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Jess Flarity
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2025

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A deadly drone war rages between Ukraine and Russia. A.I.-generated images are appearing on restaurant menus and as logos in grocery store aisles. Students all around the world are flooding ChatGPT essays into their online courses.

And, for some reason, the world's richest man is now tampering with the secure government data banks of one of the world's most powerful nations because the country re-elected a third-rate reality TV star who has a meme coin worth \$180 billion dollars. Despite all of this, the assassination of United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson in December by 26-year-old Luigi Mangione may be the most cyberpunk event of the 21st century.

Cyberpunk is a genre of science fiction first popularized in the roaring Reagan years of the 1980s. Its plots usually include all-powerful corporations, a corrupt and ineffective government, and hacker protagonists fighting back against their oppressors. Through a low-life and high tech mentality, these scrappy proletarians use their wits and technological prowess to strike fear into the hearts of the megalomaniacs.

In fiction and video games like *Cyberpunk 2077*, this futuristic setting is glamorized in mirror shades and blazing neon, but in real life, it's the homeless person on the corner with their Venmo scrawled in sharpie on a scrap of cardboard. It's the misinformation flooding your social media feed, the Spam emails clogging your inbox, and the CEOs of these companies continuing to secretly harvest your data while donating millions to a presidential inaugural fund. Fictional cyberpunk is all flash and implants; real-life cyberpunk is your neighbor's house being bought up by a rental company so they can flip it into an Airbnb.

In short: real-life cyberpunk is fucking *awful*.

This is why Mangione is seen as a cyberpunk folk hero. He tracked his target using digital surveillance, 3D-printed his own gun, and successfully escaped from the center of a mega-city covered in security cameras and crawling with police forces. But just like in many of these grim narratives, Mangione's ending will likely be an unhappy one with a lifetime prison sentence as his future. Though there is talk of jury nullification where "Free Luigi" becomes a reality, the American capitalism machine rolls on.

Are you wanting that hot, disaffected, anti-corporate Gen-Z look? Mangione's hooded assassin's jacket is available for 60% off at Macy's, demonstrating how quickly the news cycle turns it back on what had taken up all its oxygen just weeks before. His iconic burgundy courtroom sweater will only set you back \$62.65 from Nordstrom. Thousands of "Deny, Delay, Depose" merchandise options are available on Etsy.

Along with this wide assortment of products, Mangione's conventional good looks are a marketable commodity in our image-obsessed society. Wisecrack one-liners from the late-night news clowns and countless internet memes made the rounds for a few weeks, but any favorable rhetoric surrounding Mangione's actions was scrubbed by mainstream media. As a recent example, comedian Bill Burr referenced Mangione on the Jimmy Kimmel Show in January, but the shot cuts away when Burr gives him a shoutout.

Censorship of free speech related to this event is still unfolding across the internet today.

News outlets continue to paint a much broader (and safer) picture of Mangione as a young man radicalized through the Unabomber's manifesto. They insist he was a wealthy loner with a personal grudge against the healthcare industry. Some reporters even attacked the core of his masculinity and asserted that Mangione's back injury made it impossible for him to function sexually, creating a false impression of him as an incel, an involuntary celibate. Despite the negative press, people organized online support groups, but like Mangione's own social media accounts, these were shut down almost immediately.

Social media sites regularly cleanse all content even tangentially referencing the killing with Reddit being particularly notable for immediately deleting any related posts, hindering chances of individuals attempting to organize in a forum setting. Similarly, GoFundMe pulled an initial Mangione fundraiser, citing that they prohibit fundraisers for legal defense of violent crimes, but GiveSendGo still has a "preemptive legal fundraiser" available for donations, which has topped \$425,000 from over 10,000 individual donations.

It is unclear who launched this campaign, as there is a note that if the Mangione legal team rejects the funds, they will be donated to a cause in his name. Perhaps fearful of retribution due to the terrorism charges he faces, everyone involved with this venture is anonymous, and our attempt to reach out to the organizers never received a response.

As of February, organizing anything around Mangione continues to be blocked. Posts referencing his name are removed, accounts are banned, and subreddits/forums permanently deleted. The digital universe is still powered by likes, clicks, and upvotes, and until this hierarchical way of organizing information is restructured, the internet will only provide the illusion of being a free space.

Cyberspace pretends to be a nexus of interlaced communication, but the net is really an enormous mall, and the corporate executives are having Free Luigi graffiti scrawled on the bathroom walls continually painted over. This is not cyberpunk; it is techno-feudalism, and the oligarchs are controlling the masses through purposeful confusion and noise.

Where is the army of class consciousness warriors created by Mangione's sacrifice? Unlike the massive accumulation of racial injustices that blossomed into the Black Lives Matter movement, it is doubtful that even an unfair criminal trial will provide such a catalyst related to our healthcare woes. Those few dozen people who have shown up in the real world to support Mangione appear to be young women in a state of hybristophilia (sexual interest in those who commit crimes) and a handful of steely protestors. This is a bad sign.

Despite the lack of long-term investment for dismantling the corporate grip on the lives of the everyday American, this event will remain cemented into our cultural consciousness as the emergence of one of our first cyberpunk folk heroes. Mangione has been adopted as a modern equivalent of Robin Hood, though the fact that he shoots the Sheriff of Nottingham in the back is somewhat disturbing. It shows how broken the system is. There is no way to redistribute the suffering the system has caused by stealing from the rich and a blood sacrifice is not enough. But these corporations are not a single corrupt sheriff or king. They are complex interconnected systems that require dismantling piece-by-piece if not in one swift blow.

Capitalism can't be restructured with bullets, even if they are engraved with "Deny, Delay, and Depose." The Monopoly money Mangione left behind sent a stronger message, but to effectuate change within the system, CEOs need to be financially assassinated. We need to kill their paychecks, their stock options, and their profits. This requires a complex redistribution of power and

policy changes that are infinitely more complex than 3D-printing a gun and buying a bus ticket to New York.

Perhaps Mangione saw such a change as hopeless, which is why he chose the simpler path of extreme violence that has entitled him to a place in history as one who participates in the propaganda of the deed, as 19th century anarchists referred to such acts. Wikipedia's article on the subject has already been altered to include him as carrying out the first "notable action" of insurrectionary anarchism since 1932. But much more likely, this is the story of a man, a handsome, perhaps lonely, perhaps narcissistic, perhaps mentally unwell, educated young man, who some have elevated to folk hero status because of our own frustration and bitterness with an industry that continues to destroy us.

Don't spiral yourself into a locked room where shooting someone is the only way out. Talk, organize, unionize, march, resist. We don't need folk heroes; we need empathetic human beings.

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