

The brain in a vat in cyberpunk: the persistence of the flesh

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Abstract

This essay argues that the image of the brain in a vat metaphorically encapsulates articulations of the relationship between the corporeal and the technological dimensions found in cyberpunk fiction and cinema. Cyberpunk is concurrently concerned with actual and imaginary metamorphoses of biological organisms into machines, and of mechanical apparatuses into living entities. Its recurring representation of human beings hooked up to digital matrices vividly recalls the envatted brain activated by electric stimuli, which Hilary Putnam has theorized in the context of contemporary epistemology. At the same time, cyberpunk imaginatively raises the same epistemological questions instigated by Putnam. These concern the cognitive processes associated with the collusion of human and mechanical creatures, and related metaphysical and ethical issues spawned by such processes. As a philosophical trope, the brain in a vat would appear to pivot on the notion of a disembodied subject consisting of sheer mentation. However, literary and cinematic interpretations of the image in cyberpunk persistently foreground the obdurate materiality of the flesh—often in its most grisly and grotesque incarnations.

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Keywords: Brains in vats; Materiality; Disembodiment; Cyborgs; Cyberpunk

What is here proposed is that the brain in a vat image, an important trope in contemporary epistemology, is also an intriguing metaphor for one of cyberpunk's pivotal preoccupations: namely, the relationship between the body and technology. In its capacity as both a philosophical and a scientific trope, the brain in a vat apparently posits a decarnalized subject whose existence hinges on the hypothetical detachment of mentation from embodiment. However, fictional articulations of the brain in a vat in cyberpunk literature and cinema emphatically postulate the obdurate persistence of the corporeal dimension, over and above cyberpunk's obsessive concern with the body's putative obsolescence. The *meat* is ultimately inescapable,

The Persistence Of The Flesh

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