

Oppression and Violent Resistance of David Martinez and Its Impact in *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* Towards Arasaka

William Jason Budiman¹, Liliek Soelistyo²

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA.

E-mail: a11200055@john.petra.ac.id¹, lsyuwono@petra.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how oppression and violent resistance are portrayed in the anime *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* through the character of David Martinez. Using Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" and Frantz Fanon's theory of violent resistance is used for the analysis of how the oppressive conditions imposed by Arasaka Corporation lead David to walk the path of violent resistance as a means to reclaim his humanity and agency. I examine how David's story illuminates the dynamics of violent oppression and resistance. Analysis of David's character serves as a lens through which to examine the dynamics of oppression and resistance, explaining how his violent resistance not only breaks him from oppression but also inspires others to challenge oppression. The analysis finds four types of oppression that happen to David which are marginalization, victim of violence, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness. These oppressive conditions lead to two effects of David's resistance which is David's death and the rebirth of humanization.

Keywords: anime, cyberpunk, oppression, resistance, science fiction

INTRODUCTION

Cyberpunk is a subgenre within science fiction that deals with the future urban societies dominated by computer technology (*Cyberpunk Definition & Meaning*, n.d.). *Cyberpunk* is characterized by a dystopian future in which high technologies coexist with impoverished living conditions. *Cyberpunk* is interesting to analyze because of its depiction of how our society could be headed with its dystopian setting. According to Merriam-webster dictionary, "a dystopia is an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives" (*Dystopia Definition & Meaning*, n.d.).

I am interested in the cyberpunk subgenre because of the interesting settings and complex themes. I am particularly interested in the subgenre for its exploration of the human condition within a futuristic and dystopian setting. I find it very interesting to explore the story of a protagonist in their adventure of dealing with their adversary while being blended with high technology and societal deterioration. Stories with cyberpunk subgenres often explore and question the relationship between humans and technology. "The genre was formed as a response to a world where corporate power was proliferating and expanding across the globe, inequality was growing, and AI, computers, and other new forms of technology offered both the promise of liberation and the potential for new and dangerous forms of domination." (Walker-Emig, 2018). Stories with cyberpunk subgenres emerged as a critical and imaginative response to the real-world trends such as corporate globalization, social inequality, and rapid technological change. That is why it is interesting to explore the cyberpunk subgenre as the stories tend to explore the potential and the risks of a world transformed by technology and power ruled by one entity.

Cyberpunk: Edgerunners' story is about David Martinez, as he struggles to live properly in this dystopian world of Night City. The anime portrays the ruthless impact that the corporation

Budiman; Soelistyo: Oppression and Violent Resistance of David Martinez and Its Impact in Cyberpunk: Edgerunners Towards Arasaka

has on the lives of the poor, emphasizing the poor living standard that the poor must endure. David could not stand being treated and living poorly in the city, thus he decides to resist Arasaka Corporation. The main conflicts are David's struggle with his resistance as he challenges the low living standard that the Arasaka Corporation sets towards them and the consequences of the actions that he must deal with in Night City. However, for lower class people such as David, there is not much that he can do to change the status quo of his living condition. As he is beneath the Arasaka corporation, he does not get treated as fully human.

However, even though the setting of the text is set in the year 2076, the themes of oppression and resistance are central to the narrative. The story explores how oppression persists and how David and his group resist it. Marilyn Frye argues that oppression is "an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people (as cited in Young, 1990, 41). In other words, oppression acts as a system that limits the agency of those who are oppressed. This concept is evident in the world of Cyberpunk: Edgerunners where the dominant corporations Arasaka Corporation exert control over society and limit the freedoms and opportunities of those who are not part of the upper class. However, where there is oppression, there is also resistance. Haslam and Reicher define resistance as an act that "involves action and opposition" (as cited in Vollhardt et al., 2020, 92). In the context of the text, the character of David Martinez embodies this concept of resistance as he fights against the oppressive system that has marginalized him and his community. David wants to be able to save himself and his group members from the oppressive nature of Night City. Arasaka Corporation holds the most control in Night City, therefore they can do as they please towards the people, including efforts to assimilate their culture to the people and setting unfair living conditions. In other words, Arasaka Corporation actions can be viewed as colonialism in the form of corporations, oppressing people with their system.

In this study, I want to know what kinds of oppressions David experiences, what kinds of strategies he uses to resist the oppression of Arasaka Corporation, and the impacts David's resistance has on himself and others.

To analyze the kinds of oppressions, strategies, and impacts from the text, there will be two theories used. The theory that I am going to use is Five Faces of Oppression and Violent resistance. Five Faces of Oppression is a theory that helps to identify the types of oppression happening in everyday life. Iris Marion Young (1949-2006) was one of the most influential and innovative political theorists of her generation who had a significant impact on a wide range of topics such as democratic theory, feminist theory, and justice. In addition to Iris Marion Young, I also use Frantz Fanon's theory on violence. Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) was a West Indian psychoanalyst and social philosopher known for his theory that mental disorders are socially generated and for his writings on behalf of the national liberation of colonial peoples.

ANALYSIS

The analysis will be divided into 3 subchapters. The first chapter will analyze the types of oppression that happen to David Martinez. The second chapter will analyze David Martinez's strategies to resist the oppression of Arasaka. The third chapter will analyze the effects of resistance towards David and others.

Types of oppression that happen to David Martinez

In this part, I prove the kinds of oppression that happened to David. Based on the theory of Five Faces of Oppression by Iris Marrion Young, I find four types of oppression that can be applied to David. They are marginalization, violence, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness.

Marginalization through Social Exclusion

David Martinez faces oppression in the form of marginalization as a lower-class citizen in Night City. This marginalization manifests as social exclusion, particularly evident during his time at Arasaka Academy. Despite his enrollment, David is constantly reminded that he does not belong in his social environment. The school principal suggests that David "does not fit in with his classmates" and that "a change in environment could benefit" him (Imaishi, 2022, 09:45). This sentiment is further supported by David's wealthy classmate, who states, "You're not welcome" (Imaishi, 2022, 16:00). As Young (2004) argues, marginalization involves more than just material deprivation; it also consists of the "deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction" (p. 55).

Another form of marginalization could be seen from the dominance of Arasaka Corporation that ensures power and resources remain concentrated in the hands of a privileged few. While those at the bottom in Night City, like David, are left to scrape by in poverty.



Figure 1. Household Washing Machine Does Not Work Without Money (Imaishi, 2022, Ep. 1, 16:15)

Figure 1 demonstrates how Arasaka marginalizes people based on their economic status. David's financial status determines his access to resources and technology, even for matters as basic as using the washing machine. Arasaka Corporation denies David's access to using the washing machine due to his lack of financial resources. (Imaishi, 2022, 04:12). Figure 1 from above shows how Arasaka Corporation, the mega corporation that holds the most control in the city, only nurtures people that belong to their corporate group while leaving and oppressing those that are at the bottom of the chain. The city in which Arasaka Corporation influences creates a material marginalization where people that are in a lower-class group suffer and lack access to the basic things to survive

David as the Victim of Violence

Besides being marginalized, David also experiences violence. As a member of the lower-class group, David is vulnerable to two types of violences. In the text, David experiences two types of violence which are physical violence and mental violence. These forms of violence are common to be found against the lower-class group in the oppressive Night City.

Physical Violence

Budiman; Soelistyo: Oppression and Violent Resistance of David Martinez and Its Impact in Cyberpunk: Edgerunners Towards Arasaka

The violence that David experiences happens because he is a member of a low-class citizen group. Violence is systemic as it is directed at members of a group just because they are members of that group. Arasaka Corporation rule creates an unequal and unjust society marked by the contrast between lower-class and high-class citizens. It can be seen from the lack of basic rights and protections for the low-class citizens. The wealthy citizen, exemplified by the privileged students at Arasaka Academy, enjoys all the benefits that Arasaka offers from healthcare to protection, while the low-class citizen like David is left to struggle. This social context plays a significant role in perpetuating systemic violence against marginalized groups like David Martinez. Young argues that “What makes violence a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual moral wrong, is its systemic character, its existence as a social practice.” (Young, 2004, p. 61).

What makes violence an aspect of oppression is the social context in which these acts take place. This context not only allows but even justifies these violent actions. This is evident in episode one, David is beaten up by three of his classmates because of an accident that he had. David's classmate, Katsuo provoked David for being poor and got in a fight with David where David was heavily injured after the fight (Imaishi, 2022, 17:50). The actions of his classmates from Arasaka Academy are considered systemic violence, they prey on the weak and vulnerable people, which is a low-class citizen like David.

Mental Violence

Mental violence refers to the behavior that aims to abuse an individual's emotional well-being, often causing stress and trauma through non-physical means. This happens to David throughout the series as he is consistently subjected to dehumanizing treatment and discrimination. The effect of this oppression takes a toll on David's emotional health. Evidence of this could be seen during episode one, when David's mother was driving David home from Arasaka Academy after his conversation with the academy's principal, they were caught amid a gang attack (Imaishi, 2022, 11:51). This violent attack causes David's mother to be deceased after the paramedic team that came to the area chose to not rescue David's mother.



Figure 2. David's mother being left to die by the paramedic team (Imaishi, 2022, Ep. 1, 12:53)

In Figure 2, David witnesses her mother being left alone around the place of accident by the paramedic team as they did not have insurance for the service. David is left emotionally shattered because his mother is the only source of support and love in the unforgiving city of Night City, which causes David's mental well-being to break after the incident.

David Being Culturally Dominated

David also experiences oppression in the form of domination through Araska Culture. Cultural Imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group culture and establishes it as the norm. In David's case, he is being forced to adapt to Arasaka's culture. Cultural Imperialism involves the dominant group replacing previous culture and establishes the dominant group culture as the norm.

In the case of David, he is forced to follow Arasaka's values while also abandoning any culture he has left. Young argues that "The dominant group reinforces its position by bringing the other groups under the measure of its dominant norms." (Young, 2004, p. 59). This norm overshadows any culture that David has and forces him to adapt to the capitalist nature of the city which eventually shapes David's perspectives and experience around Arasaka Corporation. David being forced to adapt to the values and culture of Arasaka is an example of oppression in Cultural Imperialism. Arasaka's technological advancements, particularly in the realm of cybernetic enhancements, are presented as a necessity in Night City. This corporate-driven culture is so dominant that it effectively erases and replaces any alternative.

David Being Powerless

David faces oppression in the form of powerlessness. Powerlessness is a type of oppression that controls and oppresses the inferior group, making sure they obey the one that has power. David is powerless as he always finds himself obeying orders without the authority issuing it to them, not being able to do anything or change anything about his position as the Arasaka Corporation, the one that superior group has more power. David's being powerless is shown when he has limited options when it comes to decision-making. Ideal decision making would mean that an individual is able to freely choose their decision to prosper and nurture themselves. However, oppressed people like David are powerless to make any decision-making.



Figure 3. David Receiving Bill Options for Her Mother's Burial (Imaishi, 2022, Ep. 1, 18:52)

This is evidenced through figure 3 which shows David holding a tablet showing the bill options for her mother's burial. David was forced to accept not being able to get the proper medical service for her mother which resulted in her death. A result which would have been different had David's mother got a job in the corporation which guarantees herself and David's safety. Thus David is powerless as he is always at the mercy of someone who has more power than him and agrees with them. David is at the mercy of Arasaka's power. Since, Arasaka Corporation, as the one who holds the most control in the Night City, has more power than anyone else that lives in it.

David Martinez's strategies to resist the oppression of Arasaka Corporation

In this part, I prove two strategies that David uses to do his resistance against Arasaka Corporation. The first part is by David developing self-independence. Fanon suggests that

Budiman; Soelistyo: Oppression and Violent Resistance of David Martinez and Its Impact in Cyberpunk: Edgerunners Towards Arasaka

freedom in mental state and development of self-independence are essential for them to resist oppression.

Developing Self-Independence

To resist his oppressors, David has to develop his self-independence. According to Fanon (1963), decolonization against oppression involves the creation of "new men" who have freed themselves from the colonization (p. 84). This means that the process of liberation is not granted by any external power but is achieved through the very act of resistance itself. The turning point in David's development of self-independence occurs at the end of episode one, when he finally begins to resist the ones that oppress him. He decides to develop self-independence, as he thinks that there is no one else but him that can help him escape the oppressive nature of the city.



Figure 7. David Corporate Worker's Chip Containing Money in the Train (Imaishi, 2022, Ep. 2, 00:48)

It could be seen in figure 7, that in episode 2, his physical capability changed drastically. David can move quickly in a short period of time. This allows him to sustain himself financially through stealing from the corporate people. (Imaishi, 2022, 00:34). This means that David is resisting the oppressive living conditions set by Arasaka Corporation by having the will to reject the oppressor's narrative that is imposed towards him.

Developing the Use of Violence

David develops the use of violence as it is a legitimate and necessary means for the oppressed to resist the dehumanizing effects of oppression and reclaim their agency. According to Fanon (1963), the oppressed individual may turn to violence as a means of resistance because it is the only language that the oppressor understands. David's gradual embrace of violence can be seen as his response to the systemic violence and oppression he faces in Night City. The oppressed must sometimes use the oppressor's tools to dismantle the oppressive system. David's development of violence as a form of resistance is a gradual process, beginning with his decision to undergo illegal cybernetic enhancements. By augmenting his body with powerful technology, David seeks to level the playing field against his oppressors and gains the means to fight back against the systemic violence that constrains his life. Violence in the context of resistance is not merely a reactionary or mindless act, but rather a deliberate and purposeful response to the violence and injustice inflicted upon the oppressed. By engaging in violent resistance, the oppressed reject their assigned status as passive victims and become active agents in their own liberation. Violence then becomes a means of reclaiming David's dignity, asserting David's rights and challenging the oppressor's dominance.

The Effects of Resistance Towards David and Others

In this part, I prove the effects of resistance towards David and his gang member, Lucy. The first part shows one of the consequences of violence resistance, which is death. The second part shows that resistance can affect others in a way that humanizes them during their dehumanizing circumstances.

David's Death

David Martinez's violent resistance against the oppressive forces of Arasaka Corporation ultimately leads to his tragic death. According to Fanon (1963), when one treads the path of violence means one must be ready for the presence of violence at all times which includes sacrifice or death (p. 37). Throughout the series, David's increasing involvement in the violent world of the edgerunners or mercenaries and his direct confrontations with people from Arasaka Corporation serve as a powerful form of resistance against the corporation's oppressive power. However, as he becomes more involved in the cycle of violence and the criminal underworld, David also faces the escalating risks and dangers associated with his actions. David who takes up arms against his oppressors faces a grave consequence in the process, which is death. David's willingness to sacrifice his life in his confrontation against Arasaka Corporation can be interpreted as he finds his freedom in violence and that David Martinez is willing to die for his cause if he is to truly reclaim their humanity. In this sense, David's death can be seen not just as a tragic loss, but also as an expression of his commitment to resistance and his refusal to submit to Arasaka's oppression.

Lucy's Rebirth of Humanization

David Martinez's act of resistance not only results in his own death but also leads to a rebirth of humanization for his fellow crew member, Lucy. According to Fanon (1963), the process of decolonization and resistance against oppression has a transformative effect on individuals, turning the oppressed from passive into active agents of change and creating a new sense of humanity (p. 36). Violent resistance against oppression can have a humanizing effect on both the individual and the collective. Lucy is portrayed as a character who has been deeply affected by the dehumanizing nature of the oppressive system in Night City. As a result of her traumatic past and the constant struggles she faces in the present, Lucy has developed a cynical outlook towards life, often prioritizing her own survival above all else. When David sacrifices his life to save Lucy and strikes a blow against Arasaka's tyrannical rule, his act of resistance becomes a catalyst for Lucy to humanize herself, reclaiming Lucy's own humanity to join David's cause which is to resist Arasaka. Because the process of resistance is humanizing, it allows the oppressed to assert their agency and reclaim their dignity in the face of dehumanizing oppression. The struggle of resistance for liberation is not limited to only a fight for material but also the process of psychological emancipation. Lucy's humanization is in the form of her achieving her dream that was previously suppressed by Arasaka Corporation's oppression. Having dreams is an important aspect of humanization for Lucy as it reflects her innate desire for the pursuit of growth and meaning beyond just mere survival as oppression causes Lucy to be reduced to just tools of productivity for Arasaka Corporation.

Budiman; Soelistyo: Oppression and Violent Resistance of David Martinez and Its Impact in Cyberpunk: Edgerunners Towards Arasaka



Figure 4. Lucy's Happiness with Her New Life in The Moon (Imaishi, 2022, Ep. 10, 23:22)

Figure 4 depicts the happiness on Lucy's face as she embraces her new life on the moon. This signifies a rebirth of humanization for Lucy who has escaped Arasaka's oppressive living conditions as she is starting a new life on the moon. Hence, the moon signifies a safe haven as Lucy is finally free from Arasaka Corporation. David can fulfill Lucy's dream, saving her from the oppressive nature of Arasaka Corporation. This scene is a visual representation of Lucy's humanization, as she is finally able to experience a sense of freedom and self-determination that had been denied to her for so long as she pursues her life beyond the cage that is Night City.

CONCLUSION

The Cyberpunk subgenre is a rich medium that can be used to analyze elements that are also present in the real-world regarding oppression and resistance. In the anime *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*, the theory of Five Faces of Oppression can be applied to David to determine the types of oppression, meanwhile the theory of violent resistance can be used to determine the strategies and effects of this violent resistance.

To sum up, Oppression can be systemic. It can be deeply embedded in institutions that only target a specific group of people. Oppression not only dehumanizes oppressed people, but also severely limits their agency and ability to live properly. Through my analysis, I showed the types of oppression through David which are marginalization, victim of violence, cultural imperialism, powerlessness. The text also illustrates how the dehumanizing conditions created by oppressive systems can give rise to violent resistance. The oppressed seek to assert their humanity and break free from the chains of their oppressors. While the use of violence as a form of resistance is a complex issue, the text heavily implies it as a legitimate and even necessary response to the systemic violence and injustice faced by the oppressed. Violent resistance also has its consequences and effects. This is reflected in text showing the consequence of violent resistance through David's death. The text illustrates how the path of violent resistance, while serving as a means of reclaiming one's humanity and agency, can also lead to devastating sacrifices.

From this analysis, it can be concluded how oppressions in everyday life are bound to create resistance from the oppressed. When individuals are subjected to dehumanizing conditions and stripped of their dignity, they may resort to extreme measures, such as violence, to break free from oppression. While the use of violence as a form of resistance can be questioned, the series suggests that it is a valid response to the systemic injustices and the lack of alternative options available to the oppressed. Ultimately, it shows the importance of individuals recognizing and addressing oppression in all its forms.

REFERENCES

- Cyberpunk Definition & Meaning*. (n.d.). Merriam-Webster. Retrieved August 31, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cyberpunk>.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth*. Grove Press.
- Imaishi, H. (Director). (2022, September 13). Let you down [Episode 1]. In *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*. Studio Trigger.
- Imaishi, H. (Director). (2022, September 13). Like a boy [Episode 2]. In *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*. Studio Trigger.
- Imaishi, H. (Director). (2022, September 13). My moon my man [Episode 10]. In *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*. Studio Trigger.
- Walker-Emig, P. (2018, October 16). Neon and corporate dystopias: Why does cyberpunk refuse to move on? *The Guardian*. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/oct/16/neon-corporate-dystopias-why-does-cyberpunk-refuse-move-on>.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton University Press.