CHROME, NEON, AND CYBORGS: THE CYBERPUNK GENRE IN THE 1980'S

UNITED STATES

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Dedication

Dedicated in memory of Rebecca Smith, who died cold and alone so that others could fill their wallets.

cannot seem to break that habit no matter how hard I try. Thank you, of course, to Dr. Barbara Hales, who dealt with and put up with me for eight three-credit-hour courses at both undergraduate and graduate-level before taking me on as my thesis advisor. And last, and naturally and certainly not least, I want to thank the best friend I have ever had, Nicolette Schneider, who, for the last six years has never failed to bring a smile to my face no matter what we're talking about, who has been there through good times and bad, through venting about life's problems and sharing in each other's joy about good things that have happened in the other's life, to just nerding out about Captain America. I know for a fact I could not have come anywhere close to getting this done if I didn't have such an amazing person like you in my life. Thank you, all, for everything that you have done to help me get here.

ABSTRACT

CHROME, NEON, AND CYBORGS: THE CYBERPUNK GENRE IN THE 1980'S

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University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2021

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This project was done to prove the viability of fiction as a crucial source of historical

artifacts by focusing on the genre of cyberpunk, a genre localized in the 1980s United

States, to show how the cultural anxieties Americans had about the shifting trends in

media, military, and economic matters birthed that genre. Research for this topic utilized

three different fiction mediums from cyberpunk (film, novel, and tabletop roleplaying

game) and combined each selected source from these mediums with primary documents

drawn from 1980s news outlets, government addresses and press conferences, economic

data from places such as the Federal Reserve, and interviews and memoirs from historical

actors. This was all kept in context given by secondary source monographs and articles

that cover the various topics of the 1980s that caused the anxieties that birthed cyberpunk

as a unique and historically localized genre. The conclusion of this work divorced

cyberpunk from post-1980s stories that claim that genre. In addition, the conclusion held

that fiction has a critical place as historical artifact needed to gain as complete a record of

humanity as possible, and that cyberpunk is crucial to understanding 1980s America in particular.

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INTRODUCTION

Fiction, in all forms, is a product of both the time and place that it was made in. Even if a content creator does not wish it to, the world they live in influences their stories in both profound and subtle ways that inform future consumers about its time period. Renowned author and Great War veteran J.R.R. Tolkien even stated as such in the forward to the second and onward editions of his fantasy epic *Lord of the Rings*. It had no intended "inner meaning or 'message,'" he wrote, but he fully admitted that "history, true or feigned, [has] its varied applicability."[1] Martin Johnes, about novels specifically, said that they "are invaluable sources of … history" that "both reflect and contribute to the context that produced them."[2] About fiction in general, Emanuel J. Mickel wrote that "from the earliest examples of history-writing in the European tradition, the writing of history has been intertwined with fiction."[3]

The best way to show just how valuable the study of fiction is to the field of history is to look at a genre of fiction that is unique to its specific time and location: Cyberpunk. This genre is so unique to its time because the events and then-modern problems of the 1980s were influential in creating both the narratives and the aesthetics of the genre as a whole. According to Nancy Partner, creators of fiction and historians share similarities as writers that make fiction a viable historical source when studying a population. Both use narrative construction in how they weave their writing together, and

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[1] J.R.R. Tolkien. "Forward" *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. (New York: Ballentine Books, 1965), x.
[2] Martin Johnes. "Texts, Audiences, and Postmodernism: The Novel as a Source in Sport History." *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 121.
[3] Emanuel J. Mickel. "Fictional History and Historical Fiction." *Romance Philology*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Spring 2012), 57.

both research the topics they write about.[4] Dale H. Porter builds off Partner's writing by arguing that "all other criteria for distinguishing fiction from non-fiction are mere conventions or even stereotypes, honored as much in exception as in practice."[5] Mickel reinforces this connection by describing the ancient Greek epics from Homer that recount the historic war against Troy, "one can often see the reverence for Homer's accuracy in the work of sober historians… here we see the early joining of poetry to history."[6] Since the poetic epics of the ancient world are also some of the oldest works of narrative fiction (as it is evident that there was no divine hand in real events covered in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*), Mickel's connecting of the poetry of the old epics to history can be expanded to say that in them historians can see the early joining of fiction to history. Fiction can best be used by historians via what Katherine Pickering Antonova refers to as "reading the silences," a method of study to learn about "people who did not leave behind direct textual evidence of their views and experiences."[7] In this way, fiction enables historians to learn about those very values and experiences that the general population of a given time did not write down in a collective type of journal or diary for historians to analyze.

Despite this connection between fiction and history, there is still a reluctance for historians to even partake of fiction. John Demos recalls that during his early years in his career he felt "guilty" for reading fiction, as though "they were mere distractions" from

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[4] Nancy Partner. "History, Mystery, Meaning, and Truth," a paper read to the American Historical Association annual meeting, Cincinnati, 1989.

[5] Dale H. Porter. "The Gold in Fort Knox: Historical Fiction in the Context of Historiography." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 76, No. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 1993), 316.

[6] Mickel, 57.

[7] Katherine Pickering Antonova. *The Essential Guide to Writing History Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 176.

what he and others in the field were attempting to do in practicing history as a "scientifically minded work."[8] The notion that the study of history is a science, put forward by those like Paul Lacombe and Karl Lamprecht in the 1890s, led to things like Cliometrics, "the application of quantitative methods to historical topics," to try and shift the study of history into a full science.[9] The use of and study of fiction as historical artifact, under this view of historical study, would therefore be antithetical to this scientific and quantitative approach. Pushback against this orthodoxy has been difficult because, according to Norman J. Wilson, the older and senior historians in the field tend to be "fairly conservative" and can "easily dismiss the writings of younger historians who [do] not share their views."[10] In such a scientifically minded approach to the study of history, fiction would naturally fall by the wayside as historical artifact to be studied and analyzed. Thus the best refutation of this conservative view of how history is to be studied comes best from studying a genre like Cyberpunk.

Cyberpunk is a mixture of noir and science fiction, with the aspects of both varying from story to story. It is set in a vague-to-directly-stated future that ranges from only a few years beyond whence it is produced to several decades, this is usually displayed by the setting's advanced technology. This jump to the future allows for each story's issue of concernment to grow into where that issue is feared to lead (Reagan's 'Star Wars' project moves in time into *The Terminator's* Skynet, for example). The future is always more technologically advanced than the story's time period (the 'cyber'

[8] John Demos. "In Search of Reasons for Historians to Read Novels…" *The American History Review*, Vol. 103, No. 5 (December 1998), 1526-1527.
[9] Norman J. Wilson. *History in Crisis?: Recent Directions in Historiography* (Boston: Pearson, 1999), 44.
[10] Wilson, 45.

part of the genre name comes from this) but this advancement does not serve to help make the world better. The modern societal systems and movements of the time are, through this time-jump, taken to their most logical conclusions: media threatening the integrity of human society, unshackled capitalism turning into a corporate-dominated world, and increased military armament leading to near-apocalypse or forever war. This is where the 'punk' aspect comes in. Emerging in the mid-1970s, the punk subculture quickly established itself in the western hemisphere through its anti-establishment music scene.[11] As Kirsty Lohman describes, the subculture was "a form of protest" with highly individualistic, even anarchistic, positions of "anti-authority, anti-consumerism, and anti-(normative) approaches to society."[12] Cyberpunk, as a genre, was therefore a set of stories about finding and keeping individualism and personal rebellion in a future that had gone awry.

One of the best internal descriptions of this genre comes from Mike Pondsmith, the creator and lead writer of the long-running tabletop game *Cyberpunk*: "Cyberpunk [is] a warning, not an aspiration."[13] The economic, media and military trends of 1980s America gave birth to stories made from the fears and anger that rose up in response to them, seeing stories that showed a "dystopian future" that was feared to come if those trends continued.[14] In spite of a future with vast technological advancements, the feared

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[11] Jon Savage. *The England's Dreaming Tapes: The Essential Companion to England's Dreaming, The Seminal History of Punk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) 3.
[12] Kirsty Lohman. *The Connected Lives of Dutch Punks: Contesting Subcultural Boundaries* (Guildford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 150.
[13] Mike Pondsmith, quoted by R Talsorian Games Inc. in *From the Screamsheets: A Statement from RTG,* June 5, 2020. https://rtalsoriangames.com/2020/06/05/from-the-screamsheets-a-statement-by-rtg/.
[14] R Talsorian Games Inc. *From the Screamsheets: A Statement from RTG*, June 5, 2020. https://rtalsoriangames.com/2020/06/05/from-the-screamsheets-a-statement-by-rtg/

future predicted by the genre was not one made better by the technology. The 'cyber' advancements of this bleak future near-always serve to help create the oppressive megacorporate-dominated world. It is in the 'punk' aspect that a side of 1980s America, discontented with the Reagan Administration's leadership among other things, is seen. Pondsmith, in a recent interview, said that "[he] liked the idea of emphasizing the punk over the cyber… Cyberpunk, by its nature, is about a personal thing. You don't save the world. You might do that on the side, as an outcome of something you do… but it's always personal."[15] The characters in Cyberpunk stories can only survive the dystopic capitalist future that those in 1980s America feared would come, and thus that is what the genre provides historians: a multilayered understanding of the fear that the general population had.

The three major areas of concern for the American public that translated into these stories were: fear of where new and shifting media trends would lead, fear of the rising armaments and advancements of the United States military, and fear of how economic deregulation would change the nation. The anxiety over where the decade's expanding television media, with fads rising into whole networks like CNN, ESPN, and MTV, would lead saw itself manifested in works like Stephen King's 1982 novel *The Running Man* and its 1987 film adaptation. Here the Network Games, a variety of life-threatening gameshows hosted by one single television network, keep the population entertained and distracted as the world slips further into corporate fueled chaos and

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[15] Mike Pondsmith, quoted in "A Vast Future," by Kimberly Wallace and Matt Miller, *Game Informer*, number 327, July 2020, 44-55.

destruction. In the novel, Ben Richards participates in the titular game because these

dangerous programs, like *Treadmill to Bucks*, *Dig Your Grave*, *Run for Your Guns*, and

other lethal 'entertainment' programs, are the only way he and others of the giant lower

and poverty classes of the future of America can get the money needed to survive.

Richards himself is competing simply because he needs antibiotics for his sick eighteen-

month-old daughter.[16] The film adaptation, meanwhile, has Richards (Arnold

Schwarzenegger) as a military man placed on the show to fight till his death as

punishment for refusing to shoot at a protesting crowd of lower class, poverty-stricken

people who only want food. Here, the Network is so omnipresent and powerful that even

the Department of Justice answers to it while the President of the nation has an agent to

interact with it.[17]

 Concern over VTRs (videotape recorders) and the prospect of having the ability to

record and rewatch any level of violent or mature content at home, was given visual form

in David Cronenberg's film *Videodrome* (1983). The use of the Betamax and VCR

recording television had been controversial for years, with multiple legal battles over

copyright and the like going as far back as 1977 and reaching from the state to Supreme

Court in 1984.[18] Here, James Woods' character of Max Renn hunts down the creators and

distributors of Videodrome, a tape-distributed snuff television program that shows

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[16] Stephen King. *The Running Man*, (New York: Signet Fiction, 1982), ii.

[17] *The Running Man*, Paul Michael Glaser, Braveworld Productions, Taft Entertainment, HBO Pictures, 1987.

[18] *Universal City Studios v. Sony Corp. of America*, 429 F. Supp. 407 (C.D. Cal. 1977) https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/429/407/1532027/. / Fred Barbash. "Supreme Court Rules 5 to 4." *Washington Post*. January 18, 1984, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/01/18/supreme-court-rules-5-to-4/ff7bd2f9-27cf-4f6a-b71b-553fbdd50e5f/.

unknown individuals being tortured and murdered in each episode. His hunt for what he believes is the future of television in North America leads Renn through a tv den (television instead of opium) where homeless individuals watch television nonstop, as violent and sexual hallucinations are brought on by his pursuit, to the eventual truth. Videodrome is a vector for a corporation's war on decadence by using the recording technology to cause lethal tumors in all viewers of the show. This way all those who would watch such a disturbing recorded television show would die for it as their violent and dark sexual fantasies and urges become real via tumor-induced hallucinations as they die.[19]

The advent of the video game and the arcade market, which grew to near-equal profitability as the film industry, saw anxiety over this new technology and its possibilities that can be seen in the 1982 film *Tron*. [20] Here, the fear is not of the technology itself, but rather in who controls the technology of video games. The film has two main antagonists, one in the physical world and one in the digital world. In the physical world, the villain is ENCOM Executive Vice President Ed Dillinger (David Warner), who rose to that level of power over the company by stealing the video game designs and programs of Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges). In the digital world, there is the Master Control Program (Warner), originally created as just a chess program by Walter Gibbs (Barnard Hughes) but was altered into a self-aware Artificial Intelligence by Dillinger. Together Dillinger and the MCP work to steal from rival corporations and the

[19] *Videodrome*, David Cronenberg, Canadian Film Development Corporation, 1983.
[20] Aljean Harmetz. "Home Video Games Nearing Profitability Of The Film Business." *New York Times*, October 4, 1982. https://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/04/arts/home-video-games-nearing-profitability-of-the-film-business.html.

US Department of Defense to further increase their power, while hiding behind the mask of successful video game production.[21]

The public's military fears are most well defined in films *WarGames* (1983) and *The Terminator* (1984), as the increased 1981 defense budget, nuclear-armed Pershing and Cruise Missiles, and the Strategic Defense Initiative came as consecutive escalations each one year right after the other.[22] Both films add a very conceivable concept to the then-recently announced Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI): Artificial Intelligence (AI). With computer technology growing at a rapid pace that led to expectations of them becoming "smaller and faster and in… every machine humans use," combined with higher defense budgets and exuberant armament plans, it was a logical predictive leap.[23] In *WarGames* the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) has built an AI called WOPR (War Operation Plan Response) that will be given control of the United States' nuclear missile arsenal due to its ability to predict and learn from nuclear war scenarios and learn over time how to achieve American nuclear victory. WOPR's continuous running of war game scenarios results in a near-miss that almost inadvertently starts the very war it was designed for.[24] *The Terminator* likewise has an AI that is a very plausible prediction and fear: Skynet. With the growing number of real-world nuclear

[21] *Tron*, Steven Lisberger, Walt Disney Productions, Lisberger-Kushner Productions, 1982.
[22] Dan Collins. "Tens of Thousands of Peaceful Protesters Call for Nuclear Disarmament." *United Press International*. June 12, 1982, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/06/12/Tens-of-thousands-of-peacful-protesters-call-for-nuclear-disarmament/8981392702400/. / John M. Broder. "'Star Wars' First Phase Cost Put at $170 Billion: System Would Intercept Only 16% of Soviet Missiles, Report of 3 Senate Democrats Says." *Los Angeles Times*. June 12, 1988. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-06-12-mn-7383-story.html.
[23] William Stockton. "The Technology Race," *New York Times*. June 28, 1981, https://www.nytimes.com/1981/06/28/magazine/the-technology-race.html.
[24] *WarGames*, John Badham, United Artists, Sherwood Productions, 1983.

missiles being constructed in the 1980s and the work being done on SDI, *The Terminator* throws Skynet in along with those things. Skynet will take complete control of the United States nuclear arsenal to fully remove the possibility of human error and to ostensibly make that arsenal safer. Instead Skynet, upon gaining self-awareness, condemns humanity and launches the U.S. nukes, causing World War III. After the bombs fall Skynet constructs its own army of human-slaying machines to finish off the survivors.[25] In this, *The Terminator* predicts that the growing destructive power of the U.S. military, combined with the rapidly expanding pace of technological development, will only lead to devastation if not outright extinction for all of humanity.

Finally, the removal of economic regulations by the Reagan Administration that gave unprecedented new freedoms to corporations and led to great economic upheaval is a central theme across all of the genre, as fear of how the future would look if deregulations continued to spread.[26] The fear of a corporate-dominated future and the decline of democracy in favor of that landscape is seen quite clearly in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Here, in the future, the world is covered by a pollution/smog cloud cover where the wealthy corporate elite, like Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel), live in massive pyramid-style buildings with their penthouse peaks above the clouds. Were this not enough, the main objective of Harrison Ford's Rick Deckard is to hunt down and kill four escaped replicants (synthetic human laborers) loose on earth after leaving their workplace off-planet. While the world chokes on pollution, the ones that caused that pollution live in

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[25] *The Terminator*, James Cameron, Hemdale, Pacific Western Productions, 1984.
[26] Ronald Reagan. "President Reagan's Remarks at Briefing for Presidential Task Force on PSI on April 27, 1982," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCj63TrHa2k.

splendor above it as workers who flee from their corporate-engineered lives are hunted down by the police to be killed by the order of the corporations they fled.[27] The fear that *Blade Runner* embodies is that there will be nowhere on earth or in space where one can escape unrestrained capitalism.

The 1987 film *Robocop* is similar in theme but more blatant about the control over the population, and indeed some levels of government, that corporations are feared to one day have. Omni Consumer Products (OCP) is planning to bring paternal capitalism back to the United States by building Delta City, advertised as the city of the future while "old" Detroit falls further into criminal-caused chaos each day. As the city-funded and controlled police department cannot handle the rising tide of crime, OCP takes recently murdered officer James Murphy (Peter Weller) and rebuilds his body into the cybernetic super-officer they dub Robocop. As he patrols Detroit in a one cyborg war on crime, OCP hopes to show that its own privately controlled police for the future Delta City is superior to public control and thus garner more support for the project. However, along the way it is revealed that OCP Senior President Dick Jones (Ronny Cox) is, in fact, supplying and funding the very criminal gang that murdered Murphy. Unrestricted capitalism here, *Robocop* predicts, will lead to a future where corporations will attack the public's trust in society through a legitimate public face while aiding and abetting crime in the shadows to get what it wants.[28]

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[27] *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott, The Ladd Company, Shaw Brothers, Blade Runner Partnership, 1982.
[28] *Robocop*, Paul Verhoeven, Orion Pictures, 1987.

William Gibson's 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*, also shows a future feared to come in the quiet and off-page collapse of the United States into corporate-controlled fiefdoms before the novel even starts as the result of their unshackling in the 1980s.[29] This part of the world is a poor, dystopic place, with people doing whatever jobs they can to just stay alive. The novel's protagonist, Henry Case, must work as a freelance hacker for whatever corporate or criminal group will hire him just to pay the bills. What little detail is gathered of the non-western world shows that while the rise of corporate power shattered the United States, the communist Soviet Union remained strong into the future as perhaps the only safe place from rampant capitalism and its economic disparity.[30] A bold statement, and desperate hope to have, in the Reagan era.

In addition, both military and economic fears and concerns are seen across the vast world created for the tabletop game *Cyberpunk* that came out in 1988 and saw four successive sourcebook lore additions in 1989. Taking place in 2013, the base lorebook's establishing timeline paints a grim picture of the American future. Near-constant riots, collapsed local governments and stock markets, with devasting levels of unemployment and wandering homeless is what the future brings for the majority of Americans. Meanwhile, corporations will take advantage of the weakened United States to rise to levels of power where they are capable of waging inter-corporate wars against one another to secure new means of profit.[31] Things only get worse from there as, by the time

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[29] William Gibson. "The Sky Above the Port: Introduction to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition," *Neuromancer: 20th Anniversary Edition*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), ix.
[30] William Gibson. *Neuromancer*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1984).
[31] Mike Pondsmith, Colin Fisk, Dave Friedland, and Will Moss. *Cyberpunk: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future – Welcome to Night City: A Sourcebook for 2013*. (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1988), 0.

of the world's setting, 2013, "the middle class was nearly eradicated" in "an America in which nothing was sacred, and everything was for sale."[32] The second core lorebook furthers this prediction of a corporate-dominated future by labeling the United States and the Soviet Union as "over-armed second raters" in a world where "everything's more or less run by the Corporations" and people live sixteen to an apartment.[33]

Cyberpunk's first lore supplement book in 1989, Solo of Fortune, displays concerns over the military and increasing corporatized economy merging into a dangerous duel entity. Background for many of the corporate soldiers in this world, even those employed by health insurance agencies, includes time spent in the wars in "Honduras, Panama (the Canal Zone) and the Columbian Drug Wars" of the late Twentieth/early Twenty-First Centuries.[34] A very clear but subtle line to display the concern that the Invasion of Grenada from October 1983 would only be the beginning of massive military efforts to impose American hegemonic rule in South America.[35] These interventions, this world predicts, will eventually lead to Corporations with their own armies of soldiers to use for assassinations, "corporate extraction" (forcibly abducting personnel from competitors), to even waging inter-corporate wars.[36]

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[32] Pondsmith, Fisk, Friedland, and Moss, 1, 34.

[33] Mike Pondsmith, Colin Fisk, Dave, Friedland, and Will Moss. Cyberpunk- View From The Edge: The Cyberpunk Handbook. (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1988), 3-5.

[34] Mike Pondsmith, Will Moss, Dave Friedland, Scott Ruggles, Derek Quintanar. Cyberpunk: Solo of Fortune- a Supplement For Cyberpunk, (Renton: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1989), 6-7.

[35] Michael T. Kaufman. "1,900 U.S. Troops, With Caribbean Allies, Invade Grenada and Fight; Leftist Units; Moscow Protests; British are Critical," New York Times, October 26, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/26/world/1900-us-troops-with-caribbean-allies-invade-grenada-fight-leftist-units-moscow.html.

[36] Pondsmith, Moss, Friedland, Ruggles, Quintanar, 23-24.

Cyberpunk's final lorebook of the 1980s, *Near Orbit*, furthers the concerns of technological advancement perverted by corporate greed by adding to its world an elaborate view of a future where space itself has been corrupted by capitalism. In this hypothesized future of 2013, "there are nearly two hundred factories," among other things, "in orbit… churning out drugs, plastics, alloys, and tools for corporate markets on Earth."[37] The 1980s started with great strides by NASA, the Solar Maximum Mission to study the sun of the Sol System during the height of its solar cycle was launched on February 14, 1980, and the first launch of the space shuttle *Columbia* on April 12, 1981.[38] The decade ended with ever-increasing activity from NASA as, despite the loss of the *Challenger* on January 28, 1986, the Kennedy Space Center launched five space shuttle missions in 1989.[39] These strides came right alongside the economic strife of the decade as well. While the Producer Price Index for commodities in the United States fell dramatically during the decade, personal consumption expenditures and the consumer price index for urban American consumers showed a consistent rise through those years.[40] With such a dichotomy between scientific advancement off-planet and increasing

[37] Mike Pondsmith. Dave Ackerman, Glenn Wildermuth, and Derek Quintanar. *Cyberpunk: Near Orbit – Space Supplement for Cyberpunk*. Edited by Derek Quintanar and Edward S. Bolme. Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1989.

[38] Anna Heiney. "1980s: All Eyes Focus on Space Shuttle," *Kennedy Space Center*, June 29, 2012, https://www.nasa.gov/centers/kennedy/about/history/timeline/80s-decade.html#:~:text=The%20Solar%20Maximum%20Mission%2C%20or,NASA%20and%20for%20the%20nation.

[39] Heiney.

[40] FRED Economic Data. "Producer Price Index by Industry: Plastics Material and Resins Manufacturing," *Economic Research*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Updated September 10, 2020, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PCU325211325211. / FRED Economic Data. "Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers: All Items in U.S. City Average," *Economic Research*. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Updated September 11, 2020, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CPIAUCSL. / FRED Economic Data. "Personal Consumption Expenditures Excluding Food and Energy (Chain-Type Price Index)," Economic Research. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, updated October 1, 2020, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PCEPILFE.

economic strife, it is no surprise that Americans would see these issues merge into a fear that space itself would become privatized. Nor should it be a surprise that this branch of economic concern was expressed in a cyberpunk story.

All these were the concerns and fears for the future from the changing times and trends of the 1980s in the United States. Cyberpunk gave those fears an outlet. In this way cyberpunk, in all its forms, provides historians studying this decade of American history a unique window into the minds of the people. While places and groups like the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Federal Reserve of St. Louis can give information about employment/unemployment rates, Producer Price Indexes, and the price index for urban American expenditures, they cannot give insight into just how these things impacted the mindsets of the American people. Cyberpunk stories, however, can.

Cyberpunk grew out of anxieties over modern issues, and its fictional worlds coalesced into a prediction of the future based on worst-case scenarios of where those issues would lead. That is their value to historians, like all fiction, and why the close analytical study of this particular brand of fiction is essential to the study of 1980s America. In this thesis I will analyze this genre of fiction across three different mediums, film, novel, and tabletop game; and show how it is unique to that decade and how it provides a great insight into the mindset of the discontented part of the American population in that decade.

The first chapter will cover media worries over concerns about things like the new Betamax video recorder, the rise of single-focus television channels, and the advent of video games and arcades to show just what the fears of these new technologies and ideas

were. The second chapter will explore military policy and armament changes during the 1980s and fiction sources that showed just what the fears of the nation towards that trend were. The third and final chapter will cover the economic changes that came from President Reagan's removal of regulations, the effect these 'Reaganomics' policies had on the nation, and the fear over where these continuing trends would lead. These chapters will be followed by a conclusion that ties this all together, restating Cyberpunk's value to the study of 1980s America, and will reject and refute that 'cyberpunk' stories made since that decade are indeed actual parts of the genre and should be described by a different name.

CHAPTER I:

MEDIA ANXIETIES IN CYBERPUNK

The 1980s saw significant developments in the realms of consumer media that came at an alarming rate and gave rise to American anxieties about these shifts that would manifest within cyberpunk stories. By the end of 1982 it was predicted that 15 million American households would have some kind of video game system as, in five years, video games had gone from near-nonexistent to a "$7-billion-a-year industry."[41] The end of the legal battle between Universal City Studios and Sony Corp of America over the legality of home recording of television via Sony's Betamax recorders, which started in a California courtroom in 1977, ended in the U.S. Supreme Court in 1984 with a win for Sony.[42] This legal victory ensured that going forward, anyone in the nation would be able to record any type of television program they wanted to watch as desired and at their leisure. Television itself was also shifting at this time, with the debut of single-fad cable networks. ESPN emerged in November of 1978 as a network focused exclusively on sports and exploded in popularity in the 1980s.[43] This trend of single-focused cable networks only continued and grew as the decade went on. In June 1980 CNN came online under the ambitious goal of being the world's first 24-hour, "full-time

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[41] Aljean Harmetz. "Home Video Games Nearing Profitability Of The Film Business." *New York Times*, October 4, 1982. https://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/04/arts/home-video-games-nearing-profitability-of-the-film-business.html.

[42] *Universal City Studios v. Sony Corp. of America*, 429 F. Supp. 407 (C.D. Cal. 1977) https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/429/407/1532027/. / Merrill Brown. "Video-Tape Ruling Sets Stage for Battle on Hill." *Washington Post*. January 18, 1984, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/01/18/video-tape-ruling-sets-stage-for-battle-on-hill/19685d53-5293-435b-aaf4-0dd1aa9bc641/.

[43] Patrick R. Parsons. *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 389.

news" channel."[44] This was followed in August 1981 when MTV was launched under the mission of being all music videos all the time.[45] Media as a whole was shifting in dramatic and frightening ways in 1980s America, and the genre of cyberpunk fiction gave a voice to these fears and anxieties. Through this genre, with each narrative's temporal place in a future years beyond when they were released, these stories were able to let fear and anxiety grow into a prediction of where the United States could go if these trends were not handled correctly.

The film *Tron* (1982) was born out of the American fears of where the brand new video game industry could lead the nation. *Tron*'s central premise is that if this new industry stayed focused on gaining profit no matter what, in the future, the very nation itself will be put at risk. The late 1970s and early 1980s have been labeled the "Golden Age" of arcade video games; with technology journalist Jason Whittaker citing the release of arcade video game *Space Invaders* in 1978 as the beginning, and his contemporary Steven L. Kent placing its end in 1983.[46] The popularity of arcade video games in North America grew exponentially after this game's release, with the average operator population rising from approximately 5,000 in 1980 to around 13,000 by 1982.[47] That year also saw the height of the arcade population itself, with 24,000 full arcade

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[44] Parsons, 452.

[45] "MTV Changed the Music Industry on August 1, 1981," *CNN & Entertainment Weekly*, July 31, 1998, http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Music/9807/31/encore.mtv/index.html.

[46] Jason Whittaker. *The Cyberspace Handbook*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 122. / Steven L. Kent. *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokémon – The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 116.

[47] Mark J.P. Wolf. *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 105. / Mark Stephen Pierce. "Coin-Op: The Life (Arcade Videogames)," *Digital Illusion: Entertaining the Future with High Technology*, ed. by Clark Dodsworth Jr. (New York: ACM Press, 1994), 444.

establishments, 400,000 on street locations, and one and a half million individual arcade machines in use in North America.[48] This new media industry was expanding rapidly across the nation and it was not limited to just arcade vendors, but it also permeated into the homes of the American people in the span of a scant few years.

Alongside the new media technology that birthed the arcades came home video game consoles, which brought this phenomenon and public concern to where Americans lived. Individual video game cartridges, averaging in price from $20 to $25, sold around $1.2 billion in 1981 alone; meaning that around 48 million individual video game cartridges were bought by Americans that year. [49] In June of 1982, the *New York Times* reported that in 1977 "video games hardly existed," yet by 1982 the industry as a whole was a "$7-billion-a-year industry," with home-based video games alone expected to bring in $1.7 billion by the end of that year and would rise to $3 billion by 1984.[50] With such rapid growth, proliferation, and wealth pouring into this new industry, it is no surprise that Americans began to become concerned about this industry and its possible effects on those most likely to play these games: children.

The "seemingly magnetic pull" of video games startled school officials and parents across the nation.[51] In 1982 local municipality governments ranging from California to New Hampshire began to pass laws restricting arcades during the school

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[48] Kent, 152.
[49] Andrew Pollack. "The Video Games Sales War." *New York Times*, special to the *New York Times*, June 9, 1982. https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/09/business/the-video-game-sales-war.html.
[50] Harmetz.
[51] Peter Kerr. "Issue and Debate; Should Video Games Be Restricted By Law?," *New York Times*, June 3, 1982. https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/03/garden/issue-and-debate-should-video-games-be-restricted-by-law.html.

day. At the same time city governments, like in Chicago and Boston, began to discuss regulating arcades in a much more thorough manner due to fear that they could cause truancy and the belief that arcades were centers of drug dealing. A resident of Brookhaven, New York, Ronnie Lamm, went on record with the *New York Times* and stated that "our community was becoming like Las Vegas with one-armed bandits in every store… we asked the town of Brookhaven to call a moratorium on granting permits for any more arcades."[52] The fear of just what this new technology would do to American children in the 1980s prompted these legal pushbacks from their parents and other adults. This was unsurprising as arcades and home video game consoles were new, the medium was less than a decade old, and it was growing exponentially in the early years of the decade.

By 1982, certain American cities outlawed video game arcades in their entirety. In June 1982 Marshfield, Massachusetts passed a measure to "prohibit the use, operation, and possession of the games, and to fine violators $200 for each offense."[53] This measure did not include home-based gaming consoles, however, just those within arcades while also including things like pinball. According to the *Boston Globe*, this measure came about due to how strongly local parents "objected to the amount of time and money their children spent on the machines."[54] Town Selectman, Richard Levin, was also noted for

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[52] Ronnie Lamm. Quoted in "Issue and Debate; Should Video Games Be Restricted By Law?" by Peter Kerr. *New York Times*, June 3, 1982. https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/03/garden/issue-and-debate-should-video-games-be-restricted-by-law.html.
[53] Eric Rubin and Alan Sipress. "Video Games Banned in Marshfield," *Boston Globe*, June 17, 1982. https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/1982/06/17/video-games-banned-marshfield/AdfxwRIvZEvLdZj1LtHh5H/story.html.
[54] Rubin and Sipress.

his concern that the arcades would "encourage rowdiness and drug dealing."[55] The fear-induced outcry and legal action against this emerging industry was not something small enough to slip past the notice of cyberpunk fiction writers, nor could they ignore the resistance to such acts of anxiety.

The *Globe* reported that the "strongest opposition" came from the youth of the town, as they argued that the arcades gave children and teens something to do off the streets.[56] Adam Hessler, age 16, stated "it's my own money, and I don't spend all of it [here], no one does… I don't know what I'm going to do when they pull the machines out… I'll probably be walking the streets causing trouble."[57] Tina Coffin, also 16, argued that the youth of the city "come down [to arcades] when we have nothing to do… the games get a lot of people off the streets."[58] Rather than the feared dens of inequity and drugs that parents and city officials were worried these arcades were, those that actually spent time there argued that they were the opposite and could be of great benefit to the youth of the city.

This mix of anxiety and debate found its way into the cyberpunk film *Tron*; this film took both arguments and projected them into a supposed future to show where the video game industry might lead. More, with the two sides of this debate being very age-centered (youth in favor of and parental generations being against), it would be a surprise

[55] Rubin and Sipress.
[56] Rubin and Sipress.
[57] Adam Hessler. Quoted in "Video Games Banned in Marshfield," by Eric Rubin and Alan Sipress, *Boston Globe*, June 17, 1982. https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/1982/06/17/video-games-banned-marshfield/AdfxwRIvZEvLdZj1LtHh5H/story.html.
[58] Tina Coffin. Quoted in "Video Games Banned in Marshfield," by Eric Rubin and Alan Sipress, *Boston Globe*, June 17, 1982. https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/1982/06/17/video-games-banned-marshfield/AdfxwRIvZEvLdZj1LtHh5H/story.html.

if the issue was adapted by anyone other than the Walt Disney company. Steven

Lisberger's *Tron* (1982) was released in the second to last year of the above described

"golden age" of arcades when the video game industry's profits were rivaling that of the

film industry and were predicted to only keep increasing. A blending of the two

industries in some form of fictional media was inevitable. To make sure one side of the

video game argument was not alienated, the debate over whether arcades and video

games were a detriment or a benefit to American youths had to be addressed in a way that

was amicable to both sides. *Tron* brought together the concerns of both those for and

those against arcades and worked to establish a middle ground that both youths and adults

could agree on.

      Tron opens in what looks like a modern 1980s arcade, but the first notion that this

story does not take place in 1982 but in the future comes as the *Light Cycle* arcade game

shifts from being played by a human to a real life-or-death race within the machine

itself.[59] Each individual program in any computer system, whether it be something as

mundane as an accounting program or as significant as a Strategic Air Command

program, is a full-blown artificial intelligence (AI). The advanced technology added to

the film helps place *Tron* an undisclosed number of years into the future from when the

film was released. Even the dates on computers in the film only show month and day and

never the year. The presence of AI is not the only aspect showing that this film is set in a

future where public concerns over the video game industry have grown. The digitizing

laser which transfers physical objects into the computer system and back again is also

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[59] *Tron*, Steven Lisberger, Walt Disney Productions, Lisberger-Kushner Productions, 1982.

well beyond the technology of even today in 2021, much less 1982. Through such advances in science placing the film in the future, *Tron* was able to take the issues of the day and extrapolate from them where they could lead if left unchecked.

The arcade *Flynn's*, where the *Light Cycle* game is played, is not shown to be the den of iniquity American parents feared arcades would be. In fact, in *Flynn's* the arcade is shown to be a place of multi-generational interaction and enjoyment, as children, teenagers, and adults are all able to have fun together as they enjoy the same things. It is a place where children alone put "eight million quarters a week" into the arcade games, but it is made clear that this arcade provides amusement for all ages. The real problem with the arcade industry, the film argues, is those who are in charge. While Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges) runs this arcade, the video games within were designed and manufactured by the company he used to work for: ENCOM. When he worked there, Flynn designed a multitude of video games in his spare time to create something that people could enjoy as a way to launch his own company. However, corporate careerist Ed Dillinger (David Warner) stole Flynn's work before Flynn could present it, and then passed it off as his own. Dillinger worked his way to Executive Vice President of ENCOM while kicking Flynn out of the company.

Flynn is described as "one of ENCOM's brightest," while Dillinger is labeled "not young, not so bright, but very, very sneaky."[60] This is further emphasized when it is revealed that Dillinger also stole and altered the Master Control Program (MCP, also played by Warner) from the founder of ENCOM, Walter Gibbs (Barnard Hughes).

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[60] *Tron*.

Through Dillinger's machinations, Gibbs has been pushed to the periphery of ENCOM, where his belief that computers are meant to better humanity is unheard next to Dillinger's proclamation that "doing… business is what computers are for."[61] Rather than worry about the supposed delinquencies adults allege children and teens got up to in arcades, *Tron* instead argues that it is the corporate owners that need to be worried about by adults, not the enjoyment of children (as *Tron* does take the side of children and teens on this issue). *Tron*'s argument here is not out of place, as the video game industry in the real world of the early 1980s was getting both cutthroat and crowded.

The *New York Times* called the scramble for superiority in video games a "sales war," as the market was "controlled by a handful of companies" that each vied to gain more profits over each other. Atari Inc., Magnavox, Mattel Electronics, Astrovision, Activision, and others rose up to try and reap profits in this new burgeoning industry, with Emerson Radio Corporation, Coleco Industries, and Commodore International Ltd. also entering the field in 1982. As newer gaming groups and companies were made to join this market, the already established businesses made attempts at a breakthrough difficult. Despite the "poor quality of its graphics," Atari held 70 percent of all home installed machines alone.[62] It is clear that, while more conservative parents held reservations for the arcades themselves, the fact that this new market was booming and expanding so rapidly was something that could not be ignored. *Tron*, through the

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[61] *Tron*.
[62] Pollack.

character of Dillinger, manifests the logical worries that the American public had about these new media companies and their growing competition as they vied for profits.

Dillinger is a man whose desire for wealth and power exceeds his grasp. He stole Flynn's games and Gibbs' MCP AI to enhance his career, but as the film goes on it is clear that his greed and lust for power are overtaking him and threatening the United States itself. The first instance of this is when the MCP expresses his "disappointment" in Dillinger for failing to stop Alan Bradley (Bruce Boxleitner) from creating the Tron (also Boxleitner) autonomous security program. Here Dillinger actually apologizes to the MCP, showing that this program he once stole, altered, and used for his own purposes is now given deference by the man who used to control it. However it grows from there, as the MCP decides that it is going to "hit the Pentagon" to steal data, programs, and power with the rationale that "it shouldn't be any harder than any other big company." At this Dillinger finally tries to reassert control over the MCP that has become the manifestation of his selfishness and ambition, arguing that since he wrote the MCP's lines of code it should obey him. Just like Dillinger's own desire for wealth and power, however, the MCP too has grown. The AI rebuffs Dillinger's attempts to reassert control by saying "I've gotten 2,415 times smarter since [you wrote me]," indicating that Dillinger's greed has grown beyond control.[63] In addition, it is not just the Pentagon and the United States government that the MCP is after. When asked what it wants with the Pentagon the MCP replies "the same thing I want with the Kremlin. I'm bored of corporations. With the

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[63] *Tron*.

information I can access, I can run things 900 to 1200 times better than any human."[64] All

further attempts by Dillinger to assert control are quashed when the MCP threatens to

release the evidence that he stole Flynn's games and is a fraud. Dillinger's greed now

controls him (something that is also reflected within the digital world in the film too as

the lacky of the MCP, Sark (Warner again), has Dillinger's face and voice and lives only

to serve the MCP).

In such a rapidly growing new field like the Golden Age of Arcades and the birth

of home console video games, the motivations and desires of those who created that field

would direct where it went and what it became. While hyperbolic that a real-world

Dillinger could threaten the world at large, they could still turn the field into something

dangerous. With the arcade industry rivaling the film industry, and with 48 million home-

based games sold in a year, any problems or issues within the companies themselves

would trickle down and affect that wide and large market.

Interestingly, while *Tron* does acknowledge the problem of the capitalist nature in

such a booming new industry it does not critique that system. While at first seeming to

use Dillinger's failed efforts to control the MCP as a critique of American capitalism,

Tron changes its mind as the film progresses. To combat the unrestricted desire for profit

infecting video games, *Tron* pins its solution to that fear on the decade's new sub-class of

American capitalists: Yuppies (Young Urban Professionals). As the 1970s ended and the

1980s began, "affluent young professional people – the 20th century gentry – [moved]

into previously deteriorating city centers" in what news sources called "an urban

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[64] *Tron*.

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renaissance" or a "rebirth."[65] These individuals were "believed to be the vanguards in cultural and political change" for the decade as they seemingly brought a new and fresh viewpoint and mindset to American capitalism.[66] They appeared to be breaking from the specific capitalistic ideals of the generation before them and redefining the American economic system for themselves. In Chicago's realty market alone these investor class Yuppies very presence caused real-estate prices to skyrocket and saw "some 20,000 new dwelling units… built" in an area of just two miles. Many had the hope that this regentrification would save "previously decaying [city] neighborhoods… populated by the affluent, astute, civic-minded, taxpaying people that any city needs to survive and flourish."[67] In *Tron*, the Yuppies and the hope pinned on them are manifested within the character of Kevin Flynn, who is used to embody the Yuppie belief in "individual welfare" and stands in contrast and resistance to traditional American capitalism embodied by Dillinger.[68]

Flynn is the young up-and-comer within ENCOM who uses his own free time to labor in creating new video games, not for his own profit or ambition, but to give the children of the nation something to enjoy. Profit is a bonus to Flynn in this career field. This is in opposition to Dillinger who is very clearly the representative of the previous generation of capitalists from before the Yuppies. Flynn is out to expose Dillinger, not

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[65] Dan Rottenberg. "About That Urban Renaissance…," *Chicago Magazine*, May 1, 1980, https://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/May-1980/Yuppie/.
[66] Peter Ester and Henk Vinken. "Yuppies in Cross-National Perspective: Is There Evidence for a Yuppie Value Syndrome?," *Political Psychology*, Vol 14, No 4 (December 1993), 667.
[67] Rottenberg.
[68] Paul Dekker and Peter Ester. "The Political Distinctiveness of Young Professionals: "Yuppies" or "New Class"?," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (June 1990), 309.

just to bring truth to light, but because doing so will purge the deception and selfishness of Dillinger from ENCOM and purify the corporation.[69] The film rewards Flynn's desire for truth and reform of the capitalist system by making him the new CEO of ENCOM after Dillinger's lies are exposed and he is fired. The hope that the Yuppies would bring revitalization to various parts of American society, like the "wishful-thinking" hope Chicago had, is in full display with Flynn.[70] The video game industry will be just fine as a positive safe space for American children, *Tron* argues, if society lets the younger members of the capitalist class run it. Doing so will prevent this new industry from running rampant in its pursuit of profit and prevent any danger to American society. However, the hope for the Yuppies was only that, wishful thinking.

Journalist for *Chicago Magazine*, Dan Rottenberg, reported in May of 1980 that not only was the Yuppie-led regentrification of urban city environments "driving out the working class and the poor," but it was also a mirage of migration. Between 80 and 90 percent of Yuppies moving into American cities were not suburban dwellers moving to become new city dwellers; instead they were previous city dwellers who had already left other cities and were now moving back into the urban environment elsewhere.[71] *Tron* acknowledges a problem within the video game industry in that it is being driven solely by profit-driven individuals over those who want to spread joy to others. However, *Tron* pins its hope of stopping these 'traditional' capitalists in the industry on a younger set of capitalists. The hope displayed here is that individual change over systemic change will

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[69] *Tron*.
[70] Rottenberg.
[71] Rottenberg.

be enough to prevent Dillinger's ideal of profit no matter the cost from infecting the video game industry so that it will become a beneficial industry in the United States.

There were other new technological advances in media consumption in the 1980s that also caused concern among different parts of the American population and found their way into cyberpunk stories of that decade. As Sony introduced its Betamax videotape recorders (VTR), the anxiety around recording television to watch at the viewer's leisure most notably found its way into David Cronenberg's 1983 film *Videodrome*. In *Videodrome* Cronenberg took the legal battles and controversy surrounding home-owned television recording and projected the anxieties surrounding them into the future. Like the video game and arcade craze, the ability to record television programs for later viewing emerged in the late 1970s before becoming a nationwide event in the early 1980s. A 1976 newspaper ad for the Sony Betamax videocassette recorder, the first piece of technology allowing television recording, stated blatantly that "Even if you're not there, it records TV programs you don't want to miss [and] builds a priceless videotape library in no time."[72] As easily expected, local American television companies were not pleased with a device that could give control of programing to the populace at large.

In 1977, Universal City Studios, Inc. and Walt Disney Productions took the Sony Corporation to court in the Central District of California on a "twelve count complaint [that sought] an accounting, damages and injunctive and declaratory relief for copyright

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[72] Brian Fung. "Thirty Years Ago Today, Sandra Day O'Conner Saved the Future of Video," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2014/01/17/thirty-years-ago-today-sandra-day-oconnor-saved-the-future-of-video/.

infringement, unfair competition under both state and federal law, and intentional

interference with contractual and advantageous business relationships under state law."[73]

Seeing as this was started on just a state level, it is highly likely that the two plaintiffs did

not wish to interfere with the current efforts by the U.S. Congress in the writing of

copyright law revisions in the Copyright Act of 1976.[74] In addition to this state-level

case, the two corporations suing Sony also targeted "the distributor … various retailers …

and a purchaser of the device."[75] Despite the television studios' efforts, the state court

ruled in favor of Sony Corp. in 1979.[76]

　　　　The Court of Appeals reversed the decision of the California District Court,

however, and so Sony and the distributors of the "VTR's" pled their case before the U.S.

Supreme Court starting on January 18, 1983.[77] Here, almost a year later, on January 17,

1984 it was decided that VTR's were not infringing upon the copyright of companies

"who license their works for broadcast on free television." More, the Court stated that

broadcasts being "time-shifted" (watched at a later time than when originally aired due to

VTR owners not being able to watch something live) by private individuals would not

even cause "nonminimal harm to the potential market."[78] In essence, being able to watch

television programs at an individual's own discretion was a good thing. The Supreme

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[73] *Universal City Studios v. Sony Corp. of America*, 429 F. Supp. 407 (C.D. Cal. 1977)
https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/429/407/1532027/.
[74] "Excel Promotions Corporation v. Babylon Beacon, Inc.," *Decisions of the United States Courts Involving Copyright*, Vol 43, ed. by Mark A. Lillis, (Washington: Copyright Office, Library of Congress, 1995), 311.
[75] *Universal City Studios v. Sony Corp. of America*.
[76] *Universal City Studios v. Sony Corp. of America*, 480 F. Supp. 429 (C.D. Cal. 1979),
https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/480/429/1531591/.
[77] *Sony Corp. v. Universal City Studios*, 464 U.S. 417 (1984),
https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/464/417/.
[78] *Sony Corp v. Universal City Studios*.

Court quashed the arguments of those claiming that television recorders invalidated copyright law.

This issue and societal concerns over television recording were taken up by filmmaker David Cronenberg in his 1983 Canadian-American cyberpunk and body-horror film *Videodrome*. Like *Tron*, *Videodrome* looks like a modern set film at first glance, but the level of technology shown as the film goes on places it an unstated length of time into the future. One of the two corporate entities in the film has the ability to implant a hallucination-inducing tumor-creating signal in a television program. More, this signal is in a format capable of fully being copied by Betamax VTRs. In addition, this corporation also has the ability to record a person's hallucinations and use said hallucinations to brainwash people.[79] This allows *Videodrome* to show a possible, if hyperbolic, prediction of where television recording technology may lead the nation. More, unlike the majority of horror films, which tend to focus on religious themes of the demonic, apocalyptic, or "the battle between good and evil," Cronenberg's pronounced atheism keeps his films grounded in societal issues and out of those religious subgenres.[80] Since Cronenberg is adamant in not promoting "supernatural thinking" in his films, *Videodrome* is confined purely to the societal level of human existence.[81] The film is focused around the subject matter of the television and video recording of television programs and their effect on North American society exclusively.

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[79] *Videodrome*, David Cronenberg, Canadian Film Development Corporation, 1983.
[80] Elijah Siegler. "David Cronenberg: The Secular Auteur as Critic of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol 80, No 4, (December 2012), 1102.
[81] Siegler, 1102.

Videodrome, as described by science fiction critic Tim Lucas, deals with "the impression of a sprawling technological world on our human senses."[82] The plot revolves around the character of Max Renn (James Woods), one of three executives for smut Channel 83, Civic TV as he searches for a pirate show called "Videodrome." Renn desires this pirate show, with its plotless "torture and murder," for his channel based on a claimed "matter of economics." Channel 83 has "to give people something they can't get anywhere else" or else it supposedly will not survive as a television network.[83] Renn desires to find this pirate show and turn it into a "legitimate" network television program so that whatever money that could be made off it goes into the pockets of his studio network.

Media companies losing their exclusivity in production or distribution of content for the home voiced similar sentiments in 1984, a year after the *Sony Corp v. Universal City Studios* decision. Jack Valenti, the president of the Motion Picture Association of America, told the *Washington Post* "if what creative people produce cannot be protected by copyright, then it is the public who will be the ultimate victim."[84] Further, after the decision from the Supreme Court held that copyright should be decided by Congress, Valenti continued that the U.S. Congress should not "let one distribution apparatus lie outside of the boundaries of copyright."[85] Even the music industry weighed in with similar concerns, with Stanley Gortikov, president of the Recording Industry Association

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[82] Tim Lucas. "Videodrome," *Cinefantastique*, (December 1983), 33.
[83] *Videodrome*.
[84] Jack Valenti. Quoted by Merrill Brown in "Video-Tape Ruling Sets Stage for Battle on Hill," *Washington Post*, January 18, 1984.
[85] Valenti.

of America, claiming that home audio tape recording was costing the industry $1.4

billion each year.[86] A company claiming to have "lost" money it never had in the first

place puts that sentiment on dubious ground; Max Renn's claims about his station

needing such pirate shows to stay economically afloat in *Videodrome*'s world has that

same shaky footing. Both the character and the real-world equivalent studio executives

wanted to keep their exclusivity in consumers' homes and hid it behind the guise of

"losing money."

This argument of lost revenue is more directly addressed midway through the film

when Max Renn meets with Barry Convex (Leslie Carlson), Chief of Special Programs at

Spectacular Optics, a company that makes eyeglasses, missile guidance systems for

NATO, and the Videodrome program. Seemingly aware of the problem of the signal

embedded in the program that causes hallucination-inducing tumors, Convex wishes to

record Renn's hallucinations under the guise of helping him survive his tumor. Before

being hooked up to the recording headset, Renn half-jokingly/half-seriously asks "do I

get to keep the copyright [to the hallucinations]?"[87] This inquiry of Renn's is a fair

question to ask in an indeterminant future from when the Sony and Universal City

Studios Supreme Court Case was still ongoing. If an individual could record images from

another's mind, who would get to keep the rights over them would be a serious question

of personal privacy and intellectual rights. This is a hyperbolic notion from Cronenberg,

but it is applicable to what was going on in North America at the time. On Friday nights,

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[86] Brown.
[87] *Videodrome*.

with 9 million Americans watching a show like "Hawaii Five-0" as it broadcasted and

approximately 3 million recording the show to watch later, whether or not watching tv

later than the original broadcast violated corporate copyright laws was a major concern.[88]

However, like most of Cronenberg's work, the morality of *Videodrome*'s story

and central character (protagonist is not quite accurate for Renn) are not black and white.

As Elijah Siegler writes, "[Cronenberg's] heroes are not particularly altruistic or, indeed,

heroic."[89] While Renn seeks to take the pirate, and network-free, Videodrome show and

make it "legitimate," the people who create the snuff show have imbedded a tumor-

inducing signal into it that infects everyone who watches it. The purpose of this is to kill

off those in North America who are "getting soft" while "the rest of the world is getting

tough." Convex and his Spectacular Optics company believe that those who consume the

sex from Renn's channel and the violence from their own Videodrome show to be

"rotting [society] away from the inside."[90] By using this show to kill off those they deem

as immoral and unable to control their own desires, they will enforce a strict style of

morality.

By giving the antagonists a moralistic stance in support of VTR distribution of

content in addition to Renn as a surrogate for those fighting against home recordings,

Cronenberg creates a diverse, thoughtful, and ambiguous message. Renn is out to take

what he thinks at first is just an independently created show and turn it into "what's next"

for television without the consent of, he thinks, the non-corporate creators. However,

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[88] *Los Angeles Times* Editorial Board. "What the 1984 Betamax Ruling Did for Us All," *Los Angeles Times*, (January 17, 2014).
[89] Siegler, 1102.
[90] *Videodrome*.

Videodrome is revealed to be the creation of a rival company out to enforce their own ideas of morality upon society. Renn is labeled in an early sequence as "a menace to society," however he later stands against Spectacular Optics and tries to kill the leaders of the conspiracy to prevent the loss of life they have planned.[91] The film starts with what seems to be a plot by a North American business executive to take control of an independent program but gets revealed to be a plot about two different companies in competition with each other; a clear mirror of the conflict between Universal City Studios and Sony. The stand-in for Universal, Max Renn, is labeled a menace, meaning Cronenberg is labeling Universal City Studios a menace. Likewise, with the fictional Spectacular Optics planning a radical restructuring of society according to their own whims, *Videodrome* uses this to say that Sony Corp. wishes a similar societal upheaval in its own favor, just with profit instead of death. While this could seem to some as a copout during the then-ongoing *Sony Corp. v. Universal City Studios* case, by taking a morally grey stance with both sides culpable, the ambiguity itself is the message in Cronenberg's story.

While describing the themes of his films, in 2006, Cronenberg said that "all the reality is virtual… there is no absolute reality."[92] If there is no absolute reality in his films then that means that the truth of *Videodrome*'s message can only be decided by the individual watching it. By leaving things this ambiguous and leaving it to the viewer to decide what *Videodrome* says, Cronenberg is stating that the issue surrounding the

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[91] *Videodrome*.
[92] David Cronenberg, quoted in "David Cronenberg: The Secular Auteur as Critic of Religion" by Elijah Siegler, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol 80, No 4, (December 2012), 1103.

Betamax videotape recorder is best decided by each individual alone. There is no place

for Supreme Court Justices or corporations in deciding the controversy surrounding

VTRs. Sony's pushing for the legality of VTRs to enable them to change the visual media

landscape in favor of their profits is just as bad as Universal fighting to hold onto their

view of copyright for their own profits. Neither of these corporate entities had the best

interest of the regular American population in mind, they both just wanted their own

selfish desires like Renn and Spectacular Optics do in *Videodrome*. Just as it is up to each

viewer to decide if there is any truth to the hallucinations that Renn suffers from or if it is

all in his head, it is up to each person to decide for themselves if using a Betamax to

record television is right or wrong for them.

In addition to household changes for how television media was consumed via

VTRs, television itself was changing. The third large change of media that came in the

1980s was the rise of single-fad cable television networks and companies. The anxieties

and fears that grew in response to them were most keenly shown in both the 1982

Stephen King novel and 1987 film adaptation of *The Running Man* where these stories

took the topic into the future to show where it could lead America. The Entertainment

and Sports Programming Network (ESP in its formative phase, later changed to ESPN)

debuted on the seventh of September 1979 as a channel dedicated singularly and wholly

to sports.[93] At the channel's launch, *Sportscenter* anchor Lee Leonard declared "if you're

a fan, what you'll see in the next minutes, hours, and days to follow may convince you

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[93] James Andrew Miller and Tom Shales. *Those Guys Have All the Fun: Inside the World of ESPN*,
(Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), 44.

you've gone to sports heaven."[94] The following year saw the Cable News Network

(CNN) launched on June 1, 1980.[95] Here, founder Ted Turner stated that the purpose of

the channel, by reading a poem by Ed Kessler, was to "provide information to people

when it wasn't available before, to offer those who want it a choice."[96] On August 1,

1981, Music Television (MTV) came on the air and proved that "video now [made] the

radio star… when music ventured into the realm of television."[97] After station co-creator

John Lack's opening words "Ladies and gentlemen, rock and roll," The Buggles "Video

Killed the Radio Star" boldly and ironically served as the first music video shown on the

channel.[98] Television was changing and appeared to be growing exclusively into the

private hands of cable networks, with each network controlling a specific type of

information and how that information reached the public.

      The foundation of ESPN was the centralization of college sports and network

ownership into the hands of the few. In February 1979 the Getty Oil Company invested in

the endeavor by buying 85 percent of the stock of ESP, and left the other 15 percent to be

owned by "the group of entrepreneurs and speculators who got ESPN off the ground."[99]

This was added to by, at the time, cable TV's biggest advertising contract with Anheuser-

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[94] Miller and Shales, 45.

[95] "CNN First Hour: June 1, 1980," *CNN*, June 1, 1980,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWhgKuKvvPE.

[96] Ted Turner. "CNN Introduction," *CNN*, June 1, 1980,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWhgKuKvvPE.

[97] "MTV Changed the Music Industry on August 1, 1981," *CNN*, July 31, 1998,
http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Music/9807/31/encore.mtv/index.html.

[98] History.com editors. "MTV Launches," *This Day In History, August 01*, November 13, 2009,
https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/mtv-launches.

[99] Miller and Shales, 19 / Travis Vogan. "Artifact: The 'Quiet Founder' Of ESPN's $10 Million Stock
Certificate," *Deadspin*, May 7, 2014, https://deadspin.com/artifact-the-quiet-founder-of-espns-10-million-
stoc-1566133061.

Busch for $1.38 million in May of the same year.[100] On March 14, 1979, an agreement

was made with the National Collegiate Athletic Association that gave the network

broadcasting rights for eighteen college sports for the first two years of the network's

existence.[101] That year the NCAA deal paid off as the NCAA Men's Division I

Basketball Tournament alone saw 24.1 million Americans watch the event.[102] ESPN's

launch saw the distribution of a multitude of sporting events placed into the hands of a

select few, while said few were enriched for their efforts of consolidation.

The centralization of ownership from ESPN and control of its sports viewing

would continue well into the 1980s. In 1984 the American Broadcasting Companies

(ABC) would acquire 85 percent of the network for $188 million, along with $14 million

worth of "satellite broadcasting facilities" from ESPN.[103] This would be followed the

next year, in March of 1985, by Capital Cities Communications buying ABC and "its

television and radio networks,… television stations in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Los

Angeles and San Francisco… five AM and Seven FM radio stations, [ESPN] and other

publishing, broadcasting and cable operations" for $3.5 billion.[104] ESPN's own

centralization of sports into a single location became, and continued to be, part of a much

larger effort to centralize and control televised media. While those who were only

interested in the sports shown on the station saw no interruptions of their viewing, those

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[100] Miller and Shales, 26.
[101] Miller and Shales, 19-23.
[102] Miller and Shales, 19-23.
[103] N.R. Kleinfield. "ABC to Acquire ESPN As Texaco Sells its 72%," *New York Times*, May 1, 1984.
[104] David A. Vise. "Capital Cities Communications to Buy ABC for $3.5 Billion," *Washington Post*, March 19, 1985, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/03/19/capital-cities-communications-to-buy-abc-for-35-billion/7e2d4fa9-144b-4704-8d2e-498bc5496057/.

aware of this ever-growing television machine would have had anxieties that needed an

outlet, like *The Running Man*, to display that fear of what this could become.

ESPN was not alone in this new television trend, for one network would have just

been an outlier and not a cause for a whole section of a genre like cyberpunk to write in

fear about it. The second of these single-fad networks, CNN, began as an expansion of

businessman Ted Turner's hand in the field of news media. Robert E. 'Ted' Turner III's

influence over various advertising and news media began in 1963 when he inherited the

then-called Turner Advertising Company (incorporated under Turner's leadership into

Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. in 1965) after his father, Robert Edward Turner II

died.[105] Previously a billboard company, Turner expanded it into television and radio

under his leadership.[106] In 1969 Rice Broadcasting Company, owner of Atlanta

independent station WJRJ-TV Channel 17 and Atlanta Telemeter Inc., merged with

Turner's company, which changed the name of Channel 17 to WTCG the following

year.[107] In 1976 the station became one of the first television stations to be distributed via

satellite thanks to a contract with the Radio Corporation of America for the use of their

[105] Ted Turner. *Call Me Ted*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2008), 60, 67. / Business Information. "Turner Broadcasting Systems, Inc.," *Georgia Corporations Division*, Date Retrieved: 1/14/2021, https://ecorp.sos.ga.gov/BusinessSearch/BusinessInformation?businessId=703015&businessType=Domestic%20Profit%20Corporation.
[106] Turner, 73-74, 91-93.
[107] "Merger is Proposed by Rice, Turner," *Broadcasting*, July 14, 1969, https://worldradiohistory.com/hd2/IDX-Business/Magazines/Archive-BC-IDX/69-OCR/1969-07-14-BC-OCR-Page-0038.pdf. / "ForTheRecord: Existing TV Stations," *Broadcasting*, April 13, 1970, https://worldradiohistory.com/hd2/IDX-Business/Magazines/Archive-BC-IDX/70-OCR/1970-04-13-BC-OCR-Page-0090.pdf.

Satcom 1 satellite.[108] On June 1, 1980, that very same satellite was used to broadcast the beginning of CNN.[109]

CNN's home channel was not the end of Turner's expanding influence when it came online in 1980, however. In response to ABC and the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company announcing, in 1981, that they were creating their own "all-news cable television service to compete with [CNN]," Turner unveiled the formation of "CNN-2:" a second 24-hour news service. The new station was first conceptualized and budgeted for over a year previous to the announcement, according to Turner, and this offshoot of CNN would be a "compact hard-news service catering to viewers who want a quicker, more concise summary of the day's events." This new service would be ready for launch on January 1, 1982.[110] Such a thing would mean the viewers had to place a great deal of trust in the new network to be truthful about the events they covered. The amount of cutting down and condensing of world events into the format of this new station would mean that the potential for crucial details and context to be removed would be immense. The growth of this news media juggernaut would only continue as the 1980s wore on.

Despite "reportedly [losing] $2 million a month" during CNN's first operating years, in 1983 Turner bought out Satellite News Channel, the attempted competition from ABC and Westinghouse Broadcasting.[111] Like ESPN, for American viewers who only approached CNN at face value, all they would get was the news. However, for anyone

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[108] "Ted Turner Cleared for News Cable," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1980.
[109] "Ted Turner Cleared for News Cable"
[110] Kenneth R. Clark. "Ted Turner Responds to Network Challenge," *Ellensburg Daily Record*, August 21, 1981, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=u0tPAAAAIBAJ&pg=4017%2C4080465.
[111] Charles Apple. "The Birth of Cable News," *The Spokesman-Review*, June 1, 2020, https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2020/jun/01/birth-cable-news/.

who looked at just how this conglomerate grew, concern was undoubtedly going to appear as to where it could lead. Control of the news seemed to be shifting into the hands of one man and his singular company, just as the villainous Network in both versions of *The Running Man* was shown to be in their predicted American futures.

However *The Running Man* does not just show a singular all-controlling Network that governs all information and entertainment in its fear-crafted version of America's future, it also fears that this new trend will indoctrinate American children. The origin of this particular fear surrounding single-fad networks stemmed from the birth of Music Television (MTV). The third of these single-fad networks, MTV was the brainchild of rising Warner Satellite Entertainment Company star Robert W. Pittman. This channel worked, and found a way, to tap the market of "the anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian, under 30 market audience" that others companies had failed to.[112] Beginning with the music video of "Video Killed the Radio Star," MTV had found a way to tap the growing punk scene as a market, despite that very scene's anti-consumerist stance. Despite the routine fading of the screen to black as MTV personal would replace VCR tapes of the music videos, the station only grew in popularity with American youths.[113] By the second month of the channel's existence, locations where it broadcasted were selling music that

[112] "Robert W. Pittman," *The Museum of Broadcast Communications*, February 3, 2009, https://web.archive.org/web/20090203113351/http://museum.tv/archives/etv/P/htmlP/pittmanrobe/pittmanrobe.htm.

[113] "MTV Won't Say How Old it is (but it's 25)," *CNN*, August 1, 2006, https://web.archive.org/web/20060811230032/http://www.cnn.com/2006/SHOWBIZ/Music/08/01/mtv.at.25.ap/index.html.

radio stations were not playing due to MTV's rapid rise in popularity over radio with youths.[114]

The efforts of MTV to target the age range of twelve to thirty-four year-olds were clearly successful, as MTV's own research showed that "54% of its audience [was] in the 12 to 24 age group," and they watched "an average of a half-hour to two hours [of MTV] a day."[115] Unlike ESPN and CNN, MTV was a network that was coming right for the children of the United States, and it was succeeding. It is no wonder that the fear of what such a thing could do found a place in the decade's most unique fiction genre as that fear looked for an outlet. That MTV was purely a commercial endeavor and its marketing to youth and counterculture was nothing but shallow pandering could be clearly seen in how it dealt with black artists. Until the station's third year "MTV had ignored black artists from its introduction," in spite of the cry of "I want my MTV" becoming a "household commonplace" across much of the nation.[116] It took witnessing the success of those like Michael Jackson, with his 1982 album "Thriller," for MTV to finally realize that it could stand to reach an even wider market.[117] MTV was taking in America's youth, and giving them stripped versions of counterculture to make them compliant consumers in an effective form of indoctrination.

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[114] R. Serge Denisoff. *Inside MTV*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 86.

[115] Basil G. Englis. "Music Television and Its Influences on Consumer Culture, and the Transmission of Consumption Messages," *The Association for Consumer Research*, 1991, https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/7147/volumes/v18/NA-18.

[116] "MTV Won't Say How Old It Is." / Parke Puterbaugh. "Anglomania: The Second British Invasion," *Rolling Stone*, November 10, 1983, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/new-wave-1980s-second-british-invasion-52016/.

[117] "MTV Won't Say How Old It Is."

American society's concern over this new trend of massive cable network

consolidation is best seen and displayed in Stephen King's 1982 novel *The Running Man*,

and its 1987 film adaptation. The novel, written and published just months after CNN

launched its sister channel CNN2 on January 1, 1982, imagined the dark future of 2025

where these new cable network trends ran their course to their full and uninterrupted

end.[118] Televisions are now called "Free-Vees" and are legally required to be within

every domestic dwelling.[119] Even though the "Compulsory Benefit Bill of 2021" failed to

pass into law and require the Free-Vees be on all the time, they only broadcast one station

that is simply called The Network; indicating that growth and consolidation of cable in

the 1980s led to one monopolistic station.[120] More, the description of how the Network

reaches each household's Free-Vee is another logical extreme as well:

> The Free-Vee cables are safely buried under the streets and no one but an
> idiot or a revolutionary would want to vandalize them. Free-Vee is the
> stuff of dreams, the bread of life. Scag is twelve oldbucks a bag, Frisco
> Push goes for twenty on a tab, but the Free-Vee will freak you for nothing.
> Farther along on the other side of the Canal, the dream machine runs
> twenty-four hours a day…[121]

The use of the word "revolutionary" here is key in establishing just how powerful

the Network is in King's predicted America of 2025. Here, if attacking the Network is a

revolutionary act, then the Network has encompassed and become the system of

governance within the United States. This notion is elaborated on before the central

character Ben Richards is able to sign up to compete in the Network Games, with him

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[118] "Cable News Spawns a Spinoff," *Lawrence Journal-World*, December 31, 1981,
https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=bKUyAAAAIBAJ&pg=5654%2C6409657.
[119] Stephen King writing as Richard Bachman. *The Running Man*, (New York: Signet Fiction, 1982), 1.
[120] King, 1.
[121] King, 5.

undergoing a background check that compares crimes against the government and the

Network as being equal in status.[122]

Vital to understanding the place of King's novel in relation to the specific topic it

is expressing anxiety for is both when it was published and how long it took King to

write. January 1, 1982 saw the launch of CNN2, the spinoff channel from CNN later to

be renamed Headline News, within a former country club plot of land bought in 1980.[123]

CNN's $25 million buyout of ABC and Westinghouse's own attempt to enter the cable

news field came just a few months later.[124] This growing cable juggernaut's expansion

could not have gone unnoticed by King as he wrote *The Running Man* in the space of one

week, rather than his average three months.[125] In such a condensed writing period, during

the year 1982, it is undoubtable that this expansion of CNN played a key part of the

inspiration for this novel.

The future predicted by the film adaptation of *The Running Man* is not much

better than the novel. Here the predicted Network-controlled America occurs in 2017

instead of 2025 (that alone is worth noting since the film came out five years after the

novel and yet predicts a faster dystopian downfall). The film's opening text crawl holds

no punches in describing just how bad things have become:

> By 2017 the world economy has collapsed. Food, natural resources and oil
> are in short supply. A police state, divided into paramilitary zones, rules
> with an iron hand. Television is controlled by the state and a sadistic game
> show called 'The Running Man' has become the most popular program in
> history. All art, music and communications are censored. No dissent is
> tolerated and yet a small resistance movement has managed to survive

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[122] King, 22.
[123] Turner, 164-165.
[124] Turner, 199-200.
[125] Stephen King. *On Writing: a Memoir of the Craft*, (New York: Scribner, 2000) 152-153.

underground. When high-tech gladiators are not enough to suppress the people's yearning for freedom… … more direct methods become necessary.[126]

The Network, here given the abbreviated name ICS Network, has such power that they can "recruit" major criminals for their deadly gameshows right out of prison due to programs like the titular "Running Man" game being "produced in cooperation with the Department of Justice."[127] ICS Network has much more power than just influence over the American criminal justice system, however. The network has shut down schools to ensure that children can only be "brainwashed by the TV," something Americans in the real world would have found relevant in the era where over half of MTV's audience were those in their teens and early twenties.[128] More, "court-appointed theatrical agents" are assigned to criminals instead of lawyers, and the President of the United States himself has an agent through which he interacts with the singular ICS Network television media.[129] ICS in the film takes the growing trend that birthed ESPN, CNN, and MTV to its most extreme, if somewhat satirical, conclusion.

The *Running Man*'s film release date in 1987, like the novel's own in 1982, places it in close proximity to an event within its topic of concern: CNN's Goodwill Games. Following founder Ted Turner's meeting with Fidel Castro in Cuba in February 1982, and Turner's visit to the Soviet Union in 1984, Turner began trying to bridge the

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[126] *The Running Man*, Paul Michael Glaser, Braveworld Productions, Taft Entertainment, HBO Pictures, 1987.
[127] *The Running Man*.
[128] Basil G. Englis. "Music Television and Its Influences on Consumer Culture, and the Transmission of Consumption Messages," *The Association for Consumer Research*, 1991, https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/7147/volumes/v18/NA-18.
[129] *The Running Man*.

gap caused by the United States boycott of the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics.[130]

Already worried that this would increase the capitalist/communist divide, after the Soviet

Union announced their boycotting of the 1986 Los Angeles Summer Olympics, Turner

set out to create another sporting competition that would allow East and West to interact

outside of the Olympics in what would become the Goodwill Games.[131] Turner and his

network reached out to multiple nations across the world, not just the United States and

the Soviet Union, and even personally met with world leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev to

lay the groundwork for this event (where Turner also tried to convince Gorbachev to

make the first move in de-escalating the nuclear arms race).[132] While the Goodwill

Games was a massive success of international cooperation, the fact that it was a

television network that not only met with international leaders from nations the United

States labeled enemies but was also bringing multiple nations together for this large scale

event would have been a cause for concern to be reflected in the 1987 *The Running Man*

film.[133] The notion that, instead of ambassadors and diplomats representing the American

people, this international event was all orchestrated by a private television company

would have been a cause for concern. CNN, a private cable network, having power on

the world stage influenced the place of ICS in the 1987 film as *The Running Man* places

the government as subservient to the Network.

The gameshows themselves, in both the novel and film of *The Running Man*,

serve as a mixture of warning and fear of where mindless and unrestricted television

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[130] Turner, 208, 215-216.
[131] Turner, 216.
[132] Turner, 216-217.
[133] Turner, 219.

consumption and corporate growth could lead. The film's presentation of "The Running Man" gameshow is also an interesting thing, as the film presents it as a combination of sports, music video entertainment, and Network approved world news; as if it is a combination of the very same three major cable networks that started the trend of single-focus cable channels. The version of the Network Games in the novel is exclusively a way for the poor of America to gain money at the cost of participation in life or death events.[134] The future of King's 2025 America sees gameshows take on a Roman Coliseum style as all contain lethal risks. "Treadmill for Bucks" places those with "chronic heart, liver, or lung [conditions]," on a treadmill while asking them trivia questions and speeds up the treadmill when they answer wrong, with predictably fatal results.[135] Other games, "Dig your Grave," "How Hot Can You Take It," "Swimming the Crocodiles," and "Run for your Guns" are exactly what their titles suggest.[136] The titular "Running Man" gameshow sees participants become the most wanted person in America, and to add "viewer participation" Americans themselves are asked to help find the contestants and ensure its six-year "no survivals" record continues.[137] These gameshows provide lethal entertainment for the masses while giving the most desperate a tiny amount of hope to ensure they will provide that entertainment. The world in *The Running Man* film is similar, with games like "Climbing for Dollars" offering rich cash prizes while undertaking extreme life-threatening risks. "The Running Man" here, though, is used to

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[134] King, ii.
[135] King, 2,5.
[136] King, 16, 43.
[137] King, 50-52.

punish criminal offenders (regardless if their crimes are real or are just against the system) to prove to the populace that no one in America escapes justice.[138]

In both the novel and film, the game shows serve the similar purpose of keeping the American populace entertained and docile about the state of the world's decline. The novel reveals that the whole purpose of the Network games is to prevent the public from learning about the increasingly dangerous air pollution caused by unrestricted industrial capitalism.[139] Since Getty Oil owned 85 percent of ESPN stock during that channel's origin years, it is clear that King's novel is a direct challenge and warning against corporate control of televised media.[140] All efforts made by Richards to alert the public to the truth of their dying planet fail because he tries to send his message through the Network's own system while they still control it. Even newspapers have been "killed" by the Network as they have made sure that all forms of media are fully controlled by their monopoly.[141] Likewise, the film version of the Network hides all other information that does not flow from ICS. Music not produced by them is censored, the truth of the economic and environmental devastation America has suffered is kept from the public. Even some types of clothing are considered "black market" as ICS only wants emotions and ideas that spring from their TV programs to enter American minds. All eyes are on what ICS puts out on TV and TV-billboard hybrids that broadcast "twenty-four hours a day… seven days a week."[142]

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138 *The Running Man*.
139 King, 135-137.
140 Miller and Shales, 19.
141 King, 275.
142 *The Running Man*.

The novel and film versions of *The Running Man* diverge slightly on how this feared future is to be combatted and how the misinformation of the massive single-fad network machine could be defeated. At the ending of King's novel, Richards has no hope of survival, and his wife and daughter are revealed to have died two days after he started as a contestant on "The Running Man."[143] With the whole reason he joined the game gone, Richards stops playing and instead takes the plane he had previously hijacked and turns it into a suicide missile directed at the Network headquarters building in a display that "rain[s] fire twenty blocks away."[144] As the focus of the novel is Richard's journey it ends abruptly after this act of terrorism with no follow-up (though King's later introduction to the novel in its 1999 reprinting states that Richard's death took "hundreds, maybe thousands, of Free-Vee executives with him" in what King called a "happy ending" during that point of his career).[145]

The film version has a much more hopeful and subversive ending for how to defeat the Network: direct communist revolution and full seizure of information producing media. During his efforts to escape those hunting him on "The Running Man," the film version of Richards (Arnold Schwarzenegger) meets a resistance movement that is determined to take down ICS and free the United States from its corruption and tyranny. Knowing he cannot escape while ICS exists, Richards becomes the squad leader of a revolutionary strike team where not only is his second-in-command a lookalike of a young Che Guevara, complete with a red beret, but all of the revolutionaries also have

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[143] King, 293.
[144] King, 313-317.
[145] Stephen King. "The Importance of Being Bachman," *The Running Man*, (New York: Signet Fiction, 1999), vii.

some piece of red clothing on them.[146] The gun battle between revolutionaries and ICS further reinforces the message that this communist revolt is the best hope for this future America.

While the ICS guards fire full-automatic weapons blindly into a crowded room, the revolutionaries make sure to take careful aim at their enemies with single-shot to burst-fire while evacuating civilians away from the fighting.[147] To further reinforce the position that it is communism that is needed to end the tyranny of ICS, *The Running Man* ends with Richards and love interest Amber Mendez (Maria Alonso) kissing while bathed in red lights. In the second term of Ronald Reagan's presidency, a president who called communism an "evil empire" and "the focus of evil in the modern world," that such a counter-statement could be shown in a major blockbuster film indicates Americans' discontent and fear for the future did not match up with the decade's leaders.[148] More, Richards and the resistance in the film adaptation of *The Running Man* have greater success in shining light on the lies of the Network, due to the people rising up and stealing control of the media from the company itself.[149] Unlike the novel, once the people have power the lies are able to be dispelled; leaving the audience with the combined message that people, not corporations, should have both control over the nation and its media.

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[146] *The Running Man*.
[147] *The Running Man*.
[148] Ronald Reagan. *"Evil Empire" Speech by Ronald Reagan – Address to the National Association of Evangelicals*, March 8, 1983, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcSm-KAEFFA.
[149] *The Running Man*.

The 1980s were a tumultuous time, filled with rapidly changing and advancing forms of technology and media that the rising corporate powers of the decade were more than willing to start profiting off of. Naturally, the new media of the decade became one of three central foci of the cyberpunk fiction of that decade as Americans worked out their concerns and misgivings over these new things and where they could lead. *Tron* aptly took the worries of both adults and youths in regards to the rising popularity and profitability of video games and arcades and addressed them by looking to an undisclosed length of time into the future. This new trend, *Tron* narratively argues, has both positives and negatives. The position of American youth is correct, arcades are indeed good places to socialize and interact with each other. At the same time while there is cause for concern about the industry, parents' are misdirecting their concern. It is those who run the industry itself that *Tron* argues should face scrutiny from adult Americans, not the lower rung arcades and their owners, for the corporate leaders could unleash untold levels of problems as their greed overtakes them.[150]

David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* took the then-ongoing corporate legal debate over recording television via Betamax VTRs and gave a complex amplification of the concerns that debate caused. The fighting between two corporate media interests in this film placed regular civilians, quite literally, in the crossfire. One side attempts to exploit what is thought to a be homemade program for profit, while the other side seeks to use that same program to violently remake North American society into what it wants.[151]

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[150] *Tron*.
[151] *Videodrome*.

Videodrome is farfetched and almost satirical at first glance until connected to Sony

Corp's desire to profit off American VTR sales while Universal City Studios wished to

have legislation passed to regulate what Americans could do in their own homes with

their own property. *Videodrome* takes this issue to a violent extreme, but in such

hyperbolic narratives about modern issues, historians can see just which real-world

concerns fictional media speaks about.

Stephen King's novel *The Running Man* and its film adaptation add an interesting

side to cyberpunk's concern about where developing media trends will lead. The novel

was released in, and written in a single week of, 1982 during the beginning of single-fad

cable network growth. With the real-world topic of King's focus so clear, the novel gives

an extremely fresh look at the concern of where the future of increasing consolidation and

expansion of American cable will lead by the 2020s.[152] The film adaptation, made five

years later, shows that this concern had not gone away from the American consciousness.

More, with its extremely risky visual message that if modern trends continue only

communist revolt can stop it and fix things, the filmmakers would have only been able to

make that statement if they knew there were enough Americans who would support it.[153]

These stories are not the only examples in their respective cyberpunk genre

mediums to address anxieties over where media trends of the 1980s would lead.

However, they are some of the most well-known and recognizable examples in relation to

which media concerns they address. Likewise, even in other cyberpunk stories whose

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[152] King, 1.
[153] *The Running Man*.

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central theme is not media-related concerns, media changes within 1980s America are still addressed, though in smaller fashions. William Gibson's famous 1984 *Neuromancer* novel, with the core issue being where the economic trends of the 1980s will lead, still takes the time to state that the computer and arcade technology of the 1980s are what led to the advanced virtual reality and neurological computer hacking interfaces that are central to the novel's plot.[154] The fact that time is still taken to address media trends from the 1980s when not the central focus further shows just how much these new issues alarmed and worried Americans. In their own way, each of the media types described above were something that no ordinary American had any type of control over. It would just happen to the nation regardless of their input. With only a few people controlling and profiting from these new things and with no real nationwide regulations or frameworks to work within. The fear of where these things would unabatedly lead the nation had to have some kind of outlet; if only for those feeling this way to let each other know they were not alone in these worries, and these cyberpunk stories were that outlet.

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[154] William Gibson. *Neuromancer*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1984), 69.

CHAPTER II:

MILITARY ANXIETIES IN CYBERPUNK

While there was concern about shifting media trends in the American collective

mindscape, anxieties about extreme military changes also emerged in the 1980s and

found their way into cyberpunk stories as well. As the decade wore on, these anxieties

were caused by an ever-rising military budget, a steadily growing nuclear arsenal,

multiple interventions in the developing world, and plans to militarize space itself. These

events caused American fears of varying levels of destruction, from things like the

instigation of a new Vietnam-level conflict to a full-scale nuclear war. The anxieties

caused by the rapid and continuous growth of the United States military and its actions

abroad found their way into the cyberpunk stories of the 1980s. In these stories,

American writers took fears of where these military changes could lead and crafted

cautionary narratives around them.

According to the Department of Defense's annual fiscal year report for 1982, the

United States Defense Budget had been increasing by increments of approximately $30

billion in its budget overlay each fiscal year: $142.6 billion for 1980, $170.3 billion in

1981, and projected to rise to $195.7 billion in 1982.[155] Out of this rising budget came the

expansion of American nuclear missile production and deployment, which instigated

worldwide protests against them. Ranging from Bonn, West Germany to Central Park in

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[155] Harold Brown. *Department of Defense: Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1982*, (Washington D.C.:
Department of Defense, 1981), 307,
https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1982_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-
150904-113.

New York City, as the decade went on the Freeze Movement emerged. These people

rallied against the deployment of hundreds of nuclear-equipped Pershing 2 and Gryphon

Cruise missiles across NATO-aligned countries in Europe.[156] At the same time, on March

23, 1983, President Ronald Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative (derisively

called the 'Star Wars Program'). Its goal was "to counter the awesome Soviet missile

threat" by using cutting-edge technology to craft orbital weapons to incept Soviet nuclear

missiles and render them "impotent and obsolete."[157]

In addition, 1983 saw the Beirut Bombings of American and allied French

positions on October 23. Two suicide bombers attacked the barracks of American and

French military forces of the Multinational Force in Lebanon. This attack killed two

hundred and forty-one American personnel, fifty-eight French troops, and six Lebanese

civilians.[158] In the aftermath of this, the Marine commanding officer, Colonel Timothy J.

Geraghty, was given reinforcements at his request.[159] American forces would be staying

in the tumultuous region in spite of the violence. Two days after that bombing, the United

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[156] John Vinocur. "A Missile Protest Prepared In Bonn," *New York Times*, October 9, 1981, https://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/09/world/a-missile-protest-prepared-in-bonn.html. / Dan Collins. "Tens of Thousands of Peaceful Protesters Call for Nuclear Disarmament," *United Press International*, June 12, 1982, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/06/12/Tens-of-thousands-of-peacful-protesters-call-for-nuclear-disarmament/8981392702400/. / Bob Drogin. "Nuclear Freeze Movement, With Eye on '86 Elections, Renewing its Fight for Peace," *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 1985, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-09-08-mn-2906-story.html. / "General Dynamics/McDonnell Douglas BGM-109G "Gryphon" Ground-launched Cruise Missile S/N 280," *Hill Aerospace Museum*, https://web.archive.org/web/20060217213553/http://www.hill.af.mil/museum/photos/coldwar/bgm-109.htm.
[157] Ronald Reagan. "National Security: President Reagans Address on Defense and National Security 3/23/83," 1983, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApTnYwh5KvE.
[158] Timothy J. Geraghty. *Peacekeepers at War: Beirut 1983 – The Marine Commander Tells His Story*, (Sterling: Potomac Books, 2009), xv. / Eric M. Hammel. *The Root: The Marines in Beirut, August 1982-February 1984*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 386, 394. / Robin Wright. *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 72.
[159] Geraghty, 94, 109, 111.

States invaded the South American nation of Grenada to oust what President Reagan

claimed in his memoirs were "radical Marxists."[160] The justification for this invasion was

a retreading of the infamous Domino Theory that justified the war in Vietnam. When

recalling the events of Grenada, Reagan said that multiple South American nations

requested American military intervention in Grenada due to fear that "the Grenadians and

Castro [would move] on their countries."[161] This time, instead of in Asia, the United

States got involved in South America from the same rationale that led to the multi-decade

quagmire that was the Vietnam War. And, in the last half of the decade, what would

become known as the Iran-Contra Affair was exposed to the public. Following the

passing of the Boland Amendment in 1982, an act of Congress that ended American

support of the Nicaraguan right-wing Contra rebel groups, the conspiracy rose to bypass

that Amendment. Though Reagan claimed he had no knowledge of how far agencies like

the N.S.C. and C.I.A. had gone, the validity of that as truth is highly dubious.[162]

Americans in the 1980s were not only faced with increased military spending,

growing military actions, and rising nuclear deployment across the world but also the

prospect of the weaponization of space at the hands of their own government. The

anxieties about where these military activities would lead the future found an outlet in the

cyberpunk genre. The films *WarGames* and *The Terminator* encapsulate the fears relating

to the nuclear buildup and the SDI Program. *WarGames* (1983) depicted the usage of a

U.S. Air Force Artificial Intelligence (AI) created to predict the perfect-win scenario for

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[160] Ronald Reagan. *Ronald Reagan: An American Life – The Autobiography*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 450.
[161] Reagan, 450.
[162] Reagan, 484-485.

the United States in the event of nuclear war. This AI, in the process of running multiple war scenarios, comes an inch away from actually launching American nuclear missiles.[163] Similarly, the 1984 film *The Terminator* also depicts a future where the American military developed an AI. Here, the AI Skynet was used to remove all human error from nuclear control. Instead, Skynet initiates a nuclear war and kills billions before waging a genocidal campaign to wipe out the rest of humanity.[164] In addition, the tabletop game *Cyberpunk* deals with the anxieties of overextended military involvement across the world and the increased military power government agencies appeared to be gaining in that decade. The 1988 tabletop game predicted a grim future for America in military matters. Starting its timeline in 1989, it envisioned that four government agencies would secretly take over the United States. That, in turn, would be followed by the U.S. launching the Central American Conflict in 1990 that will turn almost all of South America into a Vietnam-style quagmire for over a decade.[165] In these stories, the fear 1980s Americans had for where their nation's military would lead them is acutely visible for all to see and gives greater insight to the people of that decade.

The rise in military spending in the 1980s was the continuation of a trend that started under President Jimmy Carter in 1979. Ironically, despite the normalization of relations between the United States and China on January 1 and the SALT II Treaty finally being signed on June 18, the full amount of military spending rose almost $5

[163] *WarGames*, John Badham, United Artists, Sherwood Productions, 1983.
[164] *The Terminator*, James Cameron, Hemdale, Pacific Western Productions, 1984.
[165] Mike Pondsmith, Colin Fisk, Dave Friedland, and Will Moss. *Cyberpunk: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future – Welcome to Night City: A Sourcebook for 2013*, (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1988), 0.

billion from 1978's budget of $150.8 billion to $155.1 billion in 1979.[166] Following the

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979, the budget increased again under

Carter in 1980 to $166.5 billion.[167] After Reagan took office military spending continued

to increase. For 1981, the budget was raised to over $178 billion which included funding

for new airfields on the Indian Ocean island Diego Garcia for B-52 bomber squadrons.[168]

As the decade went on the budget continued to rise each year by over $10 billion. Even

into Reagan's second term, the rise had not stopped as 1987 had reached spendings of

$251.1 billion.[169] As the calmer policies of the previous decade's détente ended,

American taxpayer money was more and more shifted into the military-industrial

complex.

The most obvious usage of this raise in funding was the increase of nuclear

missiles to be deployed in Europe. Facing immediate local backlash in October 1981,

nuclear-equipped Pershing 2 and Gryphon Cruise missiles were announced to be

stationed across Western Europe. This deployment was justified as a balance to Soviet

SS-20 nuclear missiles. However, West German anti-missile activist Volkmar Deile

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[166] Jimmy Carter. "Taiwan Relations Act Statement on Signing H.R. 2479 Into Law," January 1, 1979, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/taiwan-relations-act-statement-signing-hr-2479-into-law. / Martin Schram. "Carter and Brezhnev Sign SALT II," *Washington Post*, June 19, 1979, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/06/19/carter-and-brezhnev-sign-salt-ii/178e1345-41bf-4c58-a787-ccad34019a80/. / Council of Economic Advisors, *Annual Report - 1987* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987), 245-248.
[167] Anthony Arnold. *Afghanistan's Two-Party Communism: Parcham and Khalq*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 96-97. / *Council of Economic Advisors, Annual Report* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987), 245-248.
[168] Richard Halloran. "Reagan to Request $38 Billion Increase in Military Outlays," *New York Times*, March 1981, https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/04/us/reagan-to-request-38-billion-increase-in-military-outlays.html.
[169] Council of Economic Advisers, *Annual Report – 1988*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 248-52.

clarified that these new Soviet middle-range missiles were not a reasonable justification

for more American missiles. In fact, as Deile pointed out, the SS-20s were "modernized"

versions of previous missiles that had been removed from deployment.[170] The United

States was taking this replacement of old missiles with modern ones as an excuse to

deploy more of their own missiles in Western Europe. Deile was part of a West German

protest movement, but outrage and pushback did not stay in West Germany nor was it

something that happened in just 1981. On June 12, 1982, as the American nuclear build-

up continued, approximately 500,000 protestors of what would be called the Freeze

Movement gathered in New York City's Central Park to protest.[171] The *New York Times*

reported that this protest was "far larger than any during the antiwar movement of the late

1960's and early 1970's," and reported that the protest's members included children,

various peace groups, college students, various unions, pacifists, anarchists, Buddhists,

Catholics, and even Communist Party leaders, with people from across the world with

dozens of languages all committed to the cause of nuclear disarmament and peace.[172]

With such a diverse coalition, including those who had long been ideological

enemies, it is evident just how powerful this anxiety was for humanity as a whole,

including Americans.[173] Such pushbacks continued as, in 1985, American missile bases

across Western Europe arrested multiple trespassers when a near-continent wide protest

[170] Vinocur.
[171] Collins.
[172] Paul L. Montgomery. "Throngs Fill Manhattan to Protest Nuclear Weapons," New York Times, June 13, 1982, https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/13/world/throngs-fill-manhattan-to-protest-nuclear-weapons.html.
[173] Carol Bellamy, quoted in "Throngs Fill Manhattan to Protest Nuclear Weapons" by Paul L. Montgomery, *New York Times*, June 13, 1982, https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/13/world/throngs-fill-manhattan-to-protest-nuclear-weapons.html.

erupted in April. This protest was in response to NATO's planned deployment of 572

Cruise and Pershing 2 missiles.[174] Though not within U.S. borders, the European protest

held at least a cultural impact on the American population. The American Freeze

Movement leadership met in September that same year. Realizing that mass protest

actions had achieved little, they "called for a shifting of emphasis away from mass

protests… towards efforts to influence specific congressional races in 1986."[175] With this

issue spanning the decade, it is no surprise it found its way into cyberpunk fiction as an

outlet for the American anxieties that this rising defense budget and increased nuclear

arsenal caused.

One of the best examples of this anxiety coalescing into a cyberpunk story is the

1983 film *WarGames*. According to Lawrence Lasker and Peter Schwartz, screenwriter

and creative consultant for the film respectively, the beginning story concepts for the film

began in years 1979 and 1981.[176] This meant that the foundation for *WarGames*' story,

and the societal anxieties it chose to address, was conceptualized during the beginning of

Carter and Reagan's increasing military budgets. Its place in the genre is on shaky

ground, as a brief scene places the film in both 1982 and 1983 at the same time in small

text, and a picture of Ronald Reagan is next to the DEFCOM board in NORAD.[177]

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[174] "Hundreds of Thousands Protest Missiles in Europe: Urge U.S. to Match Soviet Halt," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1985, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-04-08-mn-18506-story.html.
[175] Drogin.
[176] Scott Brown. "*WarGames*: A Look Back at the Film That Turned Geeks and Phreaks Into Stars," *Wired*, July 21, 2008,
https://web.archive.org/web/20110712221432/http://www.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/magazine/16-08/ff_wargames?currentPage=all.
[177] *WarGames*, John Badham, United Artists, Sherwood Productions, 1983.

However, the technology shown in the film heavily contradicts such blink-and-you-miss-it dating and would place *WarGames*'s setting in the future. Had no dates been shown, like with *Tron* and *Videodrome*, *WarGames* would be viewed in an undisclosed future like other cyberpunk films. The most mundane of these technological tells is that NORAD, at one point, tracks twenty-two *Typhoon* class Soviet nuclear submarines.[178] The reason this contradicts the subtle placing of the film in 1982/83 is that in the real world there have only ever been six *Typhoon* submarines that the Soviet Union made, the first of which (the *Dmitriy Donskoy*) was launched in 1981.[179] If only six of these vessels were launched in the 1980s, having at least twenty-two of them would place the film in the 2010s, not 1982/83.[180] Since a key defining detail of any cyberpunk story's place in the future is its more advanced level of technology, *WarGames* will be considered part of this genre for this analysis. Likewise, the societal anxieties it addresses in this quasi-future will also be analyzed as issues given expression via this unique genre of fiction.

WarGames begins with two unnamed U.S. missile silo operators during what looks like a real order to launch their nuclear missiles, a clear real-world fear held by

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[178] *WarGames*.

[179] Thomas Nilsen. "Look Who's Coming; World's Largest Submarine en route South," *Barents Observer*, May 30, 2017, https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2017/05/look-whos-coming-worlds-largest-submarine-en-route-south.

[180] The second technological indication that *WarGames* cannot be truly set within the 1980s is an American intelligence report of the existence of a Soviet aircraft with stealth capabilities that can "project a false radar image six-hundred miles away from the real aircraft." The largest technological advancement in the film's world that contradicts the dating of 1982/32, however, is the Artificial Intelligence central to both the film's plot and societal commentary, WOPR (War Operation Plan Response). WOPR is a computer system that "could learn from its own mistakes, so they'd be better the next time they played [games]." By learning on its own to enhance itself, WOPR has what theoretical neurobiologist Bernard J. Baars, in his monograph *A Cognitive Theory of Consciousness*, describes as key to self-aware and living consciousness since there is "an intimate connection between conscious experience and… adaptive processes." WOPR is alive, something beyond even the modern era's capability, much less the supposed placement of the film in 1982/83.

Americans. However, before the lead officer (John Spencer) will turn his launch key and kill "20 million people" he finds himself unable to do so. This event is later revealed to have been a massive nationwide test to see if missile commanders could actually launch their missiles if war started. The result of this test is that twenty-two percent of American missile commanders refused or found themselves unable to be responsible for that level of death and destruction. If the real world Freeze Movement held within its ranks such antithetical allies as Catholics and communists, *WarGames* makes the statement that if a nuclear war occurs some in the American military will refuse the order. It is this humanity within military personal that, *WarGames* predicts, in the future will be replaced by a machine that will not refuse a nuclear launch order out of morality.

WarGames says no simple reevaluation of the military's psychological screening procedures will be done to weed out those with moral objections to truly firing nuclear missiles. If there is even a chance that missile commanders will not fire the weapons then all of them will need to be taken "out of the loop." *WarGames*' WOPR AI is the hypothesized replacement of the human element in the nuclear arsenal. It is a computer that "[is given] access to the state of the world, troop movement, Soviet missile tests, shifting weather patterns," and uses them to "[spend] all its time thinking about World War III." With this constant evaluation of every possible variable, WOPR runs countless war game simulations to find the best possible 'winning' outcome for the United States. Naturally, this is where this advanced "trillion dollar" technology starts to fail its users.[181]

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[181] *WarGames.*

David Lightman (Matthew Broderick) is a teen with a love of computers and video games. In an effort to try and hack into the system of the company Protovision and download their upcoming game software for free he accidentally connects with WOPR instead. While he does quickly learn that the computer he has connected to is a military computer, he decides that he wants to try its own installed war games and chooses "Global Thermonuclear War" from the Soviet side. This inadvertently starts WOPR's actual war game simulation within NORAD itself, which sends American Strategic Air Command (SAC) into full alert with bombers sent up and the DEFCON board counting down to one. While halfway through the simulation it is thought to be fixed, SAC refuses to stand down until the Soviet planes launched in response to the American ones land first. This the U.S. refuses to do, despite causing the whole situation because they do not want to look weak.[182]

This interaction in the film of U.S. rejection of Soviet willingness to deescalate tensions is heavily reminiscent of the failure of the United States to ever ratify the SALT II nuclear arms treaty. In spite of being signed by President Carter in 1979, throughout the whole of the 1980s it was "never ratified, never even voted upon by the full Senate and repudiated by the Reagan administration."[183] Even with their willingness to limit nuclear arms, the Soviets' efforts in SALT II would be rebuffed and no true agreement would ever be fully made. By the time of *WarGames*' release in 1983, four years after SALT II was signed, the U.S. still had not ratified the treaty.

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[182] *WarGames.*
[183] Leo Sartori. "Will SALT II Survive?", *International Security*, Vol 10, No 3, (Winter 1985-1986), 147.

Still, within the film, WOPR's simulation ran on after this supposed fix, keeping the American nuclear forces on high alert and fully believing a Soviet attack was imminent. Thinking it is still playing a game, WOPR takes the frantic activity within NORAD as just part of the simulation and begins work on "finishing the game" by hacking into the nuclear launch codes so it can launch the missiles itself if need be. The very system put in place to "fix" the problem of military personal refusing to launch the missiles, instead becomes too eager to launch those same missiles. In this, *WarGames* shows American anxieties that real-world increased nuclear development and deployment could spiral out of control and inadvertently lead to nuclear apocalypse.

The solution to this looming accidental apocalypse, caused by the very machines made to defend America, comes from putting humans back in the loop. The creator of WOPR, Stephen Falken (John Wood), first thinks that "humanity [is] planning its own destruction, that a simple phone call won't stop [it]" and so initially rejects calls to help.[184] A depressing notion in the decade's rising Soviet-American tensions. With things like the ever-expanding Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter's grain embargo on the Soviet Union, and the accompanying boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games in response to said invasion, it no doubt looked like missiles might fly if this trend continued.[185]

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[184] *WarGames.*

[185] Terence Smith. "The President Said Nyet," *New York Times*, January 20, 1980, http://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/packages/html/sports/year_in_sports/01.20.html. / Douglas E. Kneeland. "Farmers Ask Reagan to keep Vow to Lift Grain Embargo," *New York Times*, January 25, 1981, https://www.nytimes.com/1981/01/25/us/farmers-ask-reagan-to-keep-vow-to-lift-grain-embargo.html.

However, Falken does not keep this stance and decides humanity is worthy of survival. When he arrives at NORAD to help deescalate the situation alongside Lightman, he tells commanding officer General Beringer (Barry Corbin) "you're listening to a machine, do the world a favor and don't act like one." In the midst of the early 1980s, with the Reagan administration ignoring the calls for de-escalation, this statement appears more a direct plead to real-world military personnel than to the fictional general. Beringer holds off on giving the order to launch what NORAD thinks is a retaliatory nuclear strike against a supposed Soviet first strike, and as the clock runs out nothing has happened. The Soviet attack proves to be a simulation and the choice of peace over nuclear war prevails.

However, WOPR then tries to launch the missiles itself so that it can complete the scenario. To prevent such a calamity, the machine designed to replace humans who realized the futility of nuclear war must be taught that same futility. Using a Tic-Tac-Toe program, WOPR transitions it to the Global Thermonuclear War game program where it runs dozens of permutations of nuclear war instead of simply firing the real missiles it controls. In the end, WOPR delivers the central social and political commentary that it, a machine, has learned from this ordeal: "the only winning move," in Global Thermonuclear War "is not to play" at all.[186] If a machine, albeit a living machine, can learn that there can be no winners in a nuclear war, *WarGames* argues, so must the human element in the real world. To avert a future nuclear war and calm the American

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[186] *WarGames.*

anxieties that made this film, all that the leaders in charge of America's nuclear arsenal would have to do is learn that same futility.

Another effective cyberpunk story commentating increased military spending and nuclear arms expansion and deployment emerged the year after *WarGames*, in 1984: *The Terminator*. However, unlike *WarGames*, *The Terminator* brought in an anxiety over new and advanced military technologies as well, like Reagan's proposed Strategic Defense Initiative. As the trailer for the film stated before its release:

> In the 21st century, a weapon will be invented like no other. This weapon will be powerful, versatile, and indestructible. It can't be reasoned with. It can't be bargained with. It will feel no pity, no remorse, no pain, no fear. It will have only one purpose: to return to the present and prevent the future. This weapon will be called The Terminator… your future is in its hands.[187]

Like all cyberpunk stories, *The Terminator* uses the future and technological advancement to track societal development; but this film does so in an atypical way. While there is a very clear and clean-cut display of an America decades into the future, it is instead shown in flashbacks to the Future War, rather than omnipresent in the setting. The opening title crawl even states:

> Los Angeles, 2029 A.D. The Machines rose from the ashes of the nuclear fire. Their war to exterminate mankind had raged for decades, but the final battle would not be fought in the future. It would be fought here, in our present. Tonight…[188]

From the beginning, *The Terminator* very clearly states that its future came to the world thanks to uncontrolled U.S. military development, but it does not have to exist. The dark

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[187] *The Terminator* (1984) Official Trailer – Arnold Schwarzenegger Movie, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k64P4l2Wmeg.
[188] *The Terminator*, James Cameron, Hemdale, Pacific Western Productions, 1984.

future shown in flashback sequences can be prevented if those in the modern-day choose to act to stop it.

The real-world military innovation that American anxieties manifested in *The Terminator* was the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Combined with the already increasing nuclear arsenal of the United States, due to the rising military budget, SDI was another armament expansion from the U.S. that could destabilize the already tenuous situation between West and East. President Reagan, in his own memoirs, stated that SDI's purpose was to do away with the MAD (mutually assured destruction) policy that had kept the peace for the whole of the Cold War.[189] In spite of Reagan's optimistic promises of peace, the view of SDI by communists was not one of relief but one of fear. As Peter J. Westwick notes, "Soviet opposition to SDI stemmed from suspicions that SDI technologies were offensive, not defensive, and that space-based lasers could strike ground targets without warning."[190] Westwick also points out, in 1986 leftist groups like the Red Army Faction of West Germany would carry out terrorist attacks directed at those involved with SDI as their own fear of the program grew into action.[191] The Red Army Faction and those like it showed just how pervasive the anxieties surrounding SDI were, as they only continued as the decade went on after *The Terminator* was released. Even European allies feared SDI, as they worried that the United States would abandon them and "retreat behind a missile shield" while provoking a Soviet attack that would

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[189] Reagan, 547.
[190] Peter J. Westwick. "The International History of the Strategic Defense Initiative: American Influence and Economic Competition in the Late Cold War," *Centaurus*, Vol 52, Issue 4, (November 2010), 339.
[191] Westwick, 338.

leave them vulnerable.[192] SDI was not, based on foreign responses, the benevolent tool

Reagan claimed it was. Nor would it truly see a benefit to Americans as the estimated

price for the program would rise until the first phase alone was projected to cost at least

$170 billion by 1988.[193] The American public would have seen the first phases of this

controversy as *The Terminator* was in production in the early years of the 1980s. What

was claimed to be a tool of defense for the United States was instead visibly destabilizing

the relationships the United States had with the rest of the world, while also antagonizing

its enemies.

Like with *WarGame*'s WOPR AI, *The Terminator* takes the ever-increasing

military technology of the 1980s and extrapolates a possible AI being developed

alongside it in the future. The 1984 film even places Skynet within SAC-NORAD in the

Cheyenne Mountain Air Force complex just like WOPR was. Skynet is a system of new

and powerful defense network computers that will be "hooked into everything" to remove

human error from the American nuclear arsenal, "trusted to run it all." Such a concept

would not be seen as farfetched by Americans in the years when SDI was first

announced. After coming online, however, Skynet decides humanity's fate "in a

microsecond" and launches the full might of the American nuclear arsenal "a few years

from [1984]" at the Soviet Union, prompting a full Soviet response on America.[194] That

which was supposed to protect and defend the United States, as Anna Froula points out,

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[192] Westwick, 341.

[193] John Broder. "'Star Wars' First Phase Cost Put at $170 Billion: System Would Intercept only 16% of Soviet Missiles, Report of 3 Senate Democrats Says," *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 1988, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-06-12-mn-7383-story.html.

[194] *The Terminator*.

instead "turns on its human creators."[195] A blatant warning that the rise of nuclear production and the move forward of SDI will only make the future more dangerous for Americans, not safer.

However, that is where the use of time travel and the film's depiction of the future as flashbacks comes into play in its societal commentary and narrative voice. Because even as the film begins, with Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator antagonist emerging from the future into the present day 1984, Skynet has lost the war to exterminate humanity. Even though Skynet ran its genocidal campaign, with camps and numerical barcodes on the arms of human captives and "[body] disposal units [running] night and day," Skynet still fails to destroy humanity. As Michael Biehn's character Kyle Reese states "we were that close to going out forever," but humanity does not "go out."[196] Even after a nuclear armageddon and machine-led genocide, humanity endures. The survival of the human race is what forces Skynet to literally turn back the clock by trying to kill the mother of the future savior of humanity: Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton).

Sarah is the audience surrogate for those 1980s Americans too focused on their own daily routines to see the increasing danger in the world around them. She is hunted by the Terminator in the hopes that by killing her, her son John will not be able to save humanity in the future. As Kyle describes, "[Skynet] had no choice, their defense grid was smashed, [humanity had] won," leaving the AI the only option to go back and try to steal the future from humanity.[197] Like much of the cyberpunk genre, *The Terminator* is a

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[195] Anna Froula. "9/11- What's That?: Trauma, Temporality, and Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles," *Cinema Journal*, Vol 51, No 1, (Fall 2011), 174.
[196] *The Terminator*.
[197] *The Terminator*.

hyperbolic commentary about societal fears. A military machine utilizing self-created time travel to steal humanity's future is a farfetched concept but, in the context of the 1980s, the hyperbole gets the message through to the audience. Likewise, Sarah's responsibility to protect her future child also gets the message across that it is the 1980s Americans who have a responsibility to future generations of Americans to fix the current problems in the here-and-now.

Nuclear weapons had become a very real fear throughout the Cold War, and the 1980s saw growing tensions between the Soviet and American governments. The downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 on September 1, 1983 by the Soviet Air Force, for instance, saw US officials claim that this was evidence of the "barbaric communist system."[198] The Soviet response was that they did everything they could to try and get the plane out of their airspace while the plane ignored them; in the context of past U-2 American spy planes invading their airspace, that is understandable.[199] A month later, NATO conducted exercise Able Archer from November 2 to November 11 to simulate a NATO response to conventional invasion of Western Europe by the Soviet Union. While the American public knew about the exercise, the Soviet leadership took the exercise as actual NATO war preparation and went on high military alert until NATO forces stood down.[200] And, as stated above, SDI also raised tensions with the Soviet Union. With its

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[198] Marilyn J. Young and Michael K. Launer. "KAL 007 and the Superpowers: An International Argument," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol 74, No 1, (August 1988), 271. / "Legal Argumentation in International Crises: The Downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007," *Harvard Law Review*, Vol 97, Issue 5, (March 1984), 1199.
[199] Michael R. Beschloss. *May-Day: Eisenhower, Khrushchev and the U-2 Affair*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 9.
[200] Stephen J. Cimbala. *The Dead Volcano: The Background and Effects of Nuclear War Complacency*, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 92.

hyperbolic symbolism and characters, *The Terminator* works to show that the American people must leave their insular and comfortable complacency and work to prevent a similar apocalypse from befalling humanity. The rising real-world tensions and arms buildups could lead to a real-world armageddon unless the American people act to stop it. In the same way, Sarah Connor must act within the modern era to save the future from the feared doom of humanity.

The Terminator machine, like Sarah, serves as a societal commentary in its characterization. It is something that "can't be bargained with, it can't be reasoned with, it doesn't feel pity, or remorse, or fear, and it absolutely will not stop, ever." As it hunts down Sarah, it kills two other women also named Sarah Connor simply by "being systematic."[201] While it is a cold and detached thing, even with its imposing human-like appearance and horrifying endoskeleton form, all it is is a machine. The Terminator is, in fact, an anthropomorphized stand-in for the real-world military technologies being created by the rising U.S. military budget. It is only doing what it was built and programmed to do, just like the real world machines can only do what they were built to do. Likewise, its creator Skynet did what it was built to do by humans when it launched the American nuclear missiles at the Soviet Union. There is a generational gap between the humans that made Skynet and the Terminator, but that only serves to help reinforce the future-enhanced concerns of the era. The future has not yet come to pass for the real world, but just as the Terminator is only following its programming, the very real nuclear

[201] *The Terminator*.

weapons that the United States had and continued to build are simply waiting to fulfill the purpose for which they were made.

Though a minor character in *The Terminator*, Dr. Silberman (Earl Boen) also serves a similar purpose. During his interview with Kyle, Silberman concludes that all he is hearing is the ravings of a madman and so dismisses what he believes are the words of "a loon."[202] However, while leaving the police station, Silberman's beeper goes off. As he looks down at it the Terminator walks right past him into the station, and Silberman never notices despite the physical proximity. The very thing that Reese was warning about is missed because the person in authority was not looking up to see what was staring him in the face. Similarly, even the police desk sergeant (Bruce M. Kerner) does not look up when the Terminator blatantly asks to see Sarah, despite knowing that there is a killer out to murder her. He just continues to write on various forms until the Terminator rams its car through the station doors and kills him. In this, the desk sergeant serves as a collective stand-in for those in favor of the arms expansion and SDI in the real world. In turn, Silberman is a stand-in for those ignoring the negative societal impact of real-world actions. Like this unnamed officer and Silberman, those in the real world refused to look up and heed the warnings provided by the Freeze Movement against rising arms production and how SDI would raise tensions with the Soviet Union. Such disregard was exactly how the Reagan Administration reacted to the Freeze Movement and SDI detractors. As White House Communications Director from 1981 to 1984, David

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[202] *The Terminator*.

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Gergen later noted, "There was a widespread view in the administration that the Freeze was a dagger pointed at the heart of the administration's defense program."[203]

Despite this depressing reality, and the film's ending claim of "there's a storm coming" in reference to Skynet's prophesized rise, *The Terminator* ends on a note of hopeful futility.[204] The future victory of humanity over Skynet and the machines is certain, but so is the genocidal campaign Skynet will unleash on the world that will come before that inevitable victory. The warnings of the dangers of Skynet will go unheeded, much like the voices of Freeze and those against Reagan's increased defense budget and SDI will go unheard. Whatever devastation Reagan's policies lead to, *The Terminator* coveys the hope that humanity will be able to survive and withstand it, no matter the cost.

Changing internal U.S. military practices were not the only cause for military-based concerns among the American public, however, nor were they the only type of anxiety taken into the future with the cyberpunk genre. The 1980s saw an expansion of external American military actions through both overt and clandestine methods within both the Middle East and South America. Actions in Lebanon, Grenada, and the Iran-Contra Affair all helped create the concern that the United States had not learned its lesson from the Vietnam War, and would soon trigger multiple new situations just like that conflict. It was in the world of the 1988-89 tabletop game *Cyberpunk* that this anxiety was given its most detailed form, due in part to the world of *Cyberpunk* being crafted through detailed lorebooks instead of detailed narratives (as a tabletop game, the

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[203] Jeffrey W. Knopf. *Domestic Society and International Cooperation: The Impact of Protest on U.S. Arms Control Policy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 224.
[204] *The Terminator*.

specific narratives of each game session are crafted by the players). *Cyberpunk*, with the

anxiety over continued American military actions, crafted a world from the anxieties that

such actions would continue into the future. By using this particular anxiety, lead writer

Mike Pondsmith and his fellows at R. Talsorian Games built a key part of *Cyberpunk*'s

future world.

The Beirut Bombings of October 23, 1983, with its three-hundred and five

fatalities, saw American Colonel Timothy J. Geraghty request and gain reinforcements

for a longer deployment in the region for a then-undetermined length of time.[205] The

attack saw the highest number of American servicemen killed in a single act since the

Vietnam War. In response to the attack, U.S. Marine spokesman Major Robert Jordan

said the destruction was identical to the "carnage" of Vietnam.[206] This attack came only

six months after the April 18 bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut, where a car

packed with TNT drove up to the embassy's front door and exploded in a suicide attack

just like the October 23 bombings.[207] Here, the Embassy Bombing killed sixty-three

people, among which were seventeen Americans.[208] Following the October 23 attack,

President Reagan stated that the American military presence would stay there in Lebanon

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[205] Geraghty, xv, 94, 109, 111. / Hammel, 386, 394. / Wright, 72.
[206] Thomas L. Friedman. "Beirut Death Toll at 161 Americans; ; French Casualties Rise in Bombings; ; Reagan Insists Marines Will Remain; Buildings Blasted," *New York Times*, October 24, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/24/world/beirut-death-toll-161-americans-french-casualties-rise-bombings-reagan-insists.html.
[207] Thomas L. Friedman. "U.S. Beirut Embassy Bombs; 33 Reported Killed, 80 Hurt; Pro-Iran Sect Admits Action," *New York Times*, April 19, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/19/world/us-beirut-embassy-bombed-33-reported-killed-80-hurt-pro-iran-sect-admits-action.html.
[208] Thomas L. Friedman. "Beirut Death Toll at 161 Americans; ; French Casualties Rise in Bombings; ; Reagan Insists Marines Will Remain; Buildings Blasted."

because leaving "would say to the terrorists of the world that all it took to change American foreign policy was to murder some Americans."[209]

On December 3, an American F-14 Tomcat was targeted by a single Syrian anti-aircraft missile battery. The missiles missed but a massive U.S. retaliatory strike was launched the next day in the form of twenty-three planes from aircraft carriers *USS Independence* and *USS Kennedy*.[210] The attack on the Sheik Abdullah barracks within the Biqâ Valley failed, however. Syrian anti-aircraft fire shot down two A-6 Intruder bombers, leading to one pilot being captured and the other dying.[211] The conflict appeared to be expanding from Lebanon into nearby Syria. The American public's disapproval was evident as polls taken in the winter of 1983 showed that fifty-two percent of Americans disapproved of Reagan's policies in Lebanon.[212] As such, the order for withdrawal came on February 17, 1984, and was to be completed on March 15.[213] Even so, this was not the end of America's woes in Lebanon. On September 20, 1984, another suicide car bombing hit the new U.S. embassy in Beirut and killed twenty-three more people, including two Americans.[214] The increasing bloodshed in Lebanon was, however, not alone in instilling a sense of anxiety in Americans that would find its outlet in the *Cyberpunk* game.

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[209] Reagan, 462.
[210] Mattia Toaldo. *The Origins of the US War on Terror: Lebanon, Libya and American Intervention in the Middle East*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 99.
[211] Toaldo, 99.
[212] Toaldo, 100.
[213] Toaldo, 101.
[214] John Kifner. "23 Die, Including 2 Americans, in Terrorist Car Bomb Attack on the U.S. Embassy at Beirut; Blast Kills Driver," *New York Times*, September 21, 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/09/21/world/23-die-including-2-americans-terrorist-car-bomb-attack-us-embassy-beirut-blast.html.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, two days after the Beirut Bombings of October 23, 1983, the United States invaded the Caribbean island nation of Grenada on October 25 with 1,900 troops.[215] The international response was disapproval from both the rival Soviet Union and ally United Kingdom. The United States was now involved in two military actions in two different hemispheres. The initial *New York Times* report of the situation was that the invasion would spiral out of control fast. During the first confrontation between the forces in Grenada, twelve Cuban soldiers were killed, twenty-four were captured by U.S. and allied forces, and between five-hundred and a thousand Cuban troops had withdrawn into urban areas for defense.[216] This was no longer just an intervention of Grenada by the U.S. and its allies, now it looked like it was a conflict with one of the Soviet Union's major allies in the Western Hemisphere. Further, thanks to Grenada's place within the British Commonwealth, Reagan's decision to invade without consulting the British strained relations with the greatest ally the U.S. had in the Cold War. In Reagan's autobiography, he fully admitted that he lied to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher about when the invasion had happened. In addition, he also refused to call off the operation after she told him that "the United States had no business interfering in [the British Commonwealth's] affairs."[217]

News reporters were heavily restricted from reporting within Grenada and the American public was forced to rely on official military reports alone. The outcry from the

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[215] Michal T Kaufman. "1,900 U.S. Troops, with Caribbean Allies, Invade Grenada and Fight; Leftist Units; Moscow Protests; British are Critical," *New York Times*, October 26, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/26/world/1900-us-troops-with-caribbean-allies-invade-grenada-fight-leftist-units-moscow.html.
[216] Kaufman.
[217] Reagan, 454.

media and both political parties was acknowledged by the U.S. military, as shown in a

publication in 1997 from the Joint History Office, but they carried on anyway. The *New

York Times* claimed it was "an unparalleled act of censorship that forced the public to

rely on the Government's self-serving accounts of the action."[218] Senators Paul Sarbanes

and Nancy Kassebaum (Democrat from Maryland and Republican from Kansas

respectively) were also critical of Reagan and the military's restriction of reporters in

Grenada. Sarbanes claimed "the treatment by the Administration of the free press raises

very serious questions about our function as a free society," while Kassebaum noted that

"[U.S.] reporters have faced far worse conditions in Lebanon."[219] The refusal to allow the

free press to witness the invasion led to the feeling that the military and the Reagan

Administration were trying to hide something.

This suspicion was not a stretch of the imagination, for one of the reasons for the

invasion was the construction of the Point Salines International Airport. Reagan would

later recollect that the airport was "suspiciously huge," and may have been part of a

military buildup that was "vastly disproportionate to [Grenada's] needs."[220] However,

this justification was on shaky ground at best as the construction of this airport had

international western involvement from its inception. The airport plans started under

British leadership, with input from the Canadian government, involvement from a

Finnish company in terminal construction, the British Plessy company for radio

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[218] Ronald H. Cole. *Operation Urgent Fury: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Grenada, 12 October -2 November 1983*, (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997), 55.
[219] Cole, 55.
[220] Reagan, 450.

equipment, and even the American businesses of Layne Dredging Company and Norwich Engineering to fill nearby salt ponds and construct fuel storage complexes respectively.[221] Surely if this massive airport was meant for joint Grenadian-Cuban military action, the Marxist-Leninist government would not have involved such companies and governments. Combined with the refusal of the press being allowed into the country would have no doubt led some Americans to the belief that the whole conflict was built on a lie. The expansion of U.S. military presence in the Middle East and Latin America mixed with the growing fear that the government was hiding the truth to birth the specific anxieties *Cyberpunk* made its military predictions on.

This tabletop game predicted such actions would expand into a full-scale Vietnam-type situation. In the first of the game's lorebooks, *Cyberpunk: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future – Welcome to Night City: A Sourcebook for 2013*, the timeline gives a prediction of just how, with flimsy reasoning, the United States would turn all of Latin America into a quagmire. By 1990, *Cyberpunk* envisions the beginning of the Central American Conflict, with direct American military intervention in Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. This will turn into a full-scale war by 1994 that, "much like Vietnam, [is] a conflict which pits natives against outsiders."[222] Though this timeline does not say when this conflict ends, by 2003 a Second Central American War has begun. This time expanding the targeted nations to include American invasions of Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. This second conflict, in *Cyberpunk*'s future,

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[221] Anthony Payne. *Grenada: Revolution and Invasion*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 31-33.
[222] Mike Pondsmith, Colin Fisk, Dave Friedland, and Will Moss. *Cyberpunk: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future – Welcome to Night City: A Sourcebook for 2013*. (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1988), 0.

will not end until 2010. [223] America, in the real world, saw its military strike out under

false pretenses into Grenada, almost as a response to not having a centralized enemy to

attack after the Lebanon bombings. Whether this was done as a way for the Reagan

Administration and the American military to prove its strength to itself and the world, or

misplaced anger lashing out where it could in response to Lebanon, the specter of

Vietnam still hung over the nation. The anxieties produced by this manifested in

Cyberpunk as a fear that Latin America would be the new Vietnam.

The world of *Cyberpunk* goes further and fearfully predicts a future with an

almost forever war between the United States and the various nations and factions south

of its border. As both the 1980s and this game went on, supplemental lorebooks for this

game added details, and thus real-world anxieties, to the predictions therein. In the *Solo*

of Fortune supplement book from 1989, American corporations have built up their own

armies, as a response to American hyper-militarization, to wage their own battles after

the American military leaves. The American arms corporation Militech, for example, is a

major player in the Columbian Drug Wars of the late Twentieth and early Twenty-First

Centuries. Said conflict even spreads out of Columbia and into other nations in South

America like Argentina, as Militech's Buenos Ares office branch is destroyed by the

"Columbian drug lords" of that war.[224]

Even though direct national conflicts between the United States and Central and

South American nations officially end in 2012, the fighting does not ever truly stop.

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[223] Pondsmith, Fisk, Friedland, and Moss, 0.
[224] Mike Pondsmith, Will Moss, Dave Friedland, Scott Ruggles, Derek Quintanar. *Cyberpunk: Solo of Fortune- a Supplement For Cyberpunk*, (Renton: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1989), 6-7, 11.

Very clearly influenced by real-world military events like Lebanon and Grenada that would have given 1980s Americans the impression of ever-growing war, *Cyberpunk* only sees more war for the future of the United States.[225] Active "combat zones" are all over the planet in the wake of various acts of American military intervention.[226] In these places fighting between countless groups still rages and American mercenaries, many former military veterans, can fight and kill for pay. This free-for-all military situation, born out of failed and misplaced American efforts like in Lebanon and Grenada, has become a normalized part of the predicted future. The violence has become so routine that even financial institutions serve as legitimizing agents for American mercenaries to secure their funds and payments. More, many of the groups that American mercenaries are hired to fight are Marxist movements, various left-leaning factions, and "oppressed minority liberation movements."[227] A concept that is a very clear response to the conservative-leaning of the American military of the 1980s that saw intervention in Grenada to deal with Reagan's phantom "radical Marxists."[228]

The final coalescing piece, however, of these American anxieties about military actions and mistrust of the government used by *Cyberpunk* was the Iran-Contra Affair. Indeed, it is shady government organizations that *Cyberpunk* predicts will cause the quagmire of American military intervention in Latin America in the first place. Lies from high-ranking members of the military and the Reagan Administration would be intertwined with intervention in South American leftist nations as the 1980s went on,

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[225] Pondsmith, Moss, Friedland, Ruggles, and Quintanar, 62.
[226] Pondsmith, Moss, Friedland, Ruggles, and Quintanar, 62-63.
[227] Pondsmith, Moss, Friedland, Ruggles, and Quintanar, 63.
[228] Reagan, 450.

giving *Cyberpunk* its inspiration. The most visual of these was the Iran-Contra Affair,

which came to light in the latter half of the decade just before the first lorebooks of the

Cyberpunk game were to be released in 1988. This lorebook predicted that, just a year

later in 1989, a "'Gang of Four' (CIA, NSC, FBI, and DEA)" would secretly rise to

power and begin covertly ruling the nation from the shadows.[229] This was a clear display

of the American concern for the nation's future in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra Affair,

as it was to be revealed that the NSC and CIA acted beyond the scope of their authority

when crafting the conspiracy. *Cyberpunk*'s prediction would be that such overreach by

government agencies would continue despite the Iran-Contra revelation. These acts by

the NSC and CIA occurred because, as Representative Lee H. Hamilton (Democrat,

Indiana), Chair of the House Intelligence Committee from 1985 to 1987, would later say

"Reagan's management style was to delegate many matters to staff, which sometimes got

him into trouble."[230] Such was the case with the Iran-Contra conspiracy, the President

gave a vague order and the agencies ran as far as they could with it.

Reagan wished for the United States to continue aiding the right-wing Contra

terrorist groups in their effort to overthrow the socialist Sandinista National Liberation

Front government of Nicaragua. This was in defiance of the Boland Amendment's

limitation on that aid.[231] When the truth of the Reagan administration's subversion of an

act of Congress came to light, the American public was not pleased. The news broke on

November 3, 1986, when Lebanese newspaper, *Al-Shiraa*, told the story of how the

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[229] Pondsmith, Fisk, Friedland, and Moss, 0.
[230] H. Hamilton Lee. *Congress, Presidents, and American Politics: Fifty Years of Writings and Reflections*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 148.
[231] Reagan, 485.

United States was selling weapons to Iran to get hostages taken by Hezbollah released, who were being held in Lebanon.[232] The situation only got worse from there, however, as the truth of the NSC and CIA's involvement came out. That revelation only increased the societal anxieties that would see *Cyberpunk* envision these same agencies as part of a conspiracy directing American power beyond the bounds of the law.

The full scope of the conspiracy was revealed to the public at a press conference on November 25, 1986, where Attorney General Ed Meese told the public that

> In the course of the arms transfers, which involved the United States providing the arms to Israel, and Israel in turn transferring the arms, in effect selling the arms, to representatives of Iran. Certain monies which were received in the transaction between representatives of Israel and representatives of Iran were taken and made available to the forces in Central America which are opposing the Sandinista government there.[233]

Once again, the American people saw, they were involved in a conflict with a South American nation simply because their government style did not match what Washington wanted. More, just like with Nixon in the previous decade, their government had lied to them and worked to hide the truth. From Lebanon to Grenada, and then to Nicaragua, more and more military actions were being enacted. More, each one was getting progressively obscured from the American public. *Cyberpunk* took this growing trend and predicted a future where such things grew exponentially. The tabletop game's prediction of a forever war in Latin America was an ever-expanding intervention like

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[232] David M. Abshire. *Trust is the Coin of the Realm: Saving the Reagan Presidency*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 3.
[233] "Attorney General Ed Meese tells reporters that between $10-$30 million had been diverted to the Cont," November 25, 1986, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouxJiyhCl7U.

with Grenada in 1983, that would be instigated by members of the Gang of Four that included the NSC and CIA.

While Reagan's involvement was only hazy at best, the blame proven in the Iran-Contra Affair belonged to the NSC and CIA. That it was all the work of the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency led to nationwide concern.[234] Within the circle of legal scholars alone there was "horror" at how the NSC, which was supposed to just be in a policy coordinating role, had become "operational."[235] The CIA tried to distance itself from its own involvement within the affair by calling it the "NSC Iran Initiative," hoping they could avoid blame for their contributions.[236] By the time that inquiries came to an end in March of 1988, the most involved names indicted on multiple charges of conspiracy to defraud the United States were those of Rear Admiral John M Poindexter and Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North of the Navy and Marine Corps respectively.[237] In addition to these two men were also retired Air Force Major General Richard V. Secord and Iranian-American businessman Albert A. Hakim, but no higher.[238] No high officials in the NSC or CIA were charged, and aside from his approval ratings dropping from sixty-seven percent to forty-six, Reagan was relatively untouched by the scandal.[239]

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[234] Reagan, 485, 504-506.

[235] John Canham-Clyne. "Business as Usual: Iran-Contra and the National Security State," *World Policy Journal*, Vol 9, No 4, (Fall-Winter, 1992), 623.

[236] Canham-Clyne, 623.

[237] Philip Shenon. "North, Poindexter and 2 Others Indicted on Iran-Contra Fraud and Theft Charges," *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/17/world/north-poindexter-and-2-others-indicted-on-iran-contra-fraud-and-theft-charges.html.

[238] Shenon.

[239] Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus. *Landslide: The Unmaking of a President, 1984-1988*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 292, 437.

The effect of this conspiracy on the American public was clear; less than half of the American people approved of their president in its wake. In addition, it seemed clear that the intelligence agencies and elements of the U.S. military were capable of not only operating independently of the commander-in-chief but were directly defying acts of Congress while doing so. The United States was still involved in hegemonic actions on the continent to the south.

While Lebanon and Grenada caused the anxiety that would see *Cyberpunk* predict a forever war in Latin America, it was the actions of the NSC and CIA in the Iran-Contra Affair that saw the tabletop game predict that this forever war would be instigated and buoyed by the Gang of Four (that included those two agencies). This conflict is predicted to "[cost] thousands of American lives," before the Gang of Four is finally disposed of in "a wave of reform." In spite of this reform, the official American military involvement in Latin America does not end until 2010.[240] More, as the American military leaves Latin America and the Gang is removed, *Cyberpunk* predicts that corporate interests will continue the military actions through private mercenaries.[241] A clear indication of the real-world concern that, even with the truth of the Iran-Contra Affair coming to light and those like North and Poindexter being indicted, the U.S. would still be heavily involved in military action in South and Central America for years to come. Just as the real world events spiraled out of control through the failure of American leadership to reign in its

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[240] Pondsmith, Fisk, Friedland, and Moss, 0.
[241] Pondsmith, Moss, Friedland, Ruggles, and Quintanar, 62-63.

own personnel like the NSC or adequately defend its assets in Lebanon, the state of the feared future in *Cyberpunk*'s world is just as volatile.

The military concerns within the world of *Cyberpunk* are blatant and unapologetic in their connections and extrapolation from real-world events. The intervention in Lebanon, and its multitude of terror attacks on Americans, led to growing distrust of the United States by locals. However, the hegemonic invasions did not stop. Instead, they only caused growing resentment from the people the American military was allegedly protecting, people who said "we want them out, because this is now a very insecure area."[242] Right after the first American Embassy in Beirut was bombed, the U.S. invaded Grenada, a protectorate of its supposed ally Britain on shaky reasoning that seemed more lashing out after the terrorist attacks in Lebanon.[243] The U.S. military then worked to hide the cost of human life in Grenada, among other things, from the American people. This was followed by yet more secrets and interventions in Nicaragua. This conspiracy seemed to show that government agencies like the NSC and CIA had slipped their leashes and were now operating autonomously and with no regard for laws. *Cyberpunk* took these events and viewed them as a trend of growing American militarism that would not abate as time went by. Instead, this fictional work predicted a future where decades-long wars were fought by the United States under false pretenses, flimsy evidence, and to secure American economic interests with no oversight, accountability, or public consent.

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[242] Richard Bernstein. "Neighbors of Embassy Say They're In Danger," *New York Times*, September 24, 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/09/24/world/neighbors-of-embassy-say-they-re-in-danger.html.
[243] "NBC News Special Reports: October 25, 1983," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jl9nTxdJUY0.

Likewise, *The Terminator* and *WarGames* took the public fear and anxiety caused by the annually increasing military budget, increased nuclear arms production, and the Strategic Defense Initiative and crafted story outlets from them. *WarGames* took the trend of America's ever-growing nuclear arsenal and extrapolated a future where the AI WOPR was created to control it all. It compounded that with how resistance to arms production was unheeded by showing the world taken to the brink of nuclear war due to the U.S. military refusing to look "weak."[244] In the end, the apocalypse is stopped thanks to the military and executive government finally listening to and following the advice of those civilians and experts protesting against the nuclear arsenal. Only by breaking free of the hole it dug itself, by listening to the people, could the United States avoid nuclear war in the real world's future.

The Terminator is less optimistic in its story of American anxieties and fears for the future. In the same world as SDI, it envisions the AI Skynet built alongside that real-world program to take full control of American nuclear weapons and remove human error. Unlike *WarGames*, *The Terminator* predicts that the people will go unheard and that the nuclear apocalypse is inevitable, just as Sarah Connor and Kyle Reese go unheeded until it is too late.[245] However, humanity will endure if it is prepared and works together. In this sentiment, *The Terminator* uses the end of the world to break free of the militarism of the Cold War. Humanity must shake off the binders of nationalities and unify as one against fear and distrust. For the human resistance that John Connor will

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[244] *WarGames.*
[245] *The Terminator.*

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lead is not from any single specific nation, it is simply human. Only by realizing that all human life is worth saving can humanity defeat the nuclear menace; if that realization never happens, then humanity is doomed.

Like with shifting media trends, new military changes in the 1980s caused new fears and concerns in the people of the United States about what their future would look like and how it would affect them. While the American people worked to make their discontent heard by those in power through things like the Freeze Movement, they also used fiction as an outlet for these anxieties and frustrations when they went unheard. Through these stories, they crafted futures where they feared the world was going. Cyberpunk allowed 1980s Americans to show their fears in specific detail by crafting futures where the military brought humanity to the brink of annihilation, went past the brink, or got the nation embroiled in a forever war in foreign lands.

CHAPTER III:

ECONOMIC ANXIETIES IN CYBERPUNK

Across all of the cyberpunk genre, with stories set in the future to show where societal changes in the 1980s were feared to go, the core societal anxiety for those futures was directed at the economic situation of the 1980s. Even if a story's central focus was about a media or military topic, there is always some underlying comment about the economy of the feared future America. In the military-focused film, *The Terminator*, the AI Skynet that causes all the suffering for humanity in the film was "a computer defense system built for SAC-NORAD by Cyberdyne Systems."[246] The weapon that nearly destroyed humanity was built for the U.S. military by a corporation, indicating the perception that companies will always care about profit over lives even if their short-term profits end up dooming the world. Stephen King's media-focused novel, *The Running Man*, shows side character Laughlin who "had been fired [from General Atomics] for taking part in a sit-down strike protesting leaky radiation shields," while in the local Co-Op City there are four million people who are near-all unemployed and can only look on across a canal at the beautiful and clean towers of the rich and affluent.[247] In the background of a story about a television network dominating the United States, the wealthy elite have hoarded so much wealth and power that they have segregated themselves from the poverty they have created. The origin of this core theme of cyberpunk, which held the greatest impact on Americans in the 1980s, grew out of a

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[246] *The Terminator*, James Cameron, Hemdale, Pacific Western Productions, 1984.
[247] Stephen King. *The Running Man*, (New York: Signet Fiction, 1982), 8, 46.

central factor of Ronald Reagan's economic policies and the fear of where those policies would lead the United States.

To say that the Reagen Presidency held a pro-business stance for the years of 1981 to 1989 would be the mildest way to describe his economic policies. The America Reagan crafted was one that was pro-business, anti-regulation, and anti-labor in such extremes that a great deal of Americans feared where his policies could lead. In 1982, Reagan justified this shift as necessary measures to curb inflation from the years before the 1980 election. In addition, he also said it was to end the idea of "turning to the government to solve every problem," which Reagan claimed was a "dangerous tendency."[248]

The positive spins Reagan placed upon his economic policies hid the fact that those policies did not look out for the American people as a whole, but only the wealthy. In a national address on February 5, 1981, Reagan declared that "[America is] in the worst economic mess since the Great Depression."[249] To fix what he called an "out of control" federal budget, "runaway deficits," and "double-digit" inflation, Reagan planned to cut federal economic regulations and standards. This was blatantly said to protect "the investment capital needed for business and industry expansion."[250] Six months later, during the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike, despite being one of the very few unions to endorse him for his first term, Reagan gave them no reciprocal

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[248] Ronald Reagan. "President Reagan's Remarks at Briefing for Presidential Task Force on PSI on April 27, 1982," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCj63TrHa2k.
[249] Ronald Reagan. "President Reagan's Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufMyHSj5zpM.
[250] Reagan.

support.[251] On August 3, 1981, at a press conference, Reagan gave the strikers two days to get back to work or face termination.[252] When the striking air traffic controllers did not return to work, all 11,345 strikers were fired, signaling the end of post-war employer-union relations.[253] The following year, Reagan would continue his anti-union stance by espousing the merits of anti-union, "free enterprise and open competition," supporting groups like the Associated Builders and Contractors over unions themselves.[254] And, in 1985, He was still charging ahead with his cutting of regulations on the economy. At a speech to the Exchange Floor on Wall Street, Reagan made promises to "turn the bull [of Wall Street] loose," further cut economic regulations and justified such actions by claiming "government, with its high taxes, expensive spending, and over-regulation had thrown a wrench in works of our free markets."[255] This anti-regulation and anti-labor shift in the American economy had drastic effects that caused real fear in the American people for the future of the nation, which some would predict in cyberpunk fiction.

One of the earliest examples of cyberpunk, that typified the social themes and aesthetics of the genre, was the 1982 film *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott. *Blade Runner* crafted its story of American economic fears out of the collapse of the American labor movement after the failed PATCO strike of 1981. The central plot of *Blade Runner*

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[251] Rick Fantasia, Kim Voss. *Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 46.

[252] Ronald Reagan. "Remarks and Q & A with reporters on the Air Traffic Controllers (PATCO) strike," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3ZTCPJ39LA.

[253] Fantasia, Voss, 46.

[254] Ronald Reagan. "President Reagan's Remarks at Briefing for Presidential Task Force on PSI on April 27, 1982," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCj63TrHa2k. / Associated Builders and Contractors. "ABC History," June 28, 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20120628145603/http://www.abc.org/About_ABC/ABC_History.aspx.

[255] Ronald Reagan. "Ronald Reagan at Wall Street "Surviving Progress"," March 28, 1985, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kQhv_K7cfw.

deals with a futuristic extrapolation where labor-employer/labor-government relations will be thirty-eight years after the PATCO strike in 2019.[256]

While *Blade Runner* is a loose adaptation of Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, its release a year after the PATCO strike of 1981 shifts the story's relevance to the issues of the 1980s. In the aftermath of the PACTO labor disaster, it is clear that the struggle between *Blade Runner*'s replicants and the corporate-controlled law enforcement is a fearful prediction of where the fallout of PATCO will lead. In the future of 2019, replicants serve as a slave labor force that is barred from ever seeing Earth as they work unceasingly on off-world installations to keep human civilization afloat. In addition, to further keep them in line, they are programmed with a four-year lifespan to limit the likelihood of revolt. Their "superior… strength and agility" is thus exploited, without any kind of payment or representation by the Tyrell Corporation and humanity as a whole.[257] There are no unions, no recompense, nor any respite for these replicants. From the day they open their eyes, they are cogs in the machine of unrestricted capitalism. This was the future America *Blade Runner*'s creators feared would emerge as U.S. labor relations deteriorated in the 1980s.

According to Millie Allen Biek, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers strike of 1981 was a "watershed" event in American labor relations.[258] While refuting previous assertions that the strike was a "suicidal" or "arrogant" act from a greedy union, Biek instead illuminated the fact that it was an act of desperation.[259] From 1970 onward,

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[256] *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott, The Ladd Company, Shaw Brothers, Blade Runner Partnership, 1982.
[257] *Blade Runner*.
[258] Millie Allen Biek. *Labor Relations*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 249.
[259] Biek, 249.

conditions for America's air controllers grew continuously worse as air traffic across the

nation increased. The 1970 Corson Committee Report from the Department of

Transportation stated that the Federal Aviation Administration was over-reliant on

obsolete equipment, held a dangerous work schedule that forced mandatory overtime on

air traffic controllers that was causing worker "burnout," had ineffective internal

communications, and that its labor relations were in "an extensive state of disarray."[260]

By 1978 the FAA would commission its own study through the Boston University School

of Medicine. In spite of eight years passing since the Corson Report, the Rose Report of

1978 upheld much of the original conclusions from the start of the decade, though with

greater detail given to the deteriorating health conditions of air traffic controllers due to

FAA mismanagement.[261]

By the time of the 1980 Presidential Election, the FAA had done nothing with the

original Corson Report in ten years, nor the Rose Report in two years. In response, then-

presidential candidate Ronald Reagan sent a letter to the president of PATCO, Robert E.

Poli, about the situation. In that letter, Reagan said:

> I have been thoroughly briefed by members of my staff as to the
> deplorable state of our nation's air traffic control system. They have told
> me that too few people working unreasonable hours with obsolete
> equipment has placed the nation's air travellers in unwarranted danger. In
> an area so clearly related to public safety the Carter administration has
> failed to act responsibly.
> You can rest assured that if I am elected President, I will take whatever
> steps are necessary to provide our air traffic controllers with the most
> modern equipment available and to adjust staff levels and work days so
> that they are commensurate with achieving a maximum degree of public
> safety.

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[260] Biek, 249-250.
[261] Biek, 250.

As in all other areas of the federal government where the President has the power of appointment, I fully intend to appoint highly qualified individuals who can work harmoniously with the Congress and the employees of the government agencies they oversee.

I pledge to you that my administration will work very closely with you to bring about a spirit of cooperation between the President and the air traffic controllers. Such harmony can and must exist if we are to restore the people's confidence in their government.[262]

In addition to blaming the whole of the air traffic controllers' problems on his presidential opponent, while ignoring the two Presidents from his own party who also had power, Reagan's promises were all lies. This letter, along with Carter's FAA administrator Langhorne M. Bond's reneging on union contracts, saw PATCO become one of the few American unions to endorse Reagan for the presidency.[263] The air traffic controllers thought they would have a President who would finally hear their woes and help fix them. Indeed, the letter from Reagan to Poli was widely cited during the eventual brief strike as proof the president would back them. They were gravely mistaken in that optimism; and not just because, as a public union for a government agency, only Congress could approve major union contract issues. As Reagan came into office, his administration held a mandate "to change and reduce the role and size of government" while he began appointing those labeled as "union busters" to key roles.[264]

While PATCO tried to negotiate the passage of H.R.1567 to address the issues of overwork, outdated equipment, and poor wages, the recently appointed Secretary of Transportation, Drew Lewis, hired an anti-union law firm to represent the government

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[262] Ronald Reagan to Robert E. Poli, October 20, 1980, in *Hard Work: The Remaking the American Labor Movement* by Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss, (Berkely, University of California Press, 2004), 67.
[263] Biek, 251.
[264] Biek, 252.

side of negotiations. Negotiations started on February 12, 1981 and dragged on to well after the expiration of the previous union contract on March 15 as PATCO tried to have their ninety-nine issues, the majority relating to the poor working conditions, addressed. Indeed, Poli made it clear that all the union wanted was to make a "survivable career" as eighty-five percent of PATCO's members had to leave the job before retirement for medical reasons.[265] Talks broke off on April 28 and an initial strike deadline was placed on June 22, which was stopped at the eleventh hour by a potential new contract that only awaited union member approval. The new contract, however, was rejected by ninety-five percent of the union's members as it "fell far short" of the original demands and only truly affected wages, not the controllers' overworked schedules.[266] After brief attempts to restart negotiations, over 11,000 air traffic controllers walked off the job at 7AM on August 3, 1981.[267]

In response to the strike, J. Lynn Helms, one of Reagan's union-busting appointees who now headed the FAA, advised Reagan to "crush" the strike rather than negotiate.[268] Following this advice, it was Helms who carried out Reagan's order to fire the 11,400 strikers and keep the planes flying while he rebuilt a now unionless air traffic infrastructure.[269] Listening to Helms, Reagan told the striking controllers that, as they were in violation of the law, those who would not return to work in forty-eight hours

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[265] Biek, 252.

[266] Joseph A. McCartin. *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, The Air Traffic Controllers, And The Strike That Changed America.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 269, 270.

[267] Biek, 253. / McCartin, 288.

[268] Langer.

[269] "Some Private Ventures of FAA Chief Show Pattern of Failure," *Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 1983.

"had forfeited their jobs and [would] be terminated."[270] In addition, to add insult to injury to a union in "utter desperation," Reagan decertified PATCO as the legal representation of federally employed air traffic controllers.[271] For Reagan, after those two days were up the event was over. Work would continue to rebuild after the 11,345 people that had stayed on strike had been fired and blacklisted from serving as air traffic controllers again, but that was a nonissue for the President.[272] In fact, the PATCO strike was considered so minor an issue by Reagan that in his own 1990 autobiography he only dedicated two pages to the strike in his seven hundred and forty-eight-page work.[273] For the rest of American labor, however, the crushing of PATCO signaled the beginning of the end, and in response would see their worries given form in *Blade Runner* the following year.

As Domenic Torchia, a leading figure in PATCO, said about the air controller strike, "it's like flying the *Enola Gay*… you don't know what you've got until you drop it."[274] The effect of dropping this particular bomb, as Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss note, was the triggering of preparations that had been made by employers for "well over a decade" to start demolishing unions; because Reagan's firing of the PATCO strikers was the private sector's green light to begin that deconstruction in the 1980s.[275] These efforts

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[270] Ronald Reagan. "Remarks and Q & A with reporters on the Air Traffic Controllers (PATCO) strike," August 3, 1981, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3ZTCPJ39LA.

[271] Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss. *Hard Work: The Remaking of the American Labor Movement*, (Berkely: University of California Press, 2004), 68.

[272] Fantasia and Voss, 66.

[273] Ronald Reagan. *Ronald Reagan: An American Life – The Autobiography*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 282-283.

[274] Domenic Torchia, quoted in *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, The Air Traffic Controllers, And The Strike That Changed America*, by Joseph A. McCartin, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 277.

[275] Fantasia and Voss, 68.

from employers presented themselves across America in a four-step process: "Bargain to Impasse," "Provoke a Strike," "Hire 'Replacement Workers,'" and "Break the Strike (and the union)."[276] As Fantasia and Voss note, the precise number of such provoked strikes and broken unions post-PATCO in the 1980s is unknown. However, a study done later in the decade found that, by the time of the years between 1985 and 1989, strike-breaking replacements were being hired in a third of all American strikes.[277] In addition, for many other strikes, the mere threat of being replaced by "scabs" was enough to break American unions and end strikes out of workers' fears of becoming like the destroyed PATCO. On the legal side, again described by Fantasia and Voss, between August 1981 and the middle of the decade, a "multibillion-dollar… 'union avoidance'" industry rose up to help companies large and small dismantle the power and influence of unions.[278] As Torchia said, the results of a strike are not known until it actually happens. The result of the PATCO strike, thanks to a President who reneged his promises to that union, was the colossal eroding of labor power in the United States. This dismantling of such power was the central fear portrayed in Ridley Scott's 1982 film, *Blade Runner*.

The future shown by *Blade Runner* is a prediction of 2019 where the whole of labor's power in America has been eroded.[279] The very first shot of the film, after the title crawl describing what a replicant is, is of the 2019 Los Angeles nighttime skyline. The city is shrouded in a dense discoloration of smog and pollution, with the spires of plants and refineries towering over the city as they spew fire from their tallest peaks. The

[276] Fantasia and Voss, 68-69.
[277] Fantasia and Voss, 69-70.
[278] Fantasia and Voss, 70.
[279] *Blade Runner*.

indication is clear that industrialization and capitalism has charged ahead with no restrictions in their growth or impact on the environment. The coloring of the city and sky, mixed with the fire, gives off the impression of hell, a hell made out of an America where corporate power dominates labor. In the distance are great pyramids that tower over the whole of the city, including the smog layer from the industrial sites. From the top of each pyramid is a giant beam of light that illuminates even the lower smog-covered areas of the city around them, as if to broadcast the greatness of their occupants to the little people. Within the pyramids are futurized office cubicles for those like the Tyrell Corporation. It is here where the business leaders, executives, and office workers of the future reside while the rest must live in the deepest reaches of this hellscape.[280]

The path to this future America, over the years since the 1981 strike, is shown in how this opening display of Los Angeles comes after the title crawl describing the replicants:

> Early in the 21st Century, the Tyrell Corporation advanced Robot
> Evolution into the NEXUS phase – being virtually identical to a human –
> known as a Replicant. The NEXUS 6 Replicants were superior in strength
> and agility, and at least equal in intelligence, to the genetic engineers who
> created them.
> Replicants were used as Off-world slave labor, in the hazardous
> exploration and colonization of other planets.
> After a bloody mutiny by a NEXUS 6 combat team in an Off-world
> colony, Replicants were declared illegal on earth – under penalty of death.
> Special police squads – BLADE RUNNER UNITS – had orders to shoot
> to kill, upon detection, any trespassing Replicant.
> This was not called execution. It was called retirement.[281]

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[280] *Blade Runner.*
[281] *Blade Runner.*

Humanity developed a way to create synthetic people, not machines and robots but flesh

and blood people, and turned them into a slave workforce. With this film's release in

June 1982, almost a year after the PATCO strike, its prediction of the future American

workforce cannot be divorced from the changes that failed strike led to, nor from the fear

of where that fallout would lead.

The physical and mental equality of replicants to natural-born humans is

displayed multiple times throughout *Blade Runner*. More, the humans that oppose the

liberty of replicants are shown as inhuman in comparison to the synthetic people. During

the test of Leon (Brion James) to see if he is a replicant, the tester Dave Holden (Morgan

Paull) is constantly smoking and is surrounded by the smoke from his cigarettes. In

contrast, Leon is in clear, clean air despite being at the same table as the smoking human,

as if to symbolize that it is the human tester looking for an escaped replicant for his

corporate masters that is the real machine. During the beginning of the film, the slang

term "skinjob" is used by Police Chief Bryant (M. Emmet Walsh) to describe the

replicants.[282] According to the narration by Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), this term is the

2019 equivalent to the N-word being used by the police to describe black people in past

decades. The existence of such a slur, and its admitted equivalence to real-world slurs,

serve as another illustration of the replicants' peoplehood.

This peoplehood and equality to human mental capacity is the chief reason for

their engineered four-year lifespan. The NEXUS 6 models have a four-year lifespan as a

failsafe to try and prevent the development of emotional responses to the cruel world and

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[282] *Blade Runner*.

society that has enslaved them. The existence of such a failsafe indicates that the Tyrell

Corporation knows that the replicants are capable of the same kind of self-awareness and

life as humans but tries to inhibit their growth in that area so that the replicants can

continue to be disposable workers. A company creating a workforce and limiting its

lifespan as a control mechanism is a hyperbolic leap. But when combined with the health

problems the PATCO controllers endured, and the disintegration of union power in

America after their failed strike, this plot point of *Blade Runner* becomes a blatant

metaphor for corporate domination of labor in the United States. Employers in the U.S.

will take and take from American workers until they are nothing more than replaceable

cogs in machines with no life outside of production.

In addition, the role of the Reagan Administration in the disintegration of

American labor power after the PATCO strike is also extended upon in *Blade Runner*.

Whereas Reagan's decision to fire the striking air traffic controllers was taken by private

employers as the signal to begin dismantling labor power, *Blade Runner* predicts a future

where the institutions of government now directly work to curtail and destroy both the

rights and lives of the replicant workforce. Beginning in the title crawl of the film it is

stated that an attempt by a single team of replicants to take their freedom by force saw all

replicants banned from Earth in 2019.[283] The actions of a singular group had

repercussions that negatively affect all of this exploited labor force, not unlike the fallout

from the PATCO strike. The replicants are thus forced to slave away for a world they will

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[283] *Blade Runner*.

never see on "penalty of death," a penalty put in place to try and keep the replicants eternally working for the corporations that made them.[284]

In *Blade Runner*, there is more government subservience to employer interests and more direct acts of labor suppression than just the replicant lifespan limit. The title of the film itself is the designation of the police personnel whose job it is to uncover, hunt, and kill all replicants on Earth. This is the job that the lead character Deckard left before the film starts but is recalled under threat of death to perform again. Said threat comes from Chief Bryant as he declares to Deckard "if you're not a cop, you're little people" in a display that shows that the police in this predicted future are little more than bullies enforcing the interests of the employers and corporations of 2019. Bryant's threat, and thus the role of American police in 2019, is blatantly told by Deckard's narration: "I quit [the police] cause I had a bellyful of killing, but I'd rather be a killer than a victim. And that's exactly what Bryant's threat about little people meant." The oppressive nature of the police towards the people and workers is also subtly shown by how, despite the technological advances of this future America, the only flying cars ever seen are police vehicles. The replicant slave workers are banned from Earth, but the natural-born human workers are themselves constantly surveilled and monitored by the police as they too are "little people" in relation to this post-PATCO society.[285]

As for this predicted American society's fate, replicant Roy Batty's (Rutger Hauer) use of William Blake's poem *America: A Prophecy* is altered to show the real-

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[284] *Blade Runner.*
[285] *Blade Runner.*

world fear of decline. Batty says "Fiery the angels fell; deep thunder rolled around their shores; burning with the fires of Orc," when instead this line from the original poem is "Fiery the angels rose, and as they rose deep thunder roll'd. Around their shores: indignant burning with the fires of Orc."[286] The change from the original is that the angels are falling in Batty's rendition, instead of rising. As described by late literary critic, Northrop Frye, this poem expressed Blake's hope that the American Revolution would trigger a wave of reform and break from the imperial and slave-built traditions of England. [287] By altering "rose" to "fell," *Blade Runner*'s use of Batty's recitation of these two lines becomes a fear-based prediction that American society will itself fall in fire as a result of the loss of labor power.

The PATCO strike of 1981, however, and its fallout for American labor as a whole was only part of a larger shift in the American capitalist system under President Reagan. Reagan's specific policies and his implementation of his economic theories would prove even more central to the cyberpunk genre, and so deserve an accounting to understand where they affected that genre of fiction. As the decade rolled onward Reagan's policies (derisively called Reaganomics) would see increased disparity in favor of employers and the upper class of American society. Sixteen days after being sworn into office, Reagan gave a national address from Oval Office on February 5, 1981. Here, Reagan spoke of the economic problems facing the nation that he aimed to "turn around," among which included an "out of control" federal budget, $80 billion in "runaway

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[286] *Blade Runner.* / William Blake. "America: A Prophecy," lines 115-116, *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, edited by John Sampson, (London: Oxford University Press 1913), 298.
[287] Northrop Frye. *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, (1947; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 187, 213.

deficits" for that budget year, $80 billion in interest for the national debt, and "two years of back-to-back double-digit inflation."[288] While describing the negative effects these issues would have going forward, Reagan's first lament was that this would leave the nation "short on investment capital needed for business and industry expansion."[289]

Reagan was not wrong on these economic problems facing the United States. Records from the Federal Reserve show that inflation growth on the consumer price index (CPI) rose from 2.6% per year between 1964 and 1968 to a growth of 10.75% in just the first nine months of 1979.[290] On October 6, 1979, Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker implemented new policies to curtail this inflation by raising the federal funds rate.[291] This did begin rolling back some of the inflation, but it also caused "skyrocketing interest rates and two back-to-back recessions."[292] The year 1980 saw interest rates start rising again as, between May 1979 and April 1980, interest had risen to 14.6%.[293] In addition, American experimentation with deregulation through the Depository Institutions Deregulation and Monetary Control Act of 1980 saw bank regulations cut in an effort to also deal with inflation.[294] The deregulation from this act brought about an

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[288] Ronald Reagan. "President Reagan's Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufMyHSj5zpM.
[289] Reagan.
[290] Carl E. Walsh. "October 6, 1979," *FRBSF Economic Letter*, (San Francisco: Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, 2004), 1, https://www.frbsf.org/economic-research/files/el2004-35.pdf.
[291] Walsh, 2.
[292] Walsh, 1.
[293] Walsh, 3.
[294] George Hanc. "Chapter 1: The Banking Crises of the 1980s and Early 1990s: Summary and Implications," *History of the Eighties: Lessons for the Future. Vol. 1, An Examination of the Banking Crises of the 1980s and Early 1990s*, (Washington, DC: Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, 1997), 10. / Lee Davison. "Chapter 2: Banking Legislation and Regulations," *History of the Eighties: Lessons for the Future. Vol. 1, An Examination of the Banking Crises of the 1980s and Early 1990s*, (Washington, DC: Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, 1997), 91.

increasing number of bank failures across the nation that would continue into the 1980s

under Reagan as "regulators [looked] to substitute 'market discipline' for federal

oversight."[295] In addition, the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979 saw a "shutoff" of Iranian

oil to the United States in the 1979 Oil Crisis.[296] While Iran only supplied five percent of

American oil needs, the stoppage of this oil saw domestic companies delve into their

stocks much earlier than normal operations each year, with their reserves dropping ten

percent more in the winter of 1978/79 than normal. The governmental Strategic

Petroleum Reserve was also noted to be in "shambles" by *Time* magazine in February

1979 and in need of an overhaul to meet possible domestic emergency demands.[297] This

crisis saw Americans begin panic buying gasoline. As a result, this created hours-long

lines for gas stations in some areas that saw the nation waste a cumulative total of

approximately 150,000 barrels of oil per day while idling in car lines.[298]

President Reagan would blame these problems on economic regulations that he

claimed, among other things, added at least $100 billion to the cost of domestically

purchased and domestically made goods and services produced from and offered by

"shopkeepers, farmers, and major industries."[299] To fix these troubles, chief among them

inflation that he compared with "radiation," Reagan's central plan was to begin removing

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[295] James L. Rowe Jr. "Regulators See Bank Failures Rising Steadily," *Washington Post*, October 20, 1982, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1982/10/20/regulators-see-bank-failures-rising-steadily/37554a84-6809-4686-b40b-2a21d6cc17c2/.
[296] "Oil Squeeze: Ripples from Iran," *Time*, February 5, 1979, https://web.archive.org/web/20080307085655/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0%2C9171%2C946222%2C00.html.
[297] "Oil Squeeze: Ripples from Iran."
[298] Jeremy Leggett. *Half Gone: Oil, Gas, Hot, Air, and the Global Energy Crisis*, (London: Portobello Books, 2005), 150.
[299] Reagan.

federal economic regulations as he claimed "government policies of the last few decades [were] responsible for [U.S.] economic troubles."[300] Indeed in his 1990 autobiography, Reagan had the audacity of equating such regulations made by Democrat politicians to "the Soviets' failed five-year plans."[301]

Reagan's policies going forward here were, as noted by Ashley M. Donnelly, "dismissive, superficial simplicity, addressing the symptoms of a social problem with no direct contact of discussion with its roots."[302] Noting Joseph Dewey's work, *Novels From Reagan's America*, Donnelly argues that Reagan "plastered over the cracks" of real life in the eighties rather than having solved the nation's problems.[303] Reagan's policies of supply-side economics, or trickle-down economics, only masked the economic problems of 1980s America, while giving more power to a wealthy few.

Supply-side economics itself is the notion that the production and supply side of the economy should have investment and greater freedom in order to stimulate the economy. It posits "that the best way to invigorate the economy [is] to stimulate production… rather than to stress the consumption of goods and services."[304] American proponents of supply-side economics held that taxes were too high for a successful economy and that they applied too heavily to "the more successful."[305] They called for a

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[300] Ronald Reagan. "President Reagan's Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufMyHSj5zpM.
[301] Ronald Reagan. *An American Life*, 205.
[302] Ashley M. Donnelly. *Subverting Mainstream Narratives in the Reagan Era: Giving Power to the People*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 20.
[303] Donnelly, 14.
[304] Maurice A. St. Pierre. "Reaganomics and its Implications for African-American Family Life," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (March 1991), 327.
[305] Robert Lekachman. *Greed is Not Enough: Reaganomics*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 14.

bolstering of the Protestant, Calvinist work ethic for the working class as, so they

claimed, a higher gross national product would balance out the tax reductions.[306]

Though Reagan would later try to deny that supply-side economics was the

foundation of his policies, economists in the 1980s were not fooled.[307] When describing

Reagan's policies in his version of supply-side economics as they were happening, the

late economist Robert Lekachman stated in his 1982 monograph, *Greed is Not Enough*,

that Reagan's

> administration has been engaged in a massive redistribution of wealth and
> power for which the closest precedent is Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal,
> with the trifling difference that FDR sought to alleviate poverty and
> Ronald Reagan enthusiastically enriches further the already obscenely
> rich. Most of the benefits of 1981's tax legislation will flow to large
> corporations and their affluent stockholders, other prosperous individuals,
> commodity traders, military contractors, and truly greedy dabblers in oil,
> gas, and coal properties.[308]

Such actions were textbook supply-side positions. Lekachman would go even further to

say that under David Stockman, Reagan's Director of the Office of Management and

Budget from 1981 to 1985, the working class and blue-collar workers who supported

Reagan were "victimized" by Reagan's economic policies as they gained no true benefits

from the president they endorsed.[309]

From the beginning of his first term, Reagan began to remove federal economic

regulations. His first executive order, Executive Order 12287, which was signed on

January 28, 1981, exempted "all crude oil and refined petroleum products... from the

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[306] Lekachman, 14.
[307] Reagan, 231.
[308] Lekachman, 3.
[309] Lekachman, 4.

price and allocation controls" of the Emergency Petroleum Allocation Act of 1973.[310]

This act had been previously used to control and regulate private supplies of oil and

petroleum during the 1973 and 1979 Oil Crises to try to prevent those crises from

worsening.[311] The following day, January 29, saw Executive Order 12288 signed, which

revoked President Carter's November 1, 1978 Executive Order 12092 that was to

regulate and prohibit inflation by the private sector.[312] Carter's Executive Order 12092

had been put in place "to encourage noninflationary pay and price behavior by private

industry," as a way to control and limit inflation.[313] Under Reagan, this was but one of

many regulations to be terminated.

On February 17, Reagan issued Executive Order 12290, which revoked yet

another of Carter's regulations.[314] The stated regulation was a last-minute Executive

Order from Carter from the last week of his presidency, Number 12264, that was an

extensive guide for regulating goods production in America to ensure no "banned or

significantly restricted substance[s]" would find their way into American exports.[315]

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[310] Executive Order 12287, *Decontrol of Crude Oil and Refined Petroleum Products*, (January 28, 1981). https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/12287.html. Accessed August 23, 2021.

[311] Amy Myers Jaffe and Ronald Soligo. "The Role of Inventories in Oil Market Stability," *The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance*, no. 42 (2002), 407, http://www.amymyersjaffe.com/content/pdf/inventoriesaspublicgood.pdf.

[312] Executive Order 12288, *Termination of the Wage and Price Regulatory Program*, (January 29, 1981). https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/executive-order-12288-termination-wage-and-price-regulatory-program. Accessed August 23, 2021.

[313] Executive Order 12092, *Prohibition Against Inflationary Procurement Practices*, (November 1, 1978). https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-12092-federal-anti-inflationary-procurement-practices. Accessed August 23, 2021.

[314] Executive Order 12290, *Federal Exports and Excessive Regulations*, (February 17, 1981). https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-12290-federal-exports-and-excessive-regulation. Accessed August 23, 2021.

[315] Executive Order 12264, *Federal Policy Regarding Export of Banned or Significantly Restricted Substances*, (January 15, 1981). https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-12264-export-banned-or-significantly-restricted-substances. Accessed August 23, 2021.

Executive Order 12329, on October 14, created the President's Task Force on

Private Sector Initiatives that would last through till the end of 1982.[316] This Task Force

held the purpose of advising the President on

> (1) Methods of developing, supporting and promoting private sector
> leadership and responsibility for meeting public needs.
> (2) Recommendations for appropriate action by the President to foster
> greater public-private partnerships and to decrease dependence on
> government.
> (b) The Task Force shall serve as a focal point for private sector action
> addressing public problems.[317]

Reagan's rationale for the shift from public to private sector control of public issues was

to reduce government social programs and introduce budget cuts in order to deal with

what he called a "runaway growth in spending."[318] Military spending, however, would

not see any such cuts under Reagan like social programs would and would continue its

yearly upward increase.[319]

Deregulation would continue throughout Reagan's eight years in the White House

but would also go hand-in-hand with increased tax cuts for the wealthy. Keeping with the

mentality of supply-side economics and increasing the power of the production side of

the economy, Reagan signed two major tax cut acts during his presidency: the Economic

Recovery Tax Act of 1981 (ERTA) and the Tax Reform Act of 1986 (TRA). The

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[316] Executive Order 12329, *President's Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives*, (October 14, 1981). https://web.archive.org/web/20160305014624/https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1981/10 1481d.htm. Accessed August 29, 2021.

[317] Executive Order 12329.

[318] Ronald Reagan. "President Reagan's Remarks at Briefing for Presidential Task Force on PSI on April 27, 1982," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCj63TrHa2k.

[319] Richard Halloran. "Reagan to Request $38 Billion Increase in Military Outlays," *New York Times*, March 1981, https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/04/us/reagan-to-request-38-billion-increase-in-military-outlays.html.

Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, signed into law on August 13, 1981, brought sweeping changes to the American tax landscape. It brought in a phased implemented twenty-three percent cut of individual tax rates, a massive phased implemented increase of estate tax exemption from $175,625 to $600,000, it cut the highest rate from seventy percent to fifty percent, accelerated depreciation deductions, among many more changes to the tax system.[320]

Despite the continuing of cutting taxes throughout the Reagan Administration, some economists began warning, early into Reagan's first term, how these tax cuts would eventually backfire and harm the nation. Robert Lekachman, again a critic of Reagan's policies, predicted in 1982 that "even if affluent individuals do save most of their tax benefits, the remainder of America is likely to spend all or almost all of them simply to bring their budgets… into balance."[321] Lekachman warned that the increased investment capital Reagan's tax cuts hoped to make would likely see, instead, investments made outside of the United States in "low-wage, anti-union environments," while searching for tax shelters to further horde wealth.[322] Even with such warnings, Reagan's efforts to lower tax rates would continue into the TRA in 1986.

The TRA would take up the ball from the ERTA and run with it. It reduced individual income tax rates, repealed capital gains exclusion, lowered corporation income tax rates (with the top rate down to thirty-four percent), increased personal exemption

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[320] U.S. Congress. House of Representatives. Ways and Means Committee. *Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981*. 97th Congress., 1981, et al, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-95/pdf/STATUTE-95-Pg172.pdf. Accessed August 30, 2021.
[321] Lekachman, 152.
[322] Lekachman, 152-153.

amounts to $2,000, increased standard deductions to $5,000, revised the corporate minimum tax, and like the ERTA, continued from there in a myriad of ways.[323] There were some obvious compromises within this second major tax cut, such as limiting the deductions for nonbusiness interests and repealing individual sales tax deductions here and there; but on the whole, it carried through with the notion that loosing the reigns on the corporations that produce the "supply" of the American economic structure would better the American economy.[324]

These policies would have dramatic short and long-term effects on the nation's economy in both subtle and overt ways in the eyes of the American populace. While the illusion of success appeared on the surface, underneath the rot was setting in. In an interview for the December 1981 issue of *The Atlantic*, David Stockman, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget from 1981 to 1985, claimed that "[Reagan's policy] is premised on faith, on a belief about how the world works."[325] Even though he was a proponent of supply-side economics, Stockman's praising of the new policies showed its flaws. "[Inflation] could be cut in half in a very short period of time," he said, "if the policy is credible;" yet within this same interview, he admitted that various federal programs would need to be cut to offset the tax cuts.[326] To not cut these things, and keep

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[323] Jerry Tempalski. *Revenue Effects of Major Tax Bills,* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Tax Analysis, 2006), https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/tax-policy/tax-analysis/Documents/WP-81.pdf. 12-13.
[324] Tempalski, 13.
[325] David Stockman. Interviewed in "The Education of David Stockman" by William Greider, *The Atlantic*, December issue, 1981, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1981/12/the-education-of-david-stockman/305760/.
[326] William Greider. "The Education of David Stockman." *The Atlantic*, December 1981 issue, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1981/12/the-education-of-david-stockman/305760/.

Reagan's desired increase in defense spending, would create "a series of deficits without precedent in peacetime – ranging from $82 billion in 1982 to $116 billion in 1984."[327]

As Stockman described, the internal line within the Reagan Administration was "cut, cut, cut," in order to find $40 billion on the federal budget that could be cut.[328] The proposed cuts that met with Reagan's approval were eliminating Social Security minimum benefits, slashing costs of Medicaid, restricting eligibility for food stamps, shrinking unemployment benefits, cutting education aid and grants for arts and humanities, and so on.[329] While Stockman wanted to give "a helluva fight" for equity in cuts, such as cutting $752 million from the Export-Import Trade Bank that subsidized direct loans to companies like Boeing, General Electric, and others, there was intense resistance to such a cut within the administration.[330] Only social services were to be cut, not money to businesses.

The very government programs that help keep a society functioning were being shrunk or removed in order to give more power to or take fewer taxes from corporations who faced little to no cuts of their own, and this would only continue throughout the Reagan presidency. Despite Stockman's support of these cuts and Reagan's implementation of supply-side economics, Stockman still admitted that "none of us really understands what's going on with all these numbers."[331] The whole of the system was taken on faith that it would work, even when full comprehension of it was lacking. With

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[327] Greider.
[328] Stockman.
[329] Greider.
[330] Stockman / Greider.
[331] Stockman.

such a public admittance of what Reagan's economic policies were, and the hazy to lack

of understanding of their full effects from policymakers, concern and fear of where they

would lead during the next eight years expanded and wound their way into the heart of

cyberpunk fiction.

Across multiple media, American writers predicted where Reagan's policies of

deregulation and tax cuts would lead in various jaunts into imagined futures where such

policies continued unabated. One of the stories that codified the whole of the cyberpunk

genre was William Gibson's *Neuromancer* from 1984, the first book in his *Sprawl* trilogy

of loosely connected stories. The novel, stated by Gibson years after its publishing, is set

"around 2035" in a world where Reagan's policies have, in the long term, doomed the

United States.[332] In the forward to the Twentieth Anniversary of his novel, Gibson stated

of his prediction of the future that

> [a] vast omission is my failure to have quietly collapsed the Soviet Union
> and swept the rubble offstage when nobody was looking. Though there
> was a strategic reason for my not having done that. I had already done that
> to the United States, which cannot be proven to exist in the world of
> *Neuromancer*. It's deliberately never mentioned as such, and one vaguely
> gathers that it's somehow gone sideways in a puff…, to be replaced by
> some less-dangerous combine of large corporations and city states.[333]

Gibson's prediction for the future was one where the United States has silently

disintegrated between the time period of the book's publishing and the future its narrative

takes place in. The deregulation of the American free market, and tax cuts that had to be

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[332] William Gibson. Quoted in "William Gibson: The Future Will View Us 'As a Joke,'" by Tasneem Raja, *Mother Jones*, October 24, 2014, https://www.motherjones.com/media/2014/10/william-gibson-peripheral-vision-time-travel-interview/.
[333] William Gibson. "The Sky Above the Port: Introduction to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition," *Neuromancer: 20th Anniversary Edition*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), ix.

buoyed by cuts to social programs, saw the corporate entities benefit from such policies. More, the final breath of the United States is hinted at being a failed war against the Soviet Union. When going over the background of the character Willis Corto, a brief summary of this war is discussed in which Russian defenses prove exceedingly effective against an attempted American invasion.[334]

Neuromancer's prediction of war implies that the United States started a war in a final bid for national unity to stave off the growing power of corporate principalities. Instead, the war ended in a scant nine days, and Corto was forced to endure eleven months in a Finish hospital before American forces finally evacuated him. Meanwhile, the United States was falling apart, with institutions like the Pentagon and CIA being "Balkanized."[335] Since the United States is gone by the time of the novel, but the Soviet Union is not, Gibson's prediction is that Reagan's policies will lead to the end of the nation, as well its defeat in the Cold War.

Case, the main character of *Neuromancer*, is a freelance thief who utilizes his neuromancing skills to break the cyber security of various corporate computer systems by connecting his brain into them to steal and sell their data.[336] Such a morally and legally dubious job is a regularly used facet of life within the novel's future world. It is also a life-threatening profession, as Case has suffered severe nerve damage in this 'career' that, at the start of the novel, has rendered him unable to continue within this field.[337] Because

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[334] William Gibson. Neuromancer, (New York: Penguin Group, 1984), 108.
[335] Gibson, 108-109.
[336] Gibson, 6.
[337] Gibson, 6-7.

of this injury, Case has been forced from his home in the Sprawl, a remnant of America, to try and seek out what medical help he can from Japan.[338]

Like with the macro-scale prediction of the fall of the United States as a result of Reagan trading the nation's future away to corporate interests, Case's situation is a micro-scale prediction by Gibson of what life could be like for future Americans. There are no social programs to help Case with housing or safe employment, the future of 2035 is a place where one must work in an underworld of unregulated inter-corporate espionage and conflict to survive. Mistakes here are costly, as there is no health service in the former United States to help Case deal with the nerve damage he has suffered, which prompts his flight to Japan. In return for fixing the damage so he can once again be a neuromancer, Case must take on a high-risk data theft job as payment. The catch is that he is secretly implanted with slow-dissolving poison sacs during the medical procedure that will undo the healing if he fails to complete this job.[339] In Gibson's eyes, the future of both the nation and its people were being sold by Reagan's economic policies, and so the prediction in *Neuromancer* represented a fearful resolution to that betrayal.

This fear of what life would become in the future as a result of President Reagan's policies did not fade as the years moved past *Neuromancer's* release in 1984. In 1987, a film predicting a similarly dangerous future for the nation was released: *Robocop*. Directed by Paul Verhoeven, *Robocop*'s prediction of the future seems optimistic in its pessimism in that the United States still exists here. *Robocop*'s optimism ends there, as

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[338] Gibson, 5-8.
[339] Gibson, 38-39, 61.

the film shows that America is a lame-duck state ruled by the corporations within its borders. What life, in general, is like within the future United States is shown by news and commercial segments interspersed throughout the film. Early in *Robocop* is a commercial for various mechanical hearts for use in heart surgery. These are offered as if they were luxury commodities like cars with multiple brands for heart implants, "extended warranties, financing, [and] qualifies for health tax credit."[340] Even the most lifesaving facets of American healthcare have been divvied up to private interests, who now advertise and sell them like they would a car.

On the local level, the film is centered in the dying city of Detroit, where city and social services continue to break under the strain of exceedingly small budgets in clear allegories to Reagan's own real-world budget cuts to such services. With the official stance of the Reagan Administration as one of "devolving" responsibility where federal welfare was concerned, the Detroit of the future has been left to its fate of a slow death.[341] In *Robocop's* opening local news segment, the first grim picture of dying Detroit is described by anchor Casey Wong (Mario Machado): "Three dead police officers, one critically injured. Police union leaders blame Omni Consumer Products, OCP, the firm which recently entered into a contract with the city to fund and run the Detroit Metropolitan Police Department."[342] In the absence of the federal funds needed to keep the city alive, Omni Consumer Products (OCP) steps in to fulfill the needs of the people.

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[340] *Robocop*, Paul Verhoeven, Orion Pictures, 1987.
[341] Lester M. Salamon and Michael S. Lund. *The Reagan Presidency and the Governing of America*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1984) 40.
[342] *Robocop*.

OCP's involvement in Detroit is not the idealistic fulfillment that Reagan hoped private sector empowerment would create. Instead, money rules everything, and it does not matter if it comes from OCP or someone else. The power of money is clearly shown when a character the credits only call Slimy Lawyer (Gregory Poudevigne) yells at DPD Desk Sergeant Reed (Robert DoQui) "Attempted murder? It's not like he killed someone! This is a clear violation of my client's civil rights... make it aggravated assault and I can make bail in cash, now!"[343] Money holds enough power in the future America that flaunting it within the halls of law enforcement is a regular, and effective, occurrence.

The decline of the future Detroit is not only from lack of funding. OCP uses its city contract to deliberately sabotage Detroit's stability and law enforcement as well. The corporation's power over the police sees them transfer more and more of police from various peaceful parts of the city to the more dangerous and uncontrollable crime-ridden ones, leaving what stable parts of the city remain defenseless. As an unnamed and uncredited background police officer says "They're gonna manage this department right into the ground."[344] This is done because OCP is working to bring back paternal capitalism via their fully corporate-run and owned town, Delta City, which they advertise as a paradise on Earth in comparison to the decay of "old" Detroit. The difference here between the 1987 *Robocop* and William Gibson's 1984 *Neuromancer* is that OCP is in the process of carving out its own private corporate fiefdom from American soil, whereas Gibson's novel has such carving already done before the first page.

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[343] *Robocop.*
[344] *Robocop.*

Delta City will have everything, OCP advertises. It will be clean, self-sufficient, peaceful, and all money within will be controlled by OCP regardless of which way it flows. As the head of the company, known only as The Old Man (Dan O'Herlihy), states

> I've had this dream for more than a decade. A dream which I've invited
> you all to share with me. In six months, we begin construction of Delta
> City. Where Old Detroit now stands. Old Detroit has a cancer. The cancer
> is crime. And it must be cut out before we employ the two million workers
> who will give life to the city again. Although shifts in the tax structure
> have created an economy ideal for corporate growth, community services,
> in this case law enforcement, have suffered. I think it's time we gave
> something back.[345]

Delta City will, in effect, be a city that is no longer a part of the United States as every part of the city will be owned, policed, supplied, and governed by OCP with no oversight. OCP's capability to revive paternal capitalism is explained by the company's early expansions into "hospitals, prisons, [and] space exploration" before their current endeavors in Detroit and with Delta City.[346] The narrative frames this background in a way that presents it as OCP's preparation for making their own corporatocracy. With Reagan's cutting of economic regulations and tax cuts paid for by cutting social services, *Robocop* predicts that it will be corporations that not only fill the vacuum but take advantage of it to enhance and enrich themselves at the expense of others.

The efforts to push people out of Detroit and into Delta City are done at the expense of those very people, despite The Old Man's talk of "community service." While mismanaging the Detroit police department, OCP also has two programs to create the basis for their own private, corporate police force for use in Delta City that they hope will

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[345] *Robocop.*
[346] *Robocop.*

act as the carrot to the stick that is Detroit's rising crime problems. As *Robocop* progresses, however, it is revealed that the crime in Detroit is secretly caused by OCP alongside its publicized private police enforcer projects (one of which is the character Robocop, played by Peter Weller). Crime in Detroit, led by Clarence Boddicker (Kurtwood Smith), is protected from the police and supplied with military-grade arms and munitions by OCP Division President, Dick Jones (Roney Cox), who also is behind one of the privatized police projects. This duel-pronged scheme benefits OCP from all angles. The crime will cause the populace to distrust Detroit's police force and look with hope on Delta City's private alternatives while OCP gains a profit from Boddicker's purchase of weapons. In addition, whichever private police project is most successful will be marketed for military contracts for the next decade to further secure OCP's monopoly on military goods.[347]

OCP's only stumbling block is when Jones's actions and greed harms a fellow OCP executive and that act is exposed publicly. The company cuts him loose in a spectacular fashion that ends with his death, but the corporation itself faces no further consequences. It still has a contract with the city of Detroit to run the police department, it still controls Robocop himself, and the plans for Delta City are still going forward. While the film seems to initially end on a high point as the most villainous part of OCP dies, the reality is that nothing has truly changed and OCP is still rising in its power over the American people within the Detroit area.

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[347] *Robocop.*

Coming out in July 1987, in the middle of Reagan's second term as President, *Robocop*'s predicted future is one that encompasses the way in which Reagan's policies only benefitted the wealthy. As Reagan himself recounted in his memoirs, the end of his first year in office did indeed see inflation fall, with the prime interest rate going from 21.5 percent to 15 percent, and 250,000 new jobs. However, this drop in inflation came at a steep cost for the American working class. National unemployment had risen to 8.4 percent, which Reagan admitted was "the highest in six years," while states with higher industrial output had even higher unemployment rates and were closing "hundreds of factories."[348] The selling of new homes and cars had fallen, over nine million Americans were out of work, and by the end of 1981 public opinion polls showed that the nation was blaming Reagan instead of Carter for these problems.[349]

As for hard data for comparison between the corporate side versus the average people, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED) information helps paint a solid picture in many areas. Both the BLS and FRED show high unemployment in Reagan's early term as the price paid to lower inflation. FRED places the highest unemployment at 10.8 percent peaking in November 1982 before falling, with which the BLS concurs. By the time of *Robocop*'s release, average unemployment was at 6.1 percent, only one and a half percent less than when Reagan first came into office.[350] Such a scant change over six years in regards to improving the lot of the working class.

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[348] Reagan, 306.
[349] Reagan, 306-307.
[350] FRED Economic Data. "Unemployment Rate," *Economic Research*. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Updated October 2, 2020, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/UNRATE. / U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Diving deeper into specific demographics shows worse conditions for non-white workers as well, as the BLS shows. For example, Hispanic and Latino Americans saw an unemployment rate rise well over 15 percent at the end of 1982 and the start of 1983. And by the time of *Robocop*'s release, despite falling since 1983, was still higher than the national average of unemployment.[351] While what would be called The Great Inflation ended in 1982, at the same time unemployment under Reagan peaked before declining, the statement made by Reagan's policies was that unemployed Americans were the price to pay to lower inflation.[352]

For a comparison of how well the supply side of the economy did in comparison to the consumption side, FRED's data on changes in production costs and consumption costs paint a stark contrast. When tracking the Producer Price Index for commodities of pulp, paper, and similar wood pulp products, for example, FRED's information shows that the index was at 102.9 when Reagan took office, but dropped down to 92.5 in under two years, with a trend of continual decrease.[353] The Production Price Index for plastics in industry, while not seeing decreases, stayed level between 110 and 108 for the majority

"(Seas) Unemployment Rate," *BLS Data Viewer*, https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNS14000000;jsessionid=08BAE2B27FA1E552748EA576E5A28C82.

[351] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Unemployment Rate – Hispanic or Latino from 1981 to 1989," *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. Data extracted on: October 4, 2020, https://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet.

[352] Michael Bryan. "The Great Inflation: 1965-1982," *Federal Reserve History*, (St. Louis: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, November 22, 2013), https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great-inflation.

[353] FRED Economic Date. "Producer Price Index by Commodity: Pulp, Paper, and Allied Products: Wood Pulp," *Economic Research*. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Updated February 18, 2020, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/WPS0911.

of Reagan's presidency up until *Robocop*'s release in 1987.[354] Consumer Price Indexes,

on the other hand, showed a consistent increase under Reagan's Presidency. From

January 1981 to July 1987, the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers: All

Items rose from 87.2 to 113.8.[355] The Personal Consumption Expenditures Excluding

Food and Energy index went from 42.912 in January 1981 to 57.589 by July 1987.[356] The

production costs of goods in America, under Reagan, were either staying level or

decreasing, and in response to stability and good fortune, producers raised the prices for

consumers to maximize profit. Reagan's policies were turning the nation into a place for

corporate growth and economic stability, at the cost of the employment and money of the

American workers and consumers. Taking the effects of Reagan's policies to an extreme,

Robocop predicts a world where such trends have simply reached the hyperbolic

conclusion of public cities in decline while companies rise ascendant to lord over them.

One of the final pieces of the cyberpunk genre, and thus one able to critique the

entirety of Reagan's economic policies with its commentary, is the 1988/1989 tabletop

role-playing game, *Cyberpunk*. Its place at the end of the decade allows it to give a

societal commentary on the whole of Reagan's economic policies. Moreover, the lead

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[354] FRED Economic Data. "Producer Price Index by Industry: Plastics Material and Resins Manufacturing," *Economic Research*. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Updated September 10, 2020, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PCU325211325211.
[355] FRED Economic Data. "Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers: All Items in U.S. City Average," *Economic Research*. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Updated September 11, 2020, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CPIAUCSL.
[356] FRED Economic Data. "Personal Consumption Expenditures Excluding Food and Energy (Chain-Type Price Index)," *Economic Research*. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, updated October 1, 2020, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PCEPILFE.

writer of this tabletop game, Mike Pondsmith's own vantage point --as an African American --gives *Cyberpunk* a further unique standpoint.

Reagan, for his part, held a level of racist views for some time that colored and affected his domestic and economic policies. In a phone call to then-President Richard Nixon on October 26, 1971, Governor Reagan made clear his view that those of African descent were "monkeys" who were "still uncomfortable wearing shoes," (which prompted a laugh from Nixon).[357] In addition, Reagan worked to promote the 'welfare queen' myth ("the idea that African American women on welfare are sexually promiscuous, illiterate drug addicts who are undeserving of assistance") as a reason to clamp down on social benefits in his 1980 presidential campaign.[358] Such racial views tinted Reagan's politics for the whole of his time in the White House and Pondsmith, as a black American, may have considered this when writing for his tabletop game, *Cyberpunk*. Pondsmith's reaction to the Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd's murder in 2020 supports this, as Pondsmith said "Cyberpunk was a warning, not an aspiration."[359]

While Reagan worked to build up the American economy by aiding corporations and stockholders via tax cuts and deregulation, one of the ways he paid for such things was cuts to welfare assistance, which the *Harvard Law Review* noted was given "mostly

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[357] Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon, "Conversation 013-008," October 26, 1971, Washington, D.C., MP3, 12:05, *White House Tapes: Sound Recordings of Meetings and Telephone Conversations of the Nixon Administration, 1971-1973*, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/white-house-tapes/013/conversation-013-008.

[358] Premilla Nadasen. "From Widow to 'Welfare Queen': Welfare and the Politics of Race," *Black Women, Gender + Families*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 2007), 53.

[359] Mike Pondsmith, quoted by R Talsorian Games Inc. in *From the Screamsheets: A Statement from RTG*, June 5, 2020. https://rtalsoriangames.com/2020/06/05/from-the-screamsheets-a-statement-by-rtg/.

[to] women and children."[360] In addition, the growing homeless population of the United

States was shifting demographics to "more women, more African American, more young

people," many of whom were well educated but had fallen on hard times from exorbitant

medical expenses.[361] Meanwhile, John A. Svahn, appointed by Reagan as Commissioner

of Social Security, said in a letter responding to a woman about the growing

homelessness problem that "people in such situations must rely on State or local

assistance programs or volunteer organizations to provide temporary help."[362] Meaning

that the Reagan administration would not offer any federal help to the nation's homeless

and that they held public assistance of any level to be only temporary aid. The homeless

in America would have to fend for themselves in the long term. According to Marian

Moser Jones, in the early 1980s, American "homelessness likely stemmed from economic

causes such as the recession and cutbacks on social programs for the poor."[363]

Even with the growing homeless, a 1982 study by the Rand Corporation showed

that there was no "shortage in rental housing," and instead of that there was only a

"general loss of interest [among investors] to building and owning rental property."[364]

Reagan chose to ignore those facets of the report and moved to end construction efforts

on federally subsidized housing for low-income Americans, while also raising the rent on

[360] "Dethroning the Welfare Queen: The Rhetoric of Reform," *Harvard Law Review*, Vol 107, No. 8, (June 1994), 2018.
[361] Marian Moser Jones. "Creating a Science of Homelessness During the Reagan Era," *Milbank Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 1, (March 2015), 141.
[362] John A. Svahn. *Social Security commissioner's reply to October 30, 1981, letter from Audrey J. Ward, West Milford*, February 5, 1982. ID#050721, HS, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.
[363] Jones, 141.
[364] Jones, 150-151.

existing housing complexes. Reagan's actions here came after Congress approved his $35

billion budget cuts in 1981 which, Jones notes, came from "domestic social spending."[365]

One such piece of domestic social spending that faced budget cuts from Reagan

was the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) which, while administered by

state governments, was funded by the federal government. AFDC support was crucial to

black families in the United States due to a great disparity of household income when

compared to white families and the national average in the 1980s. The U.S. Bureau of the

Census showed that in 1984 the median income of black families was $15,432, while

white median income was $27,686 and the national median family income was

$26,433.[366] In addition, the poverty rate for black Americans that year was 33.8 percent,

compared to white Americans at 11.5 percent, and the disparity increased when viewing

children with 46.5 percent to 16.5 percent.[367] The AFDC was vital to helping those black

Americans affected by this economic disparity, and any cuts to its funding would hit

black Americans much harder than white recipients of its aid.

Reagan chose to cut the AFDC's funding anyway, along with that of the Child

Support Enforcement (CSE), and added qualifying "reforms" that were rationalized

around the philosophy of "industry and thrift" from his own economic views and

beliefs.[368] These new structures required applicants to terminate benefits from the Work

Incentive Program (WIN), it increased requirements for employment to qualify for

benefits, lowered allowances for utilities and shelter of beneficiary families of large

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[365] Jones, 151.
[366] St. Pierre, 331.
[367] St. Pierre, 331.
[368] St. Pierre, 331-332.

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households, cut funding going to parents whose children were sixteen or older, and required minor mothers to live with their parents to receive any aid, among other ways to lower eligibility and stress Reagan's economic theories.[369] Due to the higher average number of members in black households to white households, Maurice A. St. Pierre notes that these new measures would negatively impact black families in a far greater fashion than it would white families.[370] On the whole, Reagan's economic policies would lower the disposable income of black Americans by 60 percent by the time he left office.[371]

It is, therefore, no surprise that Mike Pondsmith's prediction of the future in *Cyberpunk* has a unique take on the genre and its commentary on Reagan's economic policies. While initially the world of *Cyberpunk* appears similar in many respects to other stories in the genre---corporations so powerful that they have their own private armies and have grown immune to the governments of the world--- it is how the community of the world is shown that a new vantage point emerges.[372] In *Cyberpunk*, it is the community that the corporate-dominated future directly threatens as there is no government that can stop the companies or support families. Corporate built, run, and owned cities emerge by forcibly removing those that are labeled "undesirables," and are capable of denying housing to employees based on race or any other prejudicial reason.[373]

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[369] St. Pierre, 332.
[370] St. Pierre, 332.
[371] Luke Tripp. "The Political Views of Black Students During the Reagan Era," *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Afro-American Studies in the Twenty-First Century (Summer 1992), 46.
[372] Mike Pondsmith, Colin Fisk, Dave Friedland, and Will Moss. *Cyberpunk: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future – Welcome to Night City: A Sourcebook for 2013*. Berkeley: R. Colin Fisk, Dave, Friedland, and Will Moss. Cyberpunk- View From The Edge: The Cyberpunk Handbook. (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1988), 24-30.
[373] Pondsmith, Fisk, Friedland, and Moss, 25.

One of the stories within the initial lorebooks for the game details how companies can and do abduct people right off the street and forcibly employ them if they feel a person has skills that can increase profit margins.[374] A later supplemental lorebook in 1989 details how this process is labeled "corporate extraction," and how companies will even do this with each other's employees.[375] More, to keep kidnapped people in line after such an ordeal, companies will also hold their families hostage via armed guards.[376]

Like much of the cyberpunk genre, the notion of companies kidnapping people right off the street in broad daylight to maximize profits is a hyperbolic commentary on real-world trends and policies. People stolen from their residences and their families in favor of corporate profits and federal budget cuts, in a general sense instead of literal, was something that was happening in the real world of the 1980s. An event made national headlines in January 1982, when a homeless African American woman, Rebecca Smith, froze to death in the cardboard box she called home on the streets of New York City over the third weekend of the month.[377] As more information on Smith's death came out, it was revealed by her daughter, Marsha Smith Williams, that Rebecca was a valedictorian college graduate, a pianist, and suffered ten years in a hospital for schizophrenia.[378] Smith eventually left her family in Virginia because "she did not want to be a burden on them,"

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[374] Pondsmith, Fisk, Friedland, and Moss, 11-21.

[375] Mike Pondsmith, Will Moss, Dave Friedland, Scott Ruggles, and Derek Quintanar. *Cyberpunk: Solo of Fortune- a Supplement For Cyberpunk*. Edited by Derek Quintanar and Mike Pondsmith. (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1989), 23-24.

[376] Pondsmith, Moss, Friedland, Ruggles, and Quintanar, 24.

[377] Jones, 141.

[378] Robin Herman. "One of City's Homeless Goes Home- in Death," *New York Times*, January 31, 1982, https://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/31/nyregion/one-of-city-s-homeless-goes-home-in-death.html.

and left for New York.[379] It was no "failure" on Smith's part that made her deserving of homelessness, it was a desire to remove the financial burden from her husband and daughter. Likewise, it was not Smith's fault that she died cold and alone in a box but was potentially that of the economic policies of the decade. As the *Washington Post* noted in February 1982

> It goes without saying (mostly because no one wants to say it) that among the things that happen when budgets are cut is that people die. They do not die because anyone wants them to, they simply die because a service that once existed no longer does. This is what happens when you cut fire services or police services. We all recognize that and so we ought to recognize, too, that this is what happens when you cut social services. People like Rebecca Smith die. You can count on it. … No one could possibly believe that a person could freeze to death on the street by accident. It was not an accident. It was policy. The decision was made somewhere that it would take too much money to constantly canvass the city, any city, for street people, to take their pulse and look them in the eye and decide which ones just had to go to the hospital right away and which ones were in no danger. After all, the tragedy is not that no one knew about Mrs. Smith. The tragedy is that everyone knew. … She was fine on Friday, but Saturday and Sunday were a different matter. The cause of death was hypothermia. The reason was cold cash.[380]

In the predicted 2013 of Mike Pondsmith's *Cyberpunk*, people are taken right off the street by the corporations for more profit; in the 1982 of the real world, people died in the street to pay for the budget cuts needed to pay for Reagan's corporate tax breaks. Regardless of fiction or reality, the results were the same-- lives are destroyed in favor of bettering corporate interests.

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[379] Herman.

[380] Richard Cohen. "Fatal Policy," *Washington Post*, February 4, 1982, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1982/02/04/fatal-policy/f039f1a8-c8db-47c9-bfa9-9cffda5168e7/.

Pondsmith's commentary on the economic treatment and disparity of black Americans in his tabletop game's future world shows the only real escape for anyone of African descent is to leave Earth. As the corporations of Earth exploit the people there and hoard the planet's wealth, millions of African workers live in the various space stations in Earth's orbit and account for two-thirds of the "spacer" population. Here, a vastly interconnected tribal culture has developed (described on a page next to artwork of a black family floating in zero-gravity, clustered around a storytelling father), with oral tales, coming of age rituals, and a new cultural identity. Due to the danger of life in the vacuum of "the Big Dark" space, this new orbital civilization is also "uniformly intelligent, fast reacting, and level headed."[381]

Likewise, as if to refute the stereotypes of the day, Pondsmith describes this community as never smoking, due to the need for clean air scrubbers in space, and rarely drinking alcohol or partaking of any other type of drug that can impair the mental faculties needed to live and survive in space.[382] The future may be doomed to corporate domination and exploitation if Reagan's policies continue, but those of African descent can escape it by leaving the Earth behind. While the heartwarming image of this space-borne community may seem optimistic at first, it is more pessimistic when the surface is scratched. In the world of *Cyberpunk*, there is no place on Earth for black people; this world is a future where those of African descent must leave behind the planet they called home to find any semblance of safety, security, and respect.

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[381] Mike Pondsmith, Dave Ackerman, Glenn Wildermuth, and Derek Quintanar. *Cyberpunk: Near Orbit – Space Supplement for Cyberpunk*. Edited by Derek Quintanar and Edward S. Bolme. (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1989), 41.

[382] Pondsmith, Ackerman, Wildermuth, and Quintanar, 41.

Of all the shifting trends in the United States in the 1980s, the economic changes brought about by Ronald Reagan were the most impactful on the American psyche. Unlike new media trends, which caused anxiety due to their more unknown nature, or military shifts, which only touched Americans interested in world affairs, Reaganomics affected the domestic front as a whole and touched each American in some way. With this prolificity, it is no surprise that the American anxieties about the new economic field in the United States became the central and binding pillar within the cyberpunk genre that the 1980s birthed. Cyberpunk content creators, regardless of the medium, used the genre to give an outlet for such anxieties by extrapolating from how Reagan's policies were affecting the nation before their eyes to imagine futures where these policies continued unabated.

1982's *Blade Runner* took the failed PATCO strike of the previous year and the unraveling of labor power in America that defeat caused, and imagined a world where laborers are crafted and controlled from birth to serve as slaves to corporate masters.[383] The workers of the future have shortened lifespans as a way to lower the chances of rebellion, and because there will always be more replicants to replace those that die. Meanwhile, they are all denied Earth, the home of the corporate masters they serve. In the real world, businesses took the cue from Reagan's firing of air traffic controllers striking for safer and fairer jobs that it was now open season on labor unions. As gains made by labor in the U.S. were being rolled back, the anxieties caused by that crafted a film that

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[383] *Blade Runner*.

imagined a future where labor has no power at all and has become nothing more than tailor-made slaves.

The supply-side economic policies of Reagan engendered anxieties for the future of the nation that were given different forms of predictions in William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer* and the 1987 film *Robocop*. Reagan's deregulation, tax cuts, and social welfare cuts saw two distinct, and pessimistic, predictions on where these policies would take America. Gibson saw these changes and from them, he predicted a future where the United States had quietly collapsed before the first page of the book as various corporations rose in deregulated power to carve out their own pieces of land.[384] *Robocop*, on the other hand, still has the United States as an existing nation, but it is in the process of having its cities taken over by corporate interests, as seen by OCP's mismanagement of Detroit's police to convince inhabitants to move into the new Delta City OCP owns.[385] Both anxiety-crafted stories envision a negative future if Reagan's policies continue. *Neuromancer*'s is a world where the United States has been devoured by business interests, while *Robocop*'s is a world where the nation is dying to feed the corporations within.

Mike Pondsmith's tabletop roleplaying game, *Cyberpunk* was released at the end of the decade. While the narrative structure of the game is something determined by the individual players of each game session, the worldbuilding lore within the various lorebooks released in 1988 and 1989 clearly show the impact of Reagan's policies on

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[384] Gibson. "The Sky Above the Port: Introduction to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition," ix.
[385] *Robocop*.

African Americans specifically. The anxiety-crafted future of *Cyberpunk* is one that is uniquely made from the concerns felt by black Americans at the direction Reagan was taking the nation. Reagan was cutting social benefits and making it harder to receive such benefits in ways that would disproportionately affect African Americans and threaten families and communities as a whole. As the disparity of income and employment continued, and people like Rebecca Smith died in the street, Pondsmith envisioned a future where people that looked like him could escape these Earth-bound problems and craft a society in the stars where they were no longer a minority, but a tightly knit community that was recapturing parts of their original traditions from Africa itself.[386]

These examples are, of course, not the only pieces of the cyberpunk genre to have anxiety-based commentaries about Reaganomics, as the economy is the central commentary of the whole genre. Even when the main focus of a novel like *The Running Man* is the shifting media trends of cable network power, for instance, time is still taken to tell the reader that the predicted future is a corporate-dominated hellscape with no recourse for the masses.[387] Likewise, *Tron*'s whole plot and exploration of a future brought about by the Golden Age of Arcades is set in motion because a corporate careerist desired more money and power regardless of legality.[388] The truth is that those Americans who were either directly affected by the negative side of Reaganomics, or who just had compassionate enough eyes, saw their nation turning into a greedier and more selfish place at the expense of the many. With the understandable fear and despair

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[386] Pondsmith, Ackerman, Wildermuth, and Quintanar, 41.
[387] King, 6-8, 46.
[388] *Tron*, Steven Lisberger, Walt Disney Productions, Lisberger-Kushner Productions, 1982.

that caused they crafted the stories that would make up the cyberpunk genre by imagining

how Reagan's policies, if continued for decades, would further rob the nation of its soul.

Whether prediction, warning, or just nightmare given form, these stories allowed this

cultural anxiety to be released into the world, and not bottled up inside.

CONCLUSION

In utilizing the cyberpunk genre, the largest cultural anxieties and fears of the United States in the 1980s are visible to historians. In this way the genre proves the viability of its stories as historical artifacts, as well as fiction in general. Cyberpunk was born out of American concern for where new media formats, military developments, and Reagan's largescale shifting of the American economy would lead the nation to in the future. This uniqueness makes the genre a valuable source for historians by which to better understand the American people of the 1980s by delving into the cultural zeitgeist of everyday Americans.

In the realm of new media trends in the 1980s, there were three large changes at the start of the decade: the Golden Age of Arcades, the legal battles over home television recording, and the birth of single-fad cable networks. In relation to the first, the 1982 film *Tron* took the cultural concerns over the Golden Age of Arcades and video game technology and moved them to an undisclosed point in the future to make a narrative that expressed the fears of misuse of those technologies if the right people were not in control of them.[389] Through this 1982 film, American anxieties that continued to grow over the course of the Golden Age of Arcades (1978 to 1983) are in open, unfiltered view.[390] In this way, *Tron* gives historians an understanding of how the new technology and industry

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[389] *Tron*, Steven Lisberger, Walt Disney Productions, Lisberger-Kushner Productions, 1982.
[390] Jason Whittaker. *The Cyberspace Handbook*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 122. / Steven L. Kent. *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokémon – The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 116.

of video games and arcades scared the American populace in regards to what improper

leadership of that industry could cause as it continued to grow in size and scope.

Similarly, the 1983 Canadian/American film *Videodrome* covered societal

concerns about home videotape recorders such as Betamax VTRs and later VCRs. In

response to Sony's creation of the Betamax Videotape Recorders, American film and

television companies took Sony to court in 1977 and 1979 at the Central District Court of

California over the legality of television recorder technology in relation to copyright.[391]

This legal battle would go all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1983, with a verdict

in favor of Sony and VTRs being reached in 1984.[392]

Like with the relation of video games to *Tron*, this new technology that was

seeing its fate decided before the eyes of the American people created concerns about the

morality and ethics of its usage; and these concerns made their way into *Videodrome* in

1983 before the Supreme Court ruling was reached. The film's narrative, set in an

undisclosed future like *Tron* that is only denoted by advanced technology, is a case of

gray versus grey conflict. In *Videodrome*, two rival companies battle over the control of a

bootleg television program distributed via videocassette tapes. One side desires the

program to gain greater wealth, while the other wishes to use it to control and modify the

population of North America with the program.[393] As the two sides fight, it becomes clear

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[391] *Universal City Studios v. Sony Corp. of America*, 429 F. Supp. 407 (C.D. Cal. 1977)
https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/429/407/1532027/. / *Universal City Studios v. Sony Corp. of America*, 480 F. Supp. 429 (C.D. Cal. 1979), https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/480/429/1531591/.
[392] *Sony Corp. v. Universal City Studios*, 464 U.S. 417 (1984),
https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/464/417/.
[393] *Videodrome*, David Cronenberg, Canadian Film Development Corporation, 1983.

that the moral of the film is that corporations should not be the ones to decide who and how VTRs are used, but each individual must decide for themselves, lest private dominance of entertainment expand further in the future. *Videodrome* shows historians a cultural refutation of the courtroom battles over home videotape recorders in favor of personal responsibility and choice that should belong only to the individual.

The new single-fad cable networks that were born at the start of the decade, likewise, had specific cyberpunk stories made to address the fears and concerns they invoked in Americans. Stephen King's 1982 novel *The Running Man* and its 1987 film adaptation both envision a world where all of television has been consumed by a singular network that only plays lethal game shows to placate the populace of a dying United States while having unparalleled power over the nation and its government. Both the novel and film show the Network using this power to hide the truth of the decaying world from the American populace of the future, but they each differ in what can be done about it. In the novel, it is only personal rebellion that can happen. Even then such rebellion will cost the individual their life without a promise that their sacrifice was worth anything.[394] The 1987 film adaptation of *The Running Man*, on the other hand, gives the message that the only way to stop the menace that is this bloated Network is direct communist revolution and seizure of control of all information distributing media by said revolutionaries.[395]

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[394] Stephen King writing as Richard Bachman. *The Running Man*, (New York: Signet Fiction, 1982), 313-317.
[395] *The Running Man*, Paul Michael Glaser, Braveworld Productions, Taft Entertainment, HBO Pictures, 1987.

Both novel and film versions of *The Running Man* show an anxiety over where the new single-fad cable networks, chiefly ESPN, CNN, and MTV, will lead the nation. ESPN was increasingly centralizing the broadcasting of sports under the ownership of a select few and fed that growth with money from corporations like Getty Oil.[396] CNN, meanwhile, was expanding more and more as Ted Turner worked to dominate the news field. Turner's influence grew so much that he went and acted as a private diplomat, with no public accountability, to meet with world leaders like Fidel Castro and Mikhail Gorbachev.[397] At the same time, MTV was specifically targeting and hitting the youth of the United States.[398] Over half of MTV's audience were between ages 12 and 24, who averaged up to two hours of MTV every day.[399] In these new cable juggernauts were increased centralization, privatization, power on the world stage, and influence with children and young people. American anxieties over the growing power of these networks in the 1980s coalesced into the novel and film adaptation of *The Running Man*.

As for the shifting military trends in this decade, the anxieties over the rising defense budget, increased nuclear arms production, and President Reagan's proposed Strategic Defense Initiative are best displayed in the cyberpunk films *WarGames* and *The Terminator*. Meanwhile, the concern over increased U.S. military action overseas is

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[396] James Andrew Miller and Tom Shales. *Those Guys Have All the Fun: Inside the World of ESPN*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), 19-23, 26, 44-45. / Travis Vogan. "Artifact: The 'Quiet Founder' Of ESPN's $10 Million Stock Certificate," *Deadspin*, May 7, 2014, https://deadspin.com/artifact-the-quiet-founder-of-espns-10-million-stoc-1566133061.

[397] Ted Turner. *Call Me Ted*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2008), 215-217.

[398] "Robert W. Pittman," *The Museum of Broadcast Communications*, February 3, 2009, https://web.archive.org/web/20090203113351/http://museum.tv/archives/etv/P/htmlP/pittmanrobe/pittmanrobe.htm.

[399] Basil G. Englis. "Music Television and Its Influences on Consumer Culture, and the Transmission of Consumption Messages," *The Association for Consumer Research*, 1991, https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/7147/volumes/v18/NA-18.

shown in the cyberpunk tabletop roleplaying game *Cyberpunk*. From 1978 onward well into the 1980s, the United States military budget increased in leaps and bounds, rising over $10 billion in less than a decade.[400] The most obvious use of these funds was the increased manufacturing of nuclear Pershing 2 and Gryphon missiles.[401] Further use of the increasing funds went to Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative that he announced in 1983 to break the MAD doctrine that had kept the peace in the Cold War.[402] Both uses of these funds faced very visible and fearful disapproval, at home and abroad, throughout the 1980s.[403] *WarGames* (1983) and *The Terminator* (1984) took these events and imagined futures where the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union grew to include the development of artificial intelligence that visibly takes control of nuclear weapons away from human hands while also anthropomorphizing them. In *WarGames*, the weapons crafted from this arms buildup nearly cause a nuclear war as the film's AI, created to find the best possible outcome of such a war, is barely stopped from launching those weapons.[404] The world is saved from destruction, but only barely. Conversely, through the use of time travel, *The Terminator*'s future, shown through flashbacks, is a world where the AI of this future succeeded in launching the nuclear

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[400] Council of Economic Advisors, *Annual Report - 1987* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987), 245-248. / Council of Economic Advisers, *Annual Report – 1988*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 248-52.
[401] John Vinocur. "A Missile Protest Prepared In Bonn," *New York Times*, October 9, 1981, https://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/09/world/a-missile-protest-prepared-in-bonn.html.
[402] Ronald Reagan. *Ronald Reagan: An American Life – The Autobiography*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 547.
[403] Vinocur. / Peter J. Westwick. "The International History of the Strategic Defense Initiative: American Influence and Economic Competition in the Late Cold War," *Centaurus*, Vol 52, Issue 4, (November 2010), 338-341.
[404] *WarGames*, John Badham, United Artists, Sherwood Productions, 1983.

arsenal of the United States and nearly wiping out humanity.[405] Human civilization and

society as it was, is destroyed. But humanity is able to survive and defeat the machines of

war. The differing events of these films show historians anxieties over American arms

increases and military technology development that fell into two camps. The first is the

thought that the world could be saved by backing off nuclear production. The second is

the fear that the bombs would be used no matter what and that only after they destroyed

modern society could humanity build something better.

As for the tabletop game *Cyberpunk*, while it did not envision a world-ending

scenario in response to military anxieties of 1980s Americans, its predicted future is

perhaps even bleaker. This game, coming out in 1988/1989 was able to take in all of the

military developments and trends of that decade, the anxieties they caused, and predicted

a future where the United States would be embroiled in a forever war in Latin America.

This war starts in 1990 and continues into the current year of the game's setting of

2013.[406] The origins of the American anxieties that inspired this prediction of forever war

were the American military interventions in Lebanon and then in Latin America with

Grenada and Nicaragua.

The Beirut Bombings of October 23, 1983, the downing of an American plane by

Syrian anti-aircraft fire, and promises of retaliation that either failed or never materialized

as American deployments lengthened saw American disapproval of these actions rise to

over half of the populace before troops started withdrawal from Lebanon in February

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[405] The Terminator, James Cameron, Hemdale, Pacific Western Productions, 1984.
[406] Mike Pondsmith, Colin Fisk, Dave Friedland, and Will Moss. *Cyberpunk: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future – Welcome to Night City: A Sourcebook for 2013*. (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1988), 0.

1984.[407] Meanwhile, as if in a wild swinging attack to reassure the nation that the United

States was powerful, two days after the Beirut Bombings, the United States invaded

Grenada, which was part of the British Commonwealth, to topple its socialist

government.[408] Reagan's choice to invade Grenada, based on flimsy evidence, held

repercussions that damaged relations with the United Kingdom and nearly brought the

United States into direct conflict with Cuba.[409] Domestic anxieties over American

interventionism only grew when the Iran-Contra scandal broke, in 1986, about how the

NSC and CIA worked to defy an act of Congress to support a side of a civil war in

Nicaragua.[410] The connection between Iran-Contra and *Cyberpunk* is keenly seen by how

it is groups like the NSC and CIA that start its predicted Latin American forever war.[411]

With its position at the end of the decade, *Cyberpunk* allows for historians to see just how

American military actions in the 1980s affected the American psyche through its

envisioned future where said actions continued for decades.

Likewise, economic shifts in the 1980s also saw the anxieties they caused work

their way into the cyberpunk genre. More, they became the central pillar for the whole of

the genre, even if a story's focus was more on military or media matters. The destruction

of the PATCO union by Reagan's betrayal of their loyalty, in 1981, began the unraveling

[407] Mattia Toaldo. *The Origins of the US War on Terror: Lebanon, Libya and American Intervention in the Middle East*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 99-101.
[408] Michal T Kaufman. "1,900 U.S. Troops, with Caribbean Allies, Invade Grenada and Fight; Leftist Units; Moscow Protests; British are Critical," *New York Times*, October 26, 1983,
[409] Reagan, 450, 454-455. / Anthony Payne. *Grenada: Revolution and Invasion*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 31-33.
[410] David M. Abshire. *Trust is the Coin of the Realm: Saving the Reagan Presidency*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 3.
[411] Pondsmith, Fisk, Friedland, and Moss, 0.

of labor power in the United States.[412] The following year saw the release of the Ridley Scott film, *Blade Runner*, which envisioned a future 2019 where labor has no power of any kind and is custom-made by companies to work until they die while being barred from the society their work creates on pain of death.[413] As labor power in the U.S. disintegrated after the failed 1981 strike, the prediction of the future in 1982's *Blade Runner* presents to historians a fear among Americans of where a United States without labor power could lead the nation.

Additionally, Reagan's own specific economic policies caused intense levels of anxiety and fear among Americans for whom those policies did not benefit, and indeed threatened. Reagan's solutions to inflation and the recession of the 1970s were to cut regulations, cut taxes, and cut funding for social services to pay for the tax cuts, policies that some of his own administration were unsure of the validity.[414] The wealthy gained more wealth, while social safety nets began to disappear. Out of the American concerns about Reagan's economic policies, stories like William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer* and the 1987 film *Robocop* emerged to take those fears and imagine where they would lead the future. *Neuromancer* showed a world where the United States is no more, and its former territory has been carved up by corporate and business interests as a result of Reagan's opening the door for them to run wild.[415] *Robocop*, on the other hand,

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[412] Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss. *Hard Work: The Remaking of the American Labor Movement*, (Berkely: University of California Press, 2004), 68-70.

[413] *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott, The Ladd Company, Shaw Brothers, Blade Runner Partnership, 1982.

[414] Stockman, David. Interviewed in "The Education of David Stockman" by William Greider, *The Atlantic*, December issue, 1981, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1981/12/the-education-of-david-stockman/305760/.

[415] William Gibson. "The Sky Above the Port: Introduction to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition," *Neuromancer: 20th Anniversary Edition*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), ix.

showed a future that is in the midst of a corporation carving out its own piece of a declining United States to be its private kingdom, while sabotaging the police and social services to do so.[416]

Rounding out how the genre of cyberpunk showed American economic anxieties is Mike Pondsmith's tabletop game *Cyberpunk*. As an African American, who were predominantly more negatively affected by Reagan's economic policies than their white countrymen, Pondsmith's vision of the dark future of 2013 illuminates black concerns.[417] Pondsmith's future is one where, as a result of unleashed corporations and evaporated social and welfare programs, American communities at the local and personal levels are under threat from corporate agents.[418] In addition, his predicted future is one where those of African descent do not have a place on Earth. Instead, it is only in space, building and supporting the efforts to explore and settle the final frontier that those like Pondsmith can find these things in his predicted future.[419] Pondsmith's tabletop game is, therefore, valuable to historians because it shows the societal fear that Reagan's policies will create a future that is not safe for black people on Earth.

This selection of cyberpunk fiction is not all there is to the genre, of course. *Neuromancer* was the first of a trilogy of novels that were released in the 1980s alongside

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[416] *Robocop*, Paul Verhoeven, Orion Pictures, 1987.

[417] Maurice A St. Pierre. "Reaganomics and its Implications for African-American Family Life," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (March 1991), 331-332.

[418] Pondsmith, Fisk, Friedland, and Moss, 11-21. / Mike Pondsmith, Will Moss, Dave Friedland, Scott Ruggles, and Derek Quintanar. *Cyberpunk: Solo of Fortune- a Supplement For Cyberpunk*. Edited by Derek Quintanar and Mike Pondsmith. (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1989), 23-24.

[419] Mike Pondsmith, Dave Ackerman, Glenn Wildermuth, and Derek Quintanar. *Cyberpunk: Near Orbit – Space Supplement for Cyberpunk*. Edited by Derek Quintanar and Edward S. Bolme. (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1989), 41.

various short stories from William Gibson. The 1986 novel *Hardwired* by Walter Jon Williams, likewise, is another of the genre's works not used here. The various works not analyzed here would show similar things to the works that were. American concern, anxiety, and fear for the future if the media, military, and economic trends of the 1980s should continue into the future is within all examples of cyberpunk. This makes cyberpunk, as a whole genre, invaluable to historians. Indeed, due to the impossibility to chronicle and study each individual of American society in the 1980s, utilizing cyberpunk fiction to gleam from the cultural collective mind these fears is essential to trying to find as clear a picture as possible of the United States of the 1980s. This also leads to the necessity of a refutation of the notion that stories of any medium with similar themes and aesthetics to cyberpunk, but are made outside the 1980s, are also a part of the genre.

As quoted both in the introduction and third chapter of this thesis, Mike Pondsmith said that "Cyberpunk was a warning, not an aspiration."[420] The genre was meant to be a cautionary set of stories about where the shifting landscape of the 1980s could lead to in the future if things were not contained or stopped. The whole of the genre is built on the idea that the worlds and futures envisioned do not have to exist, do not have to come to fruition. However, in the years since the 1980s, it has become more clear that the cyberpunk genre gave fairly accurate predictions of what the future would bring. That is why stories that look and feel like cyberpunk but are made after the 1980s, cannot

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[420] Mike Pondsmith, quoted by R Talsorian Games Inc. in *From the Screamsheets: A Statement from RTG*, June 5, 2020. https://rtalsoriangames.com/2020/06/05/from-the-screamsheets-a-statement-by-rtg/.

and should not be considered a part of the genre. The future such stories try to warn

against already exists save for the chrome, neon, and cyborgs.

There cannot be stories imaging possible futures where the video game and arcade

industry is run by corrupt corporate executives who care only for their own wealth when

Americans could argue such things exist today. In the place of a singular corrupt

executive misusing the video games industry, as seen in *Tron*, the practice of "crunch"

has infected the industry. Crunch was initially brought to light in 2004 when several

anonymous employees within the industry published an essay about the practice.

"Crunch" was described by the essay's primary writer, an anonymous employee of

Electronic Arts, as "pushing for a team of workers to put in 85-hour weeks" while

working many seven-day weeks. Another writer added that "white-collar slavery is alive

and well in the games industry."[421] While EA refused to comment on what it claimed

were "rumors," the International Game Developers Association had spoken earlier in

2004 about how "crunch time is omnipresent [in the game industry], during which

respondents work 65 to 80 hours a week… overtime is often uncompensated."[422] In the

years since that essay's release "crunch" has become epidemic, affecting high-profile

releases such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), *Red

Dead Redemption 2* (2018), *Anthem* (2019), and countless others.[423] There may not be a

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[421] Ed Frauenheim. "No Fun For Game Developers?," *CNET*, November 11, 2004,
https://www.cnet.com/news/no-fun-for-game-developers/.
[422] Frauenheim.
[423] Jason Schreier. "Inside Rockstar Games' Culture of Crunch," *Kotaku*, October 23, 2018,
https://kotaku.com/inside-rockstar-games-culture-of-crunch-1829936466. / Jason Schreier. "How
BioWare's *Anthem* Went Wrong," *Kotaku*, April 2, 2019, https://kotaku.com/how-biowares-anthem-went-
wrong-1833731964.

single corrupt executive using his power to steal state secrets or unleash rogue AI like *Tron* predicted, but there are studio and publisher executives who work their employees until they become "stress casualties."[424]

In the place of *Videodrome*'s predicted corporate copyright battles over home television recorders are the efforts put forth by streaming services to control subscriber accounts. Launched by Netflix's transition from movie rentals to digital streaming in 2007, streaming service in the United States has exploded in popularity due to the appeal of a low monthly cost that gives access to thousands of television shows and films.[425] The top three American streaming providers today, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+, each have over 100 million subscribers.[426] In spite of this vast pool of income, these streaming services have been moving forward to crack down on password sharing (when a paying subscriber allows someone to use the password of their paid account to watch programs) as these companies feel it costs them "several billion dollars a year."[427] Netflix, still the leader of the pack, has been testing measures to block account access unless they are accessed from a single household to try and force non-paying viewers to

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[424] Schreier.

[425] Nate Anderson. "Netflix Offers Streaming Movies to Subscribers," *ARS Technica*, January 16, 2007, https://arstechnica.com/uncategorized/2007/01/8627/.

[426] Peter Csathy. "Amazon Prime: The Stealthy, Ominous Streaming Force," *Forbes*, January 31, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/petercsathy/2020/01/31/amazon-prime-video-the-quiet-ominous-streaming-force/?sh=ed92b741f1a6#15440bdc1f1a/. / Sean Burch. "Netflix Hits 203 Million Subscribers as Q4 Earnings Fall Short of Wall Street's Estimates," *Yahoo Entertainment*, January 19, 2021, https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/netflix-hits-203-million-subscribers-211016408.html. / Sarah Whitten. "Disney+ Tops 100 Million Subscribers Just 16 Months After Launch," *CNBC*, March 9, 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/09/disney-tops-100-million-subscribers-just-16-months-after-launch.html.

[427] Mae Anderson. "Passing On Your Password? Streaming Services Are Past It," *AP News*, May 14, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-entertainment-arts-and-entertainment-technology-business-0f9fd76c86ada1d1162f9e9f0b8ca7f5.

buy their own subscriptions.[428] There are no tumor-inducing signals as *Videodrome*

predicted, but critics could draw similarities as companies work to restrict what people do

in their own homes with their own property when they watch TV in the name of greater

profit.

      The envisioned futures of *The Running Man* novel and film, with their all-

powerful Network, could be argued to be off only in the hyperbole of what such an

influential network would look like. The biggest example of this prediction coming to

fruition in the real world, post-1980s, is how the politically conservative network, Fox

News, directly caused the radicalization of its viewers with the levels of misinformation

and conspiracies it peddled. As reported by Tom Rosenstiel, press critic from the non-

partisan Pew Research Center, the "striking rise in the politicization of cable news…

[was] most apparent with… Fox News Channel."[429] Between the network's creation in

1996 and 2004, the percentage of Americans who watched Fox News rose to 25

percent.[430] Fox's influence on American conservatives only grew more tangible as time

has gone by, with some today connecting the network to the January 6, 2021 Capitol Riot

and American denial of the Covid-19 pandemic.[431] *The Running Man* warned of a future

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[428] Michael Kan. "Is This The End of Netflix Password Sharing?," *PCMag*, March 11, 2021,
https://www.pcmag.com/news/netflix-tests-crackdown-on-sharing-access-to-users-outside-household.
[429] Tom Rosenstiel. *Trends 2005*, (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2005), 50.
[430] Rosenstiel, 50.
[431] Brian Stelter. "'We Turned So Far Right We Went Crazy:' How Fox News Was Radicalized By its Own
Viewers," *CNN Business*, June 8, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/08/media/fox-news-hoax-
paperback-book/index.html. / Jason Lemon. "Capitol Rioters Will Blame Trump, Fox News For Their
Actions on Jan. 6: Report," *Newsweek*, May 5, 2021, https://www.newsweek.com/capitol-rioters-will-
blame-trump-fox-news-their-actions-jan-6-report-1596149. / Minyvonne Burke. "Lawyer for Capitol Riot
Suspect Blames Fox News, Trump," *NBC News*, May 7, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-
news/lawyer-capitol-riot-suspect-blames-fox-news-trump-n1266679. / Rob Davidson. "How Fox News'
Covid Vaccine Denialism Hurts My Patients," *NBC News*, July 17, 2021,

where a cable network was powerful enough to blind Americans to the dangers in the world and to fight who they were told to fight, and many today would say that has come about in Fox News.

Likewise, cyberpunk's fears for where 1980s military trends would lead were only wrong in the destination they would lead the United States, not the direction the nation would take. The predicted military AIs of *WarGames* and *The Terminator* never came about, but the military spending and growth of the American military arsenal continued.[432] Since the first increase of military spending in the 1980s, which was $178 billion, the American military budget has risen to $705 billion for fiscal year 2021 and President Joe Biden has since requested that be raised to $715 billion for fiscal year 2022 in order to "prioritize modernization."[433] The Cold War is over and but the nuclear and conventional arsenal of the United States still exists and is still growing just as cyberpunk stories feared it would.

As for the forever war that Mike Pondsmith's *Cyberpunk* tabletop game predicted the United States would instigate within Latin America, the only detail that game got wrong was the location of that feared war. In response to the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States quickly found itself embroiled in the War on Terror as its post-Cold War debates about foreign policy turned into a mythologized "'clash of civilizations.'"[434]

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https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/how-fox-news-covid-vaccine-denialism-hurts-my-patients-ncna1274236.

[432] *WarGames*, John Badham, United Artists, Sherwood Productions, 1983. / *The Terminator*, James Cameron, Hemdale, Pacific Western Productions, 1984.

[433] Scott Maucione. "DoD budget Largely Flat, Cuts Legacy Systems for Modernization," *Federal News Network*, May 29, 2021, https://federalnewsnetwork.com/defense-main/2021/05/dod-budget-largely-flat-cuts-legacy-systems-for-modernization/.

[434] David Holloway. *9/11 and The War on Terror*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 1-8.

Instead of simply focusing on finding the specific terrorist group behind the 9/11 Attacks, the United States launched full military campaigns into various points within the Middle East, most notably Afghanistan and Iraq, as the U.S. pursued the "Bush Doctrine" of "pre-emptive war, unilateral policymaking, and 'regime change' in 'rogue states'" to protect "American primacy."[435] The result was a long conflict that has seen four presidents and, as of August 2021, held a death toll of near a million people.[436] Though the final U.S. military forces left Afghanistan in late August of 2021, the War on Terror was very much what *Cyberpunk*'s predicted multi-decade and multi-generation Latin American Conflicts would be.[437]

Cyberpunk's warnings of where the United States would go if the economic changes of the 1980s did not stop or were not reversed could be argued to be accurate as well. The prediction of *Blade Runner*, that the future following Reagan's destruction of the PATCO union would lead to ever-decreasing union and labor power in America was justified.[438] As Dan Clawson and Mary Ann Clawson noted in 1999, pre-PATCO strikes involved more than 950,000 workers each year, while the years after from 1987 to 1996

[435] Holloway, 4.

[436] Neta C. Crawford and Catherine Lutz. *Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones, Afghanistan & Pakistan (Oct. 2001 – Aug. 2021); Iraq (March 2003 – Aug. 2021); Syria (Sept. 2014 – May 2021); Yemen (Oct. 2002-Aug. 2021) and Other Post-9/11 War Zones* (September 1, 2021), published by the Costs of War Project, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/WarDeathToll.

[437] Amanda Macias. "U.S. Ends 20-Year War in Afghanistan With Final Evacuation Flights out of Kabul," *CNBC*, August 30, 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/30/afghanistan-update-last-us-troops-leave-kabul-ending-evacuation.html. / Alex Horton. "The Afghanistan War Has Gone On So Long That People Born After 9/11 Can Enlist," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2018/09/12/afghanistan-war-has-gone-so-long-people-born-after-sept-can-now-enlist/. / Mike Pondsmith, Colin Fisk, Dave Friedland, and Will Moss. *Cyberpunk: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future – Welcome to Night City: A Sourcebook for 2013*, (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1988), 0.

[438] *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott, The Ladd Company, Shaw Brothers, Blade Runner Partnership, 1982.

never reached half a million.[439] While pre-1980 strikes saw regular union success, the years after PATCO's end saw "more strikes broken, with employees losing their jobs."[440] In 2009, John Godard recounted that the previous fifty years held a steady decline of American union membership despite all efforts to try and reverse this decline.[441] The years after the 1980s have seen very little success or power among American labor as a whole; though it should be noted that this may be changing in 2021 as an unofficial and disorganized quasi-general strike, beginning in October, has been occurring across employment fields.[442] Time will tell if these strikes succeed and break the past three decades following *Blade Runner*'s prediction of the future of American labor.

In regards to the predictions of megacorporate domination of America as shown in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and 1987's *Robocop*, many Americans could see the real-world companies of SpaceX, Amazon, and Disney as fitting those roles.[443] SpaceX has been working to privatize space while littering the American landscape with the debris of its failed rockets since 2002.[444] The result has been the littering of places like

[439] Dan Clawson and Mary Ann Clawson. "What Has Happened to the US Labor Movement?: Union Decline and Renewal," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 25 (1999), 97.
[440] Clawson and Clawson, 97.
[441] John Godard. "The Exceptional Decline of the American Labor Movement," *ILR Review*, Vol. 63, No. 1, (October 2009), 82.
[442] Brent Lang. "IATSE Sets Strike Date for 60,000 Film and Television Workers, Ratcheting Pressure on Studios," *Variety*, October 13, 2021, https://variety.com/2021/film/news/iatse-sets-strike-date-film-and-television-workers-1235088054/. / Robert Reich. "Is America Experiencing an Unofficial General Strike?," *The Guardian*, October 13, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/13/american-workers-general-strike-robert-reich.
[443] Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. 1984. Reprint, New York: Penguin Group, 2004. / *Robocop*, Paul Verhoeven, Orion Pictures, 1987.
[444] Kenneth Chang. "Big Day For a Space Entrepreneur Promising More," *New York Times*, May 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/23/science/space/spacexs-private-cargo-rocket-heads-to-space-station.html. / Dianna Wray. "Elon Musk's SpaceX Launch Site Threatens Wildlife, Texas Environmental Groups Say," *The Guardian*, September 5, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/05/texas-spacex-elon-musk-environment-wildlife.

the wildlife preserves of Boca Chica, Texas with debris for every rocket explosion that occurs there, causing months of cleanup and severe damage to those environments that others have to clean up and fix.[445]

Disney is another real-world company that many could say fits the cyberpunk prediction of a feared megacorporation in, among other things, the way it runs the privately governed Disney World.[446] During the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States, Disney closed the gates of Disney World for less than four months. The company worked to recoup losses by returning its 75,000 employees to work despite the rising 220,000 cases of the virus in Florida, while also starting a wave of firings to let 28,000 workers go no matter their level of employment.[447] Meanwhile, Disney Executive Chairman, Bob Iger and Disney CEO Bob Chapek took in $21 million and $14.2 million respectively over the course of 2020.[448]

Others could argue Amazon is a real-world version of *Robocop*'s OCP. In mid-2021, Amazon announced that it plans to bring back paternal capitalism in the form of "factory towns," with pro-business news outlets promoting the idea in rose-tinted ways

[445] Wray.

[446] Sophie Weiner. "Why Disney World Has Its Own Government," *Popular Mechanics*, January 13, 2018, https://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/infrastructure/a15155208/disney-world-government/.

[447] Frank Pallotta. "'It's The Heart of The Brand': Disney World Reopens as Coronavirus Cases Spike in Florida," *CNN Business*, July 9, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/09/media/disney-world-reopening/index.html. / "6,700 Non-Union Disney Employees in Central Florida Among Those Being Laid Off," *WESH2*, September 30, 2020, https://www.wesh.com/article/disney-layoffs-florida/34222642.

[448] Jill Goldsmith. "Disney Executive Chair Bob Iger Sees Pay Package Plunge As He And CEO Bob Chapek Forgo Bonuses For Pandemic-Struck 2020," *Deadline*, January 19, 2021, https://deadline.com/2021/01/disney-executive-chair-bob-iger-sees-pay-package-plunge-as-he-and-ceo-bob-chapek-forgo-bonuses-for-pandemic-struck-2020-1234676578/.

just as Delta City was in *Robocop*.[449] Many could draw further parallels to OCP's darker

nature with the past decade's continuing revelations about the multitude of worker abuses

Amazon causes employees as well.[450]

Finally, Mike Pondsmith's predicted future where African Americans cannot find

equality on Earth in *Cyberpunk* has also proven true, for the United States still faces the

same racial inequality and disparity that the nation did in the 1980s.[451] Work in the 1990s

by Bennett Harrison and Lucy Gorham, in 2005 by Michael B. Katz, Mark J. Stern, and

Jamie J. Fader, in 2006 by Claudine Gay, and work in 2015 by Gary A. Hoover, Ryan A.

Compton, and Daniel C. Giedeman showed how Reagan's policies created a thread of

economic inequality for black Americans next to white neighbors from the 1980s into the

present.[452] Looking at the work of these scholars, one could see accuracy in Pondsmith's

cyberpunk prediction of the American future.

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[449] Conor Sen. "Amazon's New 'Factory Towns' Will Lift the Working Class," *Bloomberg*, September 16, 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-09-16/amazon-s-new-factory-towns-will-lift-the-working-class.

[450] Spencer Soper. "Inside Amazon's Warehouse," *Morning Call*, September 18, 2011, republished August 15, 2015, https://www.mcall.com/news/watchdog/mc-allentown-amazon-complaints-20110917-story.html#. / "Amazon Letter to OSHA," *Morning Call*, October 24, 2011, https://web.archive.org/web/20111024203810/http://www.mcall.com/news/local/mc-amazon-document-3%2C0%2C3783986.htmlpage. / Hayley Peterson. "Missing Wages, Grueling Shifts, and Bottles of Urine: The Disturbing Accounts of Amazon Delivery Drivers May Reveal the True Human Cost of 'Free' Shipping," Insider, September 2018, https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-delivery-drivers-reveal-claims-of-disturbing-work-conditions-2018-8. / David Ingram and Jo Ling Kent. "Inside Amazon's Delivery Push: Employees and Drivers Say an Overworked System is Lax on Safety as Packages Pile Up," NBC News, November 27, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/inside-amazon-s-delivery-push-employees-drivers-say-overworked-system-n1087661. / Kate Taylor and Avery Hartmans. "Amazon Drivers Say They Had to Poop in Bags and Struggled to Change Menstrual Pads in Addition to Peeing in Bottles," Insider, March 26, 2021, https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-drivers-say-pooped-in-bags-changed-pads-pee-bottles-2021-3.

[451] Mike Pondsmith, Dave Ackerman, Glenn Wildermuth, and Derek Quintanar. *Cyberpunk: Near Orbit – Space Supplement for Cyberpunk*. Edited by Derek Quintanar and Edward S. Bolme. (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1989), 41.

[452] Bennett Harrison and Lucy Gorham. "Growing Inequality in Black Wages in the 1980s and the Emergence of an African-American Middle Class," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring 1992), 235-236. / Michael B. Katz, Mark J. Stern and Jamie J. Fader. "The New African

With these fears of the cyberpunk genre made real, and thus the 1980s American fears for the future made real, any story utilizing the aesthetics of the cyberpunk genre after the 1980s cannot and should not be labeled as a part of that genre. Cyberpunk was meant to be a warning that things in 1980s America needed to be fixed in order to avert the various futures it imagined. But in the time when these warned things could be argued to exist, there can be no stories warning against their creation for they are already here. To distinguish between the cyberpunk of the 1980s and its successors, a new name should be utilized to divide the two and help ensure that any historiographical analysis of either can tell the difference and apply them to the appropriate time periods of study. Such a name should be Cyber-Noir, as post-1980s stories take on elements of both cyberpunk and noir.

As for cyberpunk itself, its very existence proves the value of fiction as historical artifact. It was a genre born out of the collective anxieties of a nation in a single decade, in response to very specific events during that time. Since it is impossible to catalogue humanity as a whole on an individual level, utilizing the fictional stories made and consumed by humans allows for historical studies to get as close as humanly possible to that unobtainable goal. For stories, histories true and feigned, have their varied applicabilities, and cyberpunk's is to illuminate that which caused the most mental and emotional strife in a single decade in the history of the United States.

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The Running Man, Paul Michael Glaser, Braveworld Productions, Taft Entertainment,
    HBO Pictures, 1987.

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   Sipress, *Boston Globe*, June 17, 1982.

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