

Literary Visions in Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development of the cultural transformation in the reception of AI and how the conception of the killer machines has changed into a more optimistic human view on science fiction and the way in which cyber effect overcomes the boundaries between the real and the virtual worlds. The *Neuromancer* by William Gibson is a novel published in 1984 and its popularity has been very much associated in the cultural change of our human conceptions of AI. As a result by 2007 it had sold more than 6.5 million copies worldwide in addition to receiving many esteemed awards. This paper examines the novel literary and cultural influences in evolving the cyberpunk genre.

Keywords: *Cyberpunk; science fiction; Gibson; cyber space; Artificial Intelligence*

LITERARY VISIONS AND CYBERSPACE IN GIBSON'S *NEUROMANCER*

Introduction

Artificial intelligence is a recurrent theme that could be utopian or dystopian in depicting the progress and the dangers that face the world. The utopian consequences highlighting AI may include: immortality, or unlimited lifespan, easy ways to work and better opportunities at the job market. Education as well as entertainment could be provided by machines, and this creates dominating powers to protect oneself over social rules of others. On the other hand, Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction presents a critical concern of humanity witnessing the powerful technology with machines on pathway to approach brainpower.

Gibson's Vision of a human and non-human worlds collaborating together presents a futuristic image has been very influential in the development of both fictional and real aspects of building AI platforms. William Ford Gibson was born in 1948 in South Carolina US. He started his career as an American Canadian writer during the 1970s. This specific historical era of his life provides him with all the bewilderment to question human existence in on going global political struggle and the implementation of technology as the factor that makes all the difference in shaping the world political powers.

Gibson's science fiction establishes his position as a leading figure in cyberpunk fiction. Therefore, *Neuromancer* can be considered a frame to shape the theory of cyberpunk in post modern world in its themes of science and fiction. This makes the novel as a cultural creation connecting all theoretical and meta-critical analyses. Globalization, capitalism and many prominent ideologies of the last decades of the Twentieth century are found in a network of spatial relations shared between human and non-human. The fictional anxieties of Gibson's novels represent intensified social and political anxieties that are to be found in the real world. Fredric Jameson described Gibson's *Nuromancer* as the first literary form to seize the cultural implications of the explosion of communication technology (Jameson, 1991).

The city, the prison, sex clubs, restaurants, resorts and many urban spaces are related to digital virtual spaces. The novel shows social relations and systems of knowledge as connected to technologies. Consequently the novel represents contextually and theoretically cultural signpost. Urban space has reentered a cultural dialogue. Moving

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through the walls of buildings as ghosts to hack the hackers and “bug the buggers” is a continual process to extract what is hidden which is not only a non- human data but also a system of cultural interactions.

Visions and Cyberspace in Gibson’s *Neuromancer*

Science fiction presents artificial intelligence themes as an essential human struggle in a futuristic view of our world. Scientists and engineers have noted the questionability of many science fiction scenarios, but have mentioned fictional robots many times in artificial intelligence research articles, most often in a utopian context. The process of accepting the concept of having artificial intelligence as part of daily life has been affecting different life cultural domains. William Gibson’s novel, *Neuromancer* has been a form of postmodern apotheosis for creating the cyberspace in virtual reality. The novel shows a cultural allegory of the current challenges in dealing with artificial intelligence through his complex narrative crafting of science fiction influential language.

Gibson represents the human social condition in a world controlled by cybernetic technologies. His cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* has been labelled “the most vaunted book in the genre”. (Robischon, 1999). By 2007 *Neuromancer* had sold more than 6.5 million copies worldwide in addition to receiving many prestigious literary awards. This shows the novel linguistic and cultural influences in evolving the cyberpunk genre.

The novel is about technology and crime in a futuristic vision. It follows the personal experiences of Case, an out of work hacker who deals with a mercenary cyborg and thieves and participates for data thefts. His employer, Armitage will arrange a cure for poison that has put into the system by a former employer, so he can enter the matrix again. The story goes on and has different cities as its backgrounds such as Boston, Atlanta and Istanbul. The team of hackers break through the rules of cybernetics to allow it to merge with *Neuromancer*. Technology develops beyond human conceptions. Humans are emotionally weak with faulty memories and can be the victims of their own mental anguish. Artificial intelligence is superior to humans because of its ability to record as well as erase data. It survives on timeless domains while humans are trapped in alienation, physical disability, addiction and self- destruction.

The narrative style breaks the limitations for the human and the cyberspace. In “Is there a Technological Fix for the Human Condition” Gregory Benford notes that science fiction employs the narrative style as a “legitimate approach” to express annoyance with undefined beings. For him hard science fiction is “open ended- process of both reading and of writing fiction” (Slusser, 1986). This shows how the ethical question is not the aim but the transformation of the meaning of art away from the traditional purposes of art. Unlike the realistic fiction that employs the idealization of space, history, heroism and human adventures, *Neuromancer* projects infinite spaces where cybernetic data controls social life. Everyday life is taken out of human social existence.

The motive of art is for all within the cyber realm opens new horizons in accepting artificial intelligence as part of an optimist futuristic vision for humanity. For Gibson the hero is the one who uses cyberspace as a human system. The cybersphere is also enthralling any religious or social values in a sarcastic way. In *Neuromancer* art is the frame for the world of the novel. Cybernetic technology changes life into mutating artificial structures. Reality becomes a meagre traffic of information to be circulated by a new automatic and self-programming being. This narrative is indorsing self- reflection and social critique.

The social critique in Gibson’s *Neuromancer* involves participation on the part of the readers to imagine a dark world ruled by technology where cyberspace is the truth and humans are the weapons of cyborgs. Cyberpunk fiction is marked as avant-garde which the recent trend in science fiction writing (Easterbrook, 1992). In this regard Gibson’s novel shows how the artificial intelligence is developing at the present and the near future instead of a future that belongs to alien- captured earth or the world after hundreds of years. This builds public ground of accepting the storyline as a reflection of current social and political systems. In other words as Robinson observes the cyberpunk “combines high technology with a nourish pun-rock, fight- the- system ideology and has inspired countless authors, magazine publishers and film makers” (Robischon, 1999, p.58). This shows how the cultural transformation towards artificial intelligence is taken place not only within the literary circles and the intellectual societies but also the general public who represent the fans and readers of *Neuromancer* and other examples of such fiction.

This will inspire the readers to question the practices of the status quo into questions and self-reflective criticism. Gibson’s novel presents oppositional ideas concerning the survival for humanity is the novel’s futuristic vision and part of its problematic trajectory is the dialectical tension. Language as the medium of communicating ideas presents that conflict of ideas paired with strange patterns. Gibson’s *Neuromancer* is a warning about the future controlled by greed and corruption. Human relationships promote self- reflection and critical thinking and artificial intelligence within the world of the novel is set as a contrast to make human re-examine themselves and their motives from different perspectives. This could be the unique power inherent in Gibson’s futuristic cyber vision as his characters communicate about new systems in *Neuromancer*: “bringing them into accord with new meanings (rejecting old

means and selecting new means as a better solution for the problem new rephrased), we shall bring ourselves and our group nearer to the good life” (Gibson, 1984, p.81).

The perfection of new systems can be figured in new notable ways. At the same time this shows how human kind pushes themselves for perfection despite the consequences and moving towards tragic perspectives. This happens with Gibson’s presentation of the role of the information technology. In his cyberspace the word “information” is the key metaphor of our postmodern world. In this context artificial intelligence becomes a partner for the course of human history and the role of technology should be examined with social and political systems. Within the world of the novel subculture is described to settle a realist ground for the novel such as the plastic surgery in contemporary society. Gibson describes the technology for aesthetic uses as he writes: “Fads swept the youth of the Sprawl at the speed of light, entire subcultures could rise overnight, thrive for dozen weeks, and then vanish utterly” (Gibson, 1984, p.58). Also a group called The Panther Moderns represents a group of young tech punks describes as “mercenaries, practical jokes, nihilistic techno fetishists” (Gibson, 1984, p.59). Such narration is not far from our daily life realities and the subcultures in a worldwide view.

The human flesh has been imprisoned in a network of multinational controllers and the bodiless excitement of cyberspace. The protagonist Case is hunting data-cores and trying to overcome his own problems derived in his flesh and the flaw of his physical being. It is part of the deal that he participates in the criminal conspiracy of the novel while his nervous system has been sabotaged. His relaxed cyberspace highlights his own contempt for the human flesh. This can be depicted as an aspect of the techno paranoia theme giving the reader the sense of some non human being hanging around but at the same time the noir aesthetic of the novel shows the human ability to pull the invisible realms. (Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 1992). The physical need of the human body is a constant reminder of the virtual existence in cyber life. When Case looks at a sign that reads Freeside, his despise to his flesh becomes obvious:

He walked through the crowd and stood beneath it, studying the thing. WHY WAIT? pulsed the sign. A blunt white spindle flanged and studded with grids and radiators, docks, domes. He’d seen the ad, or others like it, thousands oftimes. It had never appealed to him. With his deck he could reach the Freeside banks as easily as he could reach Atlanta. Travel was a meat thing. (Gibson, p.77).

This situation puts Case in conflict with the quasi-antagonist, the Tessier -Ashpool clan who created the Freeside who practise the maintenance of their flesh by physical isolation, cryogenics and cloning. The virtual freedom of computer cyberspace with its excess of bright light is set against the limitless physical, social and economic obstacles that all human characters experience. Human beings move from city to city in a global matrix. Social entities are postmodern cultural marks. The novel presents certain dynamic of what termed as “low culture” and “high culture” within the fictional plot. The urban space becomes a background for a chain of combinations: self-confident political players, street- level criminals, photocopied luxury hotels, commercial advertisements, hoc slum villages and company spires. There is a matrix of spatial relations that entrap humans and constantly shift them between realms of luxury and security, and spaces of decay and violence.

The setting is vibrant and departs from the dark claustrophobic surroundings that are common in cyberpunk genre. Such setting presents a reading of the novel as a warning against the social risks associated with computing. But at the same time paving the way to human conceptions of a new global era where mega corporations have become powerful political players.

CONCLUSION

Decades have passed after the publication of the *Neuromancer* and Gibson’s view of the future has proven to be visionary of the materialization of cyberspace as a powerful international businesses and global computer networks, hackers and computer viruses. The world of his novel presents a black market for information and cities ruled by corrupted political systems inhabited by technological punks and weapons. The power of mega- corporations are playing a essential role in our daily life. Hence Gibson’s ideology is concerned with the nature of being human in a world where humans are used as commodities besides advanced machines.

Humans and artificial intelligences act according to implemented programming done by corrupted forces. Gibson’s characters within his cyberpunk world struggle to survive as individuals by regaining their humanity. In Gibson’s fictional world, the line dividing humans and machine blurs and conceptualizes domains in utter vagueness. It also offers social critique when the future may resemble the present since humans are not adequately processing self-reflection. The world is darker in a futuristic vision and cyberspace becomes a real platform for humans to understand the world they inhabit.

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