

Augmented Reality and Life in the Cyberspace in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts a cybercritical reading of William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984) to explore the genesis of cyborgs in the novel, address issues pertaining to cyberpunks and scrutinize the portrayal of a cyberculture set in the futuristic dystopian city of Chiba. The relationship between humans and machines has gone through multiple phases of changes in the recent past. That is why instead of satirizing machinized-humans, science fiction writers have embraced different dimensions of man-machine relationships during the past few decades. 'Cyborg' is no longer represented as the 'mutation of human capabilities', but as 'machines with Artificial Intelligence'. Gibson's *Neuromancer*, a landmark piece of literary work in the sphere of Sci-Fi literature, specifically predicts a new height of man-machine relationship by employing both human and cyborg characters at the center of his story line. This paper shows how Gibson accurately prophesizes the matrix of machine-human relationship in his novel. It also explores Gibson's depiction of female characters through the lens of cyberfeminist theories. In view of that, this paper uses contemporary critical and cultural theories including Donna Haraway's idea of cyberfeminism, Baudrillard's simulation and simulacra, Foucauldian discourse analysis, Jeremy Bentham's concept of *tabula rasa* and other relevant theoretical ideas to examine and evaluate the transformative changes.

INTRODUCTION

The use of cyborgs as central characters in science fiction novels has become a new trend in the recent decades. One such groundbreaking work of science fiction is William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) where it is predicted that the creation of Artificial Intelligence and Artificial Life as results of the advancements of technology would reshape the lifestyle of high-tech societies and create new forms of cyberculture. Back in the Industrial Era, the invention of steam-engine marked a momentous milestone in the human history. But, what 'machine' used to refer to back then was much different from what it does in today's high-tech cyber-dependent world. 'Machine' is no longer merely an assembly of tools, scientists have become more involved in researching and discovering new methods regarding how 'life' can be incorporated into the machines. The collaboration of machines and/into humans can be seen in three distinctive processes. The *first* one marks merely its invention as an "enabler of efficiency and productivity". (Thomas 18) It is noteworthy that since the Industrial Revolution, the need for labor forces kept decreasing significantly as industries began depending heavily on the newly invented machines. That was the beginning

of what went through a constant process of experimentations. A massive development occurred after the invention of electricity. In fact, electricity turned out to be the life-blood of machinery. The *second* phase marks human-machine collaboration, which, in the literary sphere, was first experimented in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). This collaborative formation is popularly known as 'cyborg'. Cyborgs are all about ensuring *posthuman* prowess and extending physical human capabilities. In her groundbreaking piece "A Cyborg Manifesto", Donna Haraway defines Cyborgs as, "a creature in a post-gender world.unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity."

Most of the modern scientific experiments are centered on the idea that humans are capable of fitting into any situation. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is arguably the motivating force that changed the course of modern scientific concepts. A reflection of this is found in the novels written particularly in the last three decades of the twentieth century. But, the scientific endeavors these days are no longer limited to cyborgs. The new trend marks significant changes in the field of sci-fi literature. Similar to what is depicted in literary discourses, the newest scientific explorations are focused on

the developments of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Artificial Life (AL).

Although AI and AL are still in the developmental phases, these concepts are nothing new in literary discourses. Edgar Allan Poe is often credited to be the first author to construct 'cyborgs' or 'machinized-humans' in his satirical piece "The Man That Was Used Up" where he depicts the protagonist Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith whose body parts need to be assembled in order to make him a functional entity. However, this paper contends that the contribution of Mary Shelley, one of the pioneering female novelists, especially in the genre of science fiction literature, is not negligible. She had created Frankenstein's demon consisting of both AI and AL even before Poe wrote his piece. That unnamed demon tempted fear into the mind of its creator, Frankenstein. He was so frightened that he refused to create a female counterpart for it. As Dr. Frankenstein narrates,

I refused, and I did right in refusing, to create a companion for the first creature. He showed unparalleled malignity and selfishness in evil; he destroyed my friends; he devoted to destruction beings who possessed exquisite sensations, happiness, and wisdom; nor do I know where this thirst for vengeance may end. (Shelley 220)

However, the fear shown in *Frankenstein* is very metaphorical. It represents the collective fear of the human kind regarding whether machines would replace them or they would survive as they have since the beginning of civilization. It took more than a hundred years to bring AIs and ALs into the mainstream. Apart from Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), it was William Gibson's *Neuromancer* that brought the human-machine relationship into the limelight. But, this genre of science fiction was still at the primary stage until *Neuromancer* was published in 1984, ironically or not, the year coincides with George Orwell's popular dystopian novel *1984*. It is apparent that Gibson foretold and redefined the human-machine relationship that film adaptations like *Her* (2013) are based on.

This paper, therefore, reads *Neuromancer* cybercritically to find whether the ideas of 'machinized-humans' and 'humanized-machines' mark a remarkable transformation. By 'Cybercriticism', this paper refers to the study of the emerging culture in a dystopian world where the novel is set in. Cybercriticism also refers to a critical study of cybernetics – i. e.: cyborgs and the cyberspace.

NEUROMANCER OR NECROMANCER: THE GENESIS OF CYBORGS

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is a pioneering literary work that portrays cyberpunks and 'machinized-humans' consisting of prosthetic body parts as cyborgs. Gibson draws a narrow line between the two types of characters he introduces in his science fiction novel – i) those who have cybernetic augmentations and ii) those with Artificial Intelligence. The story is set in the imaginary futuristic dystopian Japanese city of Chiba. The writer also sets the story in some other major cities like Istanbul and Los Angeles; but the primary reason for choosing Chiba is because this small city resembles the

perfect depiction of a postmodern city in science fictions, thus giving those a look of a dystopian world. However, Henry Dorsett Case, the protagonist of the novel has prosthetic cybernetic augmentations. All of his major body parts are machinized that virtually make him a cyborg. A hacker by profession, Case is caught red-handed when hacking his boss's computer. Case is not the only cyborg represented in the text; all major characters are somewhat cyborgs. Case eventually has a transformed neurotic system, which his previous employers intoxicated so he becomes incapable of jacking into the 'Matrix' anymore. Gibson sketches an image of Case in the following way:

And he was going to need it. Because—still smiling—they were going to make sure he never worked again. They damaged his nervous system with a wartime Russian mycotoxin. (Gibson 8)

The availability of prosthetic body parts is another notable thing in the novel. The use of the phrase 'affordable beauty' implies the idea that anyone interested can change body parts into prosthetic ones to either look more beautiful or to enhance bodily prowess. Case, who leads a low life of a hustler, plans to repay his debt by selling his 'pituitary gland', one of the most vital organs of the body. He narrowly avoids this self-sabotaging act when he is hired by Molly and Armitage. (Gibson 20)

But, the most Machinized-human character in the novel is Molly Millions, also known as the 'Razor Girl'. She has a distinctive body feature with numerous prosthetic body parts. The narrator describes Molly's body parts, especially the eyes, as follows.

The glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag. The fingers curled around the fletcher were slender, white, tipped with polished burgundy. The nails looked artificial. (Gibson 20)

Her eyes are socketed, which makes her distinctive. The contradiction is that anyone looking at her eyes would see nothing but his/her self-reflection. This prosthetic eye is robotic, but Molly herself is no robot, rather she is a human with some machine-like prosthetic body parts. Apart from the eyes, she has artificial blades inserted under her nails. This gives her a unique feature that allows her to defend herself when attacked. Gibson's approach to embolden and empower his female protagonist can be read through the lens of cyberfeminism. Molly essentially possesses every characteristics of a *femme fatale*. "Molly is considered as the archetypal cyberpunk character who is attractive yet deadly, skillful and (almost) without emotion, loveable but mercenary." (Rahman) Rahman argues that:

Molly can be a testament of Haraway's preference of cyborgs over goddesses while checking whether the notion of cyborg is simply used as a stylized liberating fetish to dupe naïve readers away from more 'realistic' solutions to the pressing problems of women in general. (Rahman)

Molly's image of 'Razor Girl' is not only limited to her possessing a prosthetic body part of a knife, but it also

denotes her strange-looking eyes and the strange effects they create upon being looked at. Similar to Medusa in Greek Mythology, whose eyes would turn anyone into stone if looked at, Molly's eyes are created and designed in a way that looking at her mirror-like eyes cause the looker to turn 'stone cold'. However, in contrast to Medusa who was a victim of patriarchal biases, Molly represents powerful women who on their own merits can defend themselves and establish certain kinds of dominations. This explains the reason why Molly is universally perceived as a sensationalizing cult-heroine among Sci-Fi readers' base.

SENSE/NET: THE MATRIX OF ARCADE GAMES

The idea of the Matrix is arguably based on an 8-bit arcade video game. But, the Matrix in *Neuromancer* is more versatile than an 8-bit decrypted arcade game. It is the Matrix where everyone is connected, where every piece of information is stored and where even artificially intelligent non-living simulated characters reside. The opening line of the novel, "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" hints *tabula rasa* or a clean-sheet Matrix. (Gibson 7) John Locke, the English empiricist introduced the idea of '*tabula rasa*' or 'clean sheet' in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Locke used the metaphor to argue that human mind is similar to "white paper, void of all characters" and "all the materials of reason and knowledge" are absent at the initial stage (Locke and Winkler). This paper contends that the absence of a priori knowledge is analogous to the 'dead channel' on the Television, which also refers to the Matrix that is similar to the *tabula rasa*. The color of a television tuned to a dead channel is greyish with multiple dotted pixels appearing on the screen. It is a virtual world made of binary digits of *Zeros* and *Ones*. The pixel dots that the screen shows are nothing but these binary digits that eventually formulate the Matrix.

The name of this cyberspace is 'Sense/Net'. This refers to a sensory network where every sensible living being or simulated being stays inside the network. But, it can also refer to a networked sense where everyone is connected or wired into the network of shared senses. Sense/Net is a shared network of senses that means everyone is jacked into a system where everyone is free to share their experiences. Cyberspace is a structure where "the tablet become(s) a page becomes a screen becomes a world, a virtual world. Everywhere and nowhere, a place where nothing is forgotten and yet everything changes." (David 16)

The depiction of the Matrix in *Neuromancer* is allegorical to where the novel is set. The novel is primarily set in Chiba City, Japan. But, the setting is not fixed to that particular place and the story shifts from one place to another. This indicates that the networked world of cyberspace is truly a global hub that has no boundary. This idea of 'One World' has gained popularity in the recent decades and has been the central idea of numerous TV shows and films.

The idea of Sense/Net is very similar to that of the World Wide Web or WWW. Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines 'World Wide Web' as "the system of connected documents on the Internet, which often contains

color pictures, video and sound, and can be searched for information about a particular subject". It is contentious that Sense/Net or the Matrix in *Neuromancer* is exactly what this virtual network does.

Anelie Crichton gives an interesting study on the idea of cyberspace in *Neuromancer*. She terms the psychological development of Case in Siberia as 'shamanic' where she claims that:

"A technological universe which shares traits with a shamanic worldview enables Gibson to portray Artificial Intelligences (AIs) with unusual 'purity', unfettered by the necessity to embody them in android form or burden them with human motivations, and creates a relation between human beings and AIs which parallels the fear and fascination of believers confronted with the divine." (Crichton 3)

By 'AIs', she refers to both Wintermute and Neuromancer who are binary opposites and foil characters of each other. However, the protagonist of the novel, Case has a distinctive past that occurred in Siberia. Case's body parts are not solely his own, he is actually a hybrid of his body and another person's RAM. The formation of Case's self is ascribed by Armitage where he states that, "We invented you in Siberia, Case." (Gibson 22) The reference to 'Operation Screaming Fist' is very important for Case as his existence depends on it. But, the process that was followed in 'creating' him is allegorical with Siberia – Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics or ICE. ICE is a process found in fictions where a memory chipset is encrypted so that hackers cannot breach in and recover/steal any data. But, ICE also refers to ice that exists in Siberia. The words 'Siberia' and 'Cyber-area' rhyme. Siberia is an area that remains frozen all through the year; Cyber-area, on the other hand, is cyberspace or Sense/Net or the internet that is a virtual world which is stable as ice and remains frozen at all times. Thawing needs an ice-breaker; for breaking through ICE, it needs a hacker.

As the Matrix is nothing but a logical sequence of wired binary commands altogether, the question of secret surveillance comes forward. The idea of Panopticon is very similar to that of Sense/Net or the Matrix. The idea of Panopticon comes from English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham's ideal Panopticon is for the purpose of surveillance which comes from monitoring a jail. The overwhelming use of surveillance cameras in almost every public place is the perfect example of the use of the Panopticon. The satellite imagery system, GPS tracking and IP tracking are few examples of the use of the Panopticon. But, the Cyberspace is an even easier platform to operate surveillance from. The consumption of enormous information virtually makes everyone dependent on the cyberspace, the place where information is stored.

HACK/JACKING IN: ROMANCING THE NEURONS

Neuromancer is a hyperreal artificial intelligence-enabled simulated living character aged 13 who resides inside the Matrix. But, splitting the word 'Neuromancer' into two gives us two ideas - 'Neuron' and 'Romancer'. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'neuron' as "a specialized cell transmitting

nerve impulses". The function of neurons is similar to that of electronic wires. Whether it is inside a machine or within a network, the need for electronic wires is unavoidable. Chipsets inside machines mostly require wired communication. It is the serial bus that transfers data from one memory stick to another. The same is true for machinized humans with neurons. On the other hand, as 'romance' refers to 'a feeling of excitement and mystery associated with love', 'romancer' is the one who creates the excitement. *Neuromancer* is at the center of the storyline and is eponymous to the title of the novel. Wintermute tries to regenerate and control Sense/Net by uniting with *Neuromancer*, but that never happens. Regardless of the 'evil' attempts Wintermute initiates, it is *Neuromancer* who is the 'savior' of the cyberspace. *Neuromancer* is 'the Lamb of God' who protects the 'netizens' from falling apart from the Matrix. Henry Dorsett Case performs the function of hack/jacking into the Matrix, who is a hacker by profession. Case is hired by Molly and Armitage to breach into the Matrix and help Wintermute connect with *Neuromancer*. Case does that in exchange for the removal of micotoxins from his blood stream. However, Case is unaware of the consequences of hacking into the cyberspace.

Cyberspace deck or SimStim is the ideal hub of connection into the matrix. Examples of one-to-one neurotic connection are also seen in the novel. Case connects with Molly's RAM via the deck. The narrator explains the event as "he hit the Simstim and flipped into her sensorium." (Gibson 42) Analyzing the existence of SimStim desk cybercritically leads to identifying the post-humanist aspects of connected communication. In order for Molly to be connected to the Matrix, two distinctive actions are required – i) she needs to have a socket to plug the wire into, and ii) it needs wire to make the connection. As Molly is neither an AI nor an AL, it is her human-machine interactive prosthetic body parts that enable her to plug into the cyberspace. The interesting aspect of the idea is that when connected, both Case and Molly can share the same 'experiences'. This idea is also found in a 2010 film named *Inception*. But, one major difference between the concept of the Matrix in *Neuromancer* and in *Inception* is that in *Neuromancer*, the characters can connect with each other where they do not need to attach themselves to any Matrix.

As defined previously, cybernetics studies the mode and frequency of communication and control between/among two or more parties. The communication model in *Neuromancer* is a matter of cybernetic criticism. Castells refers to the model of communication in the Matrix as "The Internet Galaxy". Two notable things have been discussed by Castells – i) the belief of human development by the use of technology, and ii) hackers are used by 'money-driven' business planners who use their merits in their financial interests (Anttiroiko). However, the idea of 'internet galaxy' is about the virtual presence of billions of websites and trillions of Webpages.

HYPERSPACE: RESIDING IN THE CYBERSPACE

The use of holographic imagery is a key addition in *Neuromancer*. Gibson gives readers the idea of holographic imagery by stating that, "The holographic paradigm is the

closest thing you've worked out to a representation of human memory, is all." Hyperexistence or hyperspace is closely similar to the idea of holographic imagery. Holographic imagery shows the 3D image of an unreal person in a real place. "In the hologram, it is the imaginary aura of the double that is mercilessly tracked, just as it is in the history of clones." (Baudrillard and Glaser) The person who is projected must not be present where his image is displayed. It creates hyperexistence of the person. Most science fictions employ the idea of hyperspace in travelling time in the outer space. But, it is also possible to discuss the movement of persons inside the Matrix. Travel in hyperspace is frequently depicted as faster-than-light travel in the space. An example of hyperspace movement is seen when Case breaches into the Matrix and cracks down the code of *Neuromancer*, who is an AI.

"Headlong motion through walls of emerald green, milky jade, the sensation of speed beyond anything he'd known before in cyberspace... The Tessier-Ashpool ice shattered, peeling away from the Chinese program's thrust, a worrying impression of solid fluidity, as though the shards of a broken mirror bent and elongated as they fell- " (Gibson 161-162)

Case has the feeling of sitting in the front seat of a small airplane when going through the hyperspace travel. But, neither Case nor Molly is a resident of the Cyberspace. Artificial Life (AL) is non-organic computer simulated life that exists only in the Cyberspace. The only examples of AL in *Neuromancer* are Wintermute and *Neuromancer*. They do not reside outside the Matrix. Their presence is only felt when jacked into the cyberspace through the SimStim desk. It is narrated that,

"Wintermute was hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the world outside. *Neuromancer* was personality. *Neuromancer* was immortality." (Gibson 162)

The quoted lines above clearly hint that Wintermute and *Neuromancer* are the ones in the novel who control both the Cyberspace and 'the world outside'. The Foucauldian ideas of 'discursive practices' and 'discursive formation' can be employed to further understand how Wintermute and *Neuromancer* control the systems both inside and out. 'Discursive practices' and 'discursive formation' refer to the analyses of particular institutions and their ways of establishing orders of truth, or what is accepted as 'reality' in a given society. (Michael and Valerie) As the given society in this case is the near-future city where this novel is set, the 'orders of truth' are the ones defined by these two Artificial Life-enabled characters. It is they who decide what is real and what is unreal. But, at the end, they remain anonymous until someone like Henry Dorsett Case hacks into the system and breaches into the security of the AIs and exposes their true identity.

CONCLUSION

Finally, this paper has effectively analyzed that the idea of cyborg has transgressed the boundary of science fiction novels, has become integral part of science fiction movies and is most possibly going to become a reality in the near future. William Gibson comprehensibly prophesized a future where cyborgs would eventually become a reality. His proph-

esy has been proved accurate by different science fiction novels. But most importantly, his creation of the Sense-Net or the Matrix has shown more relevance than ever at the end of the second decade of the Twentieth Century where the world has become virtually impossible without the existence of the Matrix in his words and the Internet as it is today. The advancement of AI has been very remarkable and AL is prophetically going to be the focus of the next generation of computer engineers.

However, two separate studies can be conducted on the notions of Artificial Intelligence and Artificial Life. This paper has not analyzed the ethical and religious contexts of the cyborgic and reverse-cyborgic characters in the films and the novel it has studied. As religion and ethics are deep rooted social and cultural practices, a study can be carried out to find out the grounds of bioethics of the humanized-machines. A further study is also possible on the aspects on romantic relations between humans and machines.

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