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Where Can We Expect a Respite From and Be Immune to the Surfeit of Technology? (In –depth Study of William Gibson’s Neuromancer)

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ABSTRACT. The present paper intends to explore Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) with a critical eye on the changes and influences technology has effected in contemporary societies, to elucidate how and in which ways these impacts have brought about changes in both individuals’ roles and attitudes, and to investigate the different realms influenced by technology. Hence, in the introduction section, some terms associated with *Neuromancer* will be first defined and expounded, and then in the discussion, the focus of the current research will be on the above-mentioned work in order to shed light on the main concerns of the book. At the end, a conclusion based upon the points discussed in the preceding sections will be drawn in order to help readers of Gibson’s appreciate the significance of his work in portraying the ramifications of advanced technology in years to come.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is worthwhile, to begin with, to provide a concise account of the terms *science fiction*, *cyberpunk*, and *cyberspace* to help fathom the meaning and importance of Gibson’s selected work. Having been acquainted with these terms, one would be able to recognize the importance of Gibson’s.

1.1. SCIENCE FICTION

Due to the gamut of themes and techniques encompassed and employed by authors writing under the umbrella term *science fiction*. It is rather hard to define it. Some critics regard it as a “fundamentally twentieth-century phenomenon, rooted in a predominantly western experience of technological growth” (Cavallaro 25). To others, however, it traces much further back. Marry Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is considered the pioneering example. Beside Shelley’s, other well-known instances are Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), and H.G. wells’ *the Time Machine* (1895), and *the War of the Worlds* (1898). More recent writers include Asimov Isaac, Ray Bradbury, and Doris Lessing. *Science fiction* refers, broadly defined, to novels and short stories projecting worlds which do not correspond to the one in which we as readers inhabit, where technology plays a crucial role, and events occur on a planet not identical to that of ours, or on earth in a near future involving imaginary and supernatural happenings.

There is a consensus of opinion among many critics that the “crucial moment” in the development of the current *science fiction* began in the year 1926 with the publication of *Amazing Stories*, “the first issue of the American magazine” edited by Hugo Gernsback. This issue provided inspiration for many authors writing in coming years in the realm of *science fiction*. *Amazing Stories* were thought of “hackneyed adventure tales in which heroes outfitted in dubious space metal wrecked alien worlds and rescued space maidens” (Cavallaro 4).

Some works associated with *science fiction* “project a future utopia,” or else draw attention to “an aspect of current science or society by imagining their dystopian conclusion” (George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and Margaret Atwood’s *the Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) fall into this category); yet many others like Aldus Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932) use it as a tool for satiric effects, either political or social (Abrams 323). *Science fiction*, Nicol (2008) holds, due to its

potentiality of offering an “alternative to realism-and a critique of it” is of central importance to postmodernism (164). Postmodern writers have in recent years adopted such motifs of *science fiction* as “temporal” instead of its “spatial displacements; that is, in preference to projecting faraway planets and places, they opt for the “worlds of the future”. We thus have in contemporary century observed the “science-fictionalization of postmodernism.” Just as postmodernism is indebted to *science fiction*, the converse is also true; if postmodernism has been science-fictionalized, *science fiction* too has borrowed from postmodernism. We have witnessed the “postmodernization of *science fiction*” in that it confronts contradictory worlds with an interest in literary writing itself. (McHale 65-72). This is of immense significance to its sub-gene, *cyberpunk*.

1.2. CYBERPUNK

As a “wave of radical *science fiction*,” emerging in the 1980s, it is based upon the “new wave” of *science fiction* inaugurated by such figures as Ballard and Aldiss. The movement’s main concern was with “inner space.” As Ballard puts it, inner space is “an imaginary realm in which on the one hand the outer world of reality, and on the other the inner world of the mind meet and merge” (Nicol 65). The term *cyberpunk* was first introduced and used as the title of a story by Bruce Bethke in 1983, and came into use in 1984 with the publication of *Neuromancer*. Indeed, Gibson’s was one of the pioneering efforts of this kind. Set in a near future, *cyberpunk* projects worlds in which technology is of paramount significance; we come across technology-saturated societies where people are capable of entering “virtual reality”, events and happenings may take place “partially” or “entirely” within the virtual reality, and characters are either “human” or “artificial intelligences” (Abrams 323). Though technology has reached its height, it but has been unable to enhance the quality of life. It is characterized by what Bruce Sterling calls it: “high tech and low life” (Henthorne 55). The advance of technology has had a deleterious effect on both people and environment. The prefix *cyber* coming from cybernetics suggests the principal concern of the genre with digital technology, and *punk* denotes the sort of perspective it represents: “anti-authoritarian, rebellious, and fascinated by seedy world of drugs and machismo which punk rocks symbolized” (Nicol 166). *Cyberpunk* is inextricably bound up with *virtual reality* (a term coined by Jaron Lanier). *Virtual reality* designates an “environment” where reality is “simulated” via computers so that people can experience “artificially generated data” in a way that they appear to be generating from the “real world.” Hence, those engrossed in such an environment are given the opportunity to experience feelings that are the same as those of people in the outer world. *Virtual reality*, overall, enables its users to receive “images” and “impressions” from a number of diverse devices attaching to the “user’s body” to provide them with such impressions as “sight, sound and touch.” These experiences are thus not in parallel with those provided through watching a film (Cavallaro 27-8).

1.3. CYBERSPACE

Coined by Gibson in *Neuromancer*, also referred to as matrix in the book, the term is defined by Gibson himself as:

A consensual hallucination experienced by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts...A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...” (Gibson 50).

The term denotes the internet and everything associated with it, in which one has the opportunity to communicate without limits to people across the world and find information on almost any subject. *Cyberspace* in *Neuromancer* enables its characters as well to be present in “alternative locations” from wherever s/he is and “experience the world” through someone else’s perspective (Nicol 170).

2. DISCUSSION

Gibson’s *Neuromancer* concerns Henry Dorsett Case, the antihero of the book once a “cowboy (a hacker), rustler, one of the best in the sprawl” (Gibson 8) and being trained by McCoy

Pauley (a computer hacker). He made the “classic mistake” (Gibson 8) of stealing from his employers and as a result his nervous system was damaged with a “wartime Russian mycotoxin” (Gibson 8), making him hallucinate and then unable to access *cyberspace*. Living now in Chiba city, Japan, and frequenting the Chatsbu, a “bar for professional expatriates” (Gibson 6) and addicted to drugs, Case tries to find a cure in “black clinics” (Gibson 7). He comes across Molly Millions, a “street samurai” (Gibson 31) working for Armitage, an ex-military officer who is willing to cure him providing he work for him as a hacker. Case, Molly, and Armitage along with some other criminals then get involved in a series of illicit activities and encounter *Wintermute* and *Neuromancer*; the two halves of an artificial intelligence construct.

2.1. TECHNOLOGY

Technology has undoubtedly been of enormous importance over the past centuries. The denial of its impacts on people’s lives does not seem to be a sensible thing to do. Due to the developments in technology, and the advent of computer technology in particular, human beings have achieved considerable advances in different domains. Yet that is not the whole story; quite apart from the significant influences technology has exerted over our lives, its pernicious effects too need to be reflected on. Gibson underscores these effects and consequences of technology in today’s lives. He projects a technology-saturated world set in a near future, that is to say, a bleak future in which the adverse effects of technology has greatly been accentuated. His work concentrates more on the dismal failure of technology than on its success. The two main locations are Chiba city, and sprawl (the USA). From the very outset, the reader’s attention is drawn to the prevalence of technology, “the sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel” (Gibson 6). Yet it has been unable to elevate the level of those peopling this world; “it was difficult to transact legitimate business with cash in the sprawl; in Japan, it was already illegal” (Gibson 9). Instead, cards and bio-implants are used to pay for purchased items. There are numerous references to the significance of technology. Individuals are, for instance, given the opportunity to reside *virtual reality*; the Matrix, “the *cyberspace* matrix was actually a drastic simplification of the human sensorium, at least in terms of presentation, but Simstim(simulated stimulation) itself struck him(Case) as a gratuitous multiplication of flesh input” (Gibson 53).

Cyberspace is a tremendous help to Case as it enables him to have access to Molly’s consciousness and experience the world through her, “*cyberspace* slid into existence from the cardinal points...she was moving through a crowded street past stalls vending discount software...then he wiled himself into passivity, became the passenger behind her eyes”(Gibson 53). In a later occasion as well, Case does the same thing where Molly informs him of her past while infiltrating into Straylight, “hey Case, she said, barely voicing the words, you listening? Tell you a story...Johnny, his name was” (Gibson 157). By doing this, Case comes to discover things associated to not only Molly but also all women and consequently it is of great help to him to come to terms with his grief concerning Linda (his earlier girlfriend) and to start developing relationships with other women such as a “girl who called herself Michael” (Gibson 242).

Gibson’s does not just explain technology and its effects; rather it provides help for its readers to think technology through for themselves, to ponder the ramifications and consequences of technology. Put it this way, to considerate it from a critical perspective, to reflect on negative aspects of technology.

2.2. BODY

The body, in *cyberpunk* and particularly in Gibson’s novel is thought of as a variable entity being exposed to alteration and transformation. It does not possess a fixed and firm being. It is instead subject to change, and its faculties have the potentiality of being both enhanced and attenuated. Though the body is improved, however, it is more susceptible to sordid activities. Biotechnology plays a central role in *Neuromancer*. It does not improve individuals’ health; rather it transforms it in order to be of some help to those behind these transformations. The body, it may be true as Peter Wilson suggests:

Has not disappeared...it has become the infinitely penetrable body...Life uses and violates borders, and life constructs media of its own to fill up the extra spaces. The amoeba and the

fertilized egg are both sacs of juice and slime-one grows by splitting itself, the other by being split. (Cavallaro 72)

Case, for example, undergoes a medical operation in order to be fallen prey to a number of nefarious activities. Molly ostensibly seems to have voluntarily had her body improved. Still she is utterly impotent in the absence of her artificial tissues. Julius Deane a one hundred and thirty-five old man changes his DNA so that he is granted longevity and enjoys looking young, “his metabolism assiduously warped up by a weekly fortune in serums and hormones. His primary hedge against aging was a yearly pilgrimage to Tokyo, where genetic surgeons re-set the code of his DNA, a procedure unavailable in Chiba” (Gibson 15).

2.3. MEMORY

Gibson is curious to explore the relationship between memory and technology. He is dubious of the way memory operates and of its ability to recall the past, dramatizing the elusive nature of the past. His interest is suggested by himself saying that: “computers in my books are simply a metaphor for human memory: I’m interested in the hows and whys of memory, the way it defines who and what we are, in how easily memory is subject to revision” (Cavallaro 204). There is an intimate connection between technology and memory. It seems that memory is not a dependable entity, and is hence not exempt from technology and its dire effects. It can be penetrated and pierced through by computers so that both itself and information housed in it are impaired so as to be of benefit to that particular person. Just as *Wintermute* does the same thing to Case’s memory. The relation between memory and the past is also worth considering; individuals appear to have no transparent image of the past. They rather have a vague and obscure consciousness of past events. At the end of the book, we can clearly observe the above-mentioned fact concerning the relationship between Case and Molly. After returning to sprawl, Case got familiar with a girl and “he never saw Molly again” (Gibson 242).

2.4. TECHNOLOGY AND GENDER

Technology is able to exert influence on individuals’ roles as well. Through cosmetic surgery, it transforms women so that they can be exploited for either prostitution or other wicked activities. It is thus abused to make women prepared for particular intended evil deeds. Molly, for example, undergoes such modifications, thanks to implant, as “ten double-edged, four centimeters scalpel blades” (Gibson 28) inserted under her fingernails, and “silver lenses” (Gibson 28) which covered her eye sockets bringing on the disconnection of mind and body that leads to participation in others’ sadistic pleasure, being referred to only as “meat puppet” (Gibson 132). The show entitled “*the doll*” (Gibson 124) staged at the vintienne siècle restaurant in Straylight by Peter Riviera (a drug addict and the one who can perform holographic acts) exploiting Molly’s image in his “holographic cabaret” (Gibson 124) incorporating holographic with erotic scenes suggests how Molly is conceived of as a mere doll intended for turning Riviera’s sexual fantasy into reality,

The act progressed with a surreal internal logic of its own. The arms were next. Feet. Legs. The legs were very beautiful...Riviera was in bed now, naked. His clothing had been a part of the projection...Molly’s body. Case stared, his mouth open. But it wasn’t Molly; it was Molly as Riviera imagined her. The breasts were wrong, the nipples larger, too dark (Gibson 126)

Although Molly is sexually exploited, however, it provides the chance for her to amass money to help her come to terms with her current situation, to survive this terrible ordeal and consequently cause her to disentangle herself from the current situation in which she is now. Her behavior in Gibson’s is at times identical with masculine ones. Having enhanced her physical powers and abilities, Molly to some critics is a “female man of sorts” (Henthorne 54). In her sexual experience with Case, for instance, she behaves in a manner that is considered more typical of men than of women, being the first to act,

She threw a leg across him and he touched her face...Now she straddled him again, took his hand, and closed it over her, his thumb along the cleft of her buttocks, his fingers spread along the labia. As she began to lower herself, the images came pulsing back, the faces, the fragments of neon arriving and receding. She slid down around him and his back arched

convulsively. She rode him that way, impaling herself, slipping down on him again and again, until they both had come..." (Gibson 34)

2.5. FREEDOM

Cyberspace has enjoyed a lot of success in creating an illusion for inhabitants of this given world, in believing that by gaining entry to this *virtual reality* a kind of opportunity opens up to them so that they are given a much better personal freedom compared to that of the real world in which they are part of. Having accessed *cyberspace*, individuals seize the opportunity to play out their most intimate fantasies. They are no longer fettered by the conditions existent in the real world. In the absence of it, however, a deep feeling of sadness and depression comes over people, making them feel they are circumscribed by the outer world. Case, after being unable to access *cyberspace* becomes addicted to drugs and experiences a growing disillusionment. It is for him "the fall" (Gibson 9). It appears that the only remedy would be a return to the *cyberspace*, an environment to be immune from the real world and its displeasures, "the body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh" (Gibson 9). He aspires to go back to it and once he enters this environment and begins working as a hacker, is no longer inclined to step out of it and face the real world. It brings about a kind of release, "with his deck, he could reach the Freeside banks as easily as he could reach Atlanta. Travel was a meat thing" (Gibson 74).

3. CONCLUSION

Technology has in recent years been of real help to inhabitants of the world, exerting considerable influences in different realms. Yet the seemingly inexorable impacts of it have not been wholly helpful. The cumulative effects associated with it have precipitated a growing communication breakdown. Having being entangled in a *virtual reality*, individuals find it extremely hard to escape such an environment. They seem to savor this condition; however, it is an artificial exaltation leading to their divorce from the outer (real) world. In the above-examined work, Gibson has been highly successful in rendering a technology-saturated world in which computer technology appears to have not enhanced the level of those inhabiting this given world. Through cosmetic surgery and biotechnology in particular, technology as depicted in Gibson's causes people subjected to it to get involved in a number of sordid activities, diminishing the importance of advances in technology. Not only does it play a crucial role in behavior, it but makes the body and gender too, to fall under its influence; the alteration in gender roles as a consequence of transformations undergone by body, it leaves kinds of behaviors having startling effects.

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