

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 4, April 2019

www.ijellh.com

Swapna Roy

M.Phil. Research Scholar

Department of English

Vidyasagar University

Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, India

roy91.swapna@gmail.com

Neuromancer: The Second Self in Cyberspace

Abstract

Human beings are ontological designers; we build the tools, and then the tools reshape our reality. In this matrix, space is intertwined with our consciousness. We can now hack our reality by piercing the veil of our subjective experiences. Just as we grow within the world, the world grows within us. Not only do we occupy particular places, but the places, in turn, occupy us. Boundaries are being dissolved, and we are reborn in a tech-savvy world which is not an alternative universe or parallel universe but a hyperreal world. Hyperreality blurs the physical spaces leaving us in continuous "consensual hallucination"(Gibson 51). However, "what happens when this distance, even the one separating the real from the imaginary, begins to disappear?", as questioned by Jean Baudrillard, in his essay Science, Fiction and Simulcra raised the question (1991, vol.18,part.3). Here, William Gibson pertinently raises this question in his cyberpunk novel Neuromancer (1984). Therefore, this paper would seek to analyze how the characters create and live the Second Lives parallelly in the virtual world dissolving, dissipating and diffusing into fluid selves.

Key Words: Cyberspace, Cyberpunk, Imagined Community, Hyperreality, Simulacra, Avatar, Artificial Intelligence, Terminal Space.

Introduction

Published in 1984, William Ford Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the first of his *Sprawl Trilogy* has been known as the path-breaker of the Cyberpunk genre. Futuristic setting on the surface, the novel, being his debut novel received Nebula Award, the Philip K. Dick Award, and the Hugo Award; it also raises several arguments on our hyperreal-existence. About this genre Bruce Sterling in *Mirrorshades – The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1986) wrote:

The work of the cyberpunks is paralleled throughout the Eighties pop culture: in rock video; in the hacker underground; in the jarring street tech of hip-hop and scratch music; in the synthesizer rock of London and Tokyo. This phenomenon, this dynamic, has a global range; cyberpunk is its literary incarnation". (Sterling, preface, xi-xxi).

Cyberpunk turns out to be a curious phenomenon within sci-fiⁱ discourse provoking critical debate and discussion both within and beyond 'fandom,' a debate that seemingly has been survived the sub-genre itself, where a discussion of the body and science fiction considerably influential, a genre is best known for its rejection of embodiment and embrace of an existence in cyberspace. We have already become the augmented cyborg—piercing the real through the cobweb of semblances—relinquishing the taste of 'real' from our structured phantasy as the ultimate effect of this Information Age, and it is no longer real; Reality becomes the representation of reality itself. What Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulations* says:

The *hyperreal* represents a much more advanced phase, in the sense that even this contradiction between the real and the imaginary is effaced. The unreal is no longer that of dream or fantasy, of a beyond or within, it is that of a *hallucinatory resemblance of the real*

with itself. To exit from the crisis of representation, you have to lock the real up in pure repetition". (Baudrillard 69)

The *Hyperreal* City

Set in the future and controlled by high tech *Zaibastus* of Japan, Germany, and Switzerland, data is a saleable commodity in Chiba city. The novel opens by describing "the sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel"(Gibson 3) transcending our view beyond the reality of our 'real' world uniquely. "Behind the port lay" Chiba, a *hyperreal* simulated city where "factory domes dominated by the vast cubes of corporate arcologies" (Gibson 6). A narrow borderland of older streets divides the port and the city, "an area with no official name. Night city, with Ninsei its heart. By the day, the bars down Ninsei were shuttered and featureless, the neon dead, the holograms inert, waiting, under the poisoned silver sky" (Gibson 6-7), In this city, "groups of sailors" come up "from the port, who are "tense solitary tourists" and they are "hunting pleasures"[...] "swarming the street in an intricate dance of desire and commerce..."(Gibson 10-11).

Re-Locating the Self

In this technological jungle, the identity of the self is fluid. If we closely look at the title, multiple interpretations will lead to (re)construct the self, and Herlander Elias encapsulates the heterogeneity of the title in her book *Cyberpunk2.0: Fiction And Contemporary*. Firstly, the prefix "neuro" reflects Marshall McLuhan'sⁱⁱ idea that the silver pathways of our brain are an exteriorization of the human body. Secondly, analogically the term "necromancer," in its turn related to "the space of the dead," the expression also mentioned in the novel (Gibson 243). The term "necrospace" is also related to what lacks in our life, in association with simulated and artificial life forms. Therefore, cybernetic

personality is like living-dead, only the representations within representations. Thirdly, “Neuromancer” also sounds like “new romancer”-- an advertisement to the writing style the cyberpunks writers' school-- suggests the “Neo-romantics” to be the new novelists, the great visionaries, whose main works are for sure romance oriented; “Neo-romantic” being the contemporary metropolitan artists are also famous for their imaginary sketches in relation to the idealized multidimensional cyberspace and the vast digital landscapes. In this virtual soil where the cyberspace- cowboy is erecting “The Matrix”ⁱⁱⁱ as his landscape, worth to become a new exploration territory. The enticement comes when the cyberspace is the virtual architecture representative of the highest icons of multinational enterprises, allows the experience of “diving” into the information ocean. “Diving” starts when “he closed his eyes. Found the ridged face of the power stud. And in the blood- lit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphates boiling in from the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information”(Gibson 52). Due to its infinite entanglement, it would house the most curious and intelligent cybernetic space predators. Herlander Elias opted out that, “They demanded an intense, strong, connection-a deep “Reterritorialization”^{iv} (Deleuze & Guattari) a new “take off the real,” thanks to the size and infiniteness manifest “in the powerful labyrinth structures of the virtually real cyberspace.”(Elias 62)

“An Imagined Community of Avatars?”

Kevin Miguel Sherman in “An Imagined Community of Avatars? A Theoretical Interrogation of Second Life™ as Nation through the Lens of Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities”, gives an elaborate discussion regarding the ‘second life’ of a cyborg in the virtual world-- the idea of ‘imagined community’ and cyborg—he generates a new direction by juxtaposing these two ideas. Benedict Anderson *On the Origin and Spread of*

Nationalism defines a nation as the fact that most will never meet nor even hear of one another, envision '[...] a deep horizontal comradeship' (Anderson 7). Thus, according to Anderson a nation is also imagined as being limited; in other words, it is imagined to possess contiguous territory beyond which presumably lie other nations. Lastly, a nation is implied by the use of the word 'imagined,' a nation, then, is a mental construct--other than some lines on a map there is nothing concrete to which a person could point and say, 'There. That is a nation.'

As Anderson implies, whereas such a community is imagined at the level of the individual believes a national community signifies that such an individual is deeply connected not to some disembodied abstraction (e.g., the idea of nationhood), but to the collection of people who comprise this abstraction, who breathe meaning into it. According to Anderson's contention that a nation is imagined as having a limited, finite territory. In contrast, the territory of a virtual world is not only imagined, but it is also, in this case, imaginary where there is no limit, no cartography, no boundary. In this virtual space of 'imagined community' Case is an *avatar*.

Case, in "An Imagined Community of Avatars"

The virtual embodiment of people as avatars is a term used in many online worlds, according to Tom Boellstorff, "Avatar is the Sanskrit word initially referred to the incarnation of Hindu God and particularly the god Vishnu" (Boellstorff 128). However, While 'avatar' [...] historically referred to incarnation- a movement from virtual to actual- with respect to online worlds it connotes the opposite movement from actual to virtual, a de-carnation or in virtualization. (Boellstroff 128)

An avatar is a (not necessarily true-to-life, and often fantastic) visual representation of its user. Case's incarnation completes when he plugs in the deck and escapes from the prison of

“meat.” The incarnation of the subject from real life to the virtual --the two selves whose incarnation we observe—is completely different from real life subject and the “I-subject” of the virtual world. Cyberspace is a ‘work,’ turns into a ‘text’ by this “I-subject” who penetrates this womb-like space by re-programming his course of actions vis-a-vis the user is also programmed by the ‘text’ itself, and by extra-textual materials.

“The Rhacker” in the Matrix

Case, the cowboy (Rhacker^v) lost his nervous system because of an overdose of Russian mycotoxin as a punishment used by another corporation whose information Case had attempted to hack. To him his own body is a prison, “he fell into the prison of his own body” (Gibson 6), and cyberspace is ‘home.’ Case compulsively repeats the pattern of his movement in the virtual world to achieve belated mastery. The “object *petit a*”^{vi} never crosses the gap between the real, world and virtual world and his desire is unattainable in this sense. This is presented precisely, in the field of the mirage of the narcissistic function of desire, as the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier. It is at this point of lack-- the subject has to recognize himself-- the fact is the subject turns out to be an object of the virtual gaze. The second self is different from the self of the physical world. The world is different too:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily 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 no space of mind, clusters, and constellations of data. City lights, receding... (Gibson 51)

In another sense, it is the “non-space of the matrix, the interior of a given data construct possessed unlimited subjective dimension; a child's toy calculator, accessed

through Case's Sendai, would have presented limitless gulfs of nothingness hung with a few basic commands" (Gibson 63). In this cyberspace, data becomes physical space, and the subject is re-structured within a new experimental reality. In our daily existence, we are wrapped up in 'reality,' and 'reality' is structured and supported by the fantasy, and our immersion in this reality is troubled by signs and if we decode these signs we will find that another, repressed level of our psyche is still fighting to cope up with this "reality".

Baudrillard says in his book *Simulacra*

The "real" is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, from memory banks and command models- and with these, it can be reproduced and identified a number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is hyperreal^{vii}, the product of an eradicating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (Baudrillard 6)

We can associate Lacan's concept of "traverse the fantasy" with this *Hyperreal* world, paradoxically, meaningfully identifying oneself with the fantasy- namely, with the fantasy which structures the excess that resists our immersion in daily reality; or, to quote a succinct

formulation by Richard Boothby

'Traversing the phantasy' thus does not mean the subject somehow abandons its involvement with fanciful caprices and accommodates itself to a pragmatic 'reality,' but precisely the opposite: the subject is submitted to the effect of the symbolic lack that reveals the limit of everyday reality. To traverse the phantasy in the Lacanian sense is to be more profoundly claimed by the phantasy than ever, in the sense of being brought into an ever

more intimate relationship with that real core of the phantasy that transcends imaging.

(Booby 275-6)

When we look into the cyber mirror, we find that we are different, the ego develops, and the “imaginary” world starts to take shape. As Lacan comments, “The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is participated from insufficiently to anticipation,” (Lacan 4) for the analectic child prefigures in an image the full development of its motor-nervous system and thus achieves a kind of self-mastery. Such a child, in other words, is something of a neuro (nerves) - mancer (of the future).

Similarly, Marshall McLuhan has famously written of humanity's progress toward self-mastery by way of the annihilation of space-time in *Understanding Media: The*

Extensions of Man

After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western World is imploding. During the mechanical ages, we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. (McLuhan 3-4)

The “Consensual Hallucination”

In this image of an extension of our central nervous system, we can witness the problems of the imaginary amplified to global proportions. Once again the task of self-mastery is imperiled by its success, boundless subjectivities emanate, and identity of pure self is lost in the labyrinth failing to secure its objective conditions of existence. In this respect, the “consensual hallucination” of cyberspace can be understood as “a kind of

collective solipsism” according to Tony Myers in which the aspirations of bourgeois individualism are given reign and end up being strangled on the leash. Terry Eagleton in *The*

Ideology of the Aesthetic says

The fantasy of total technological omnipotence conceals a nightmare: in appropriating Nature, you risk eradicating it, appropriating nothing but your own acts of consciousness. There is a similar problem with predictability, which in surrendering phenomena into the hands of the sociological priests threatens to abolish history. Predictive science founds the great progressive narratives of middle-class history, but by the same strokes offers to undermine them, converting all diachrony to secret synchrony. (Eagleton, 64)

Molly, the “Razor Girl”

According to Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), a cyborg can cross the boundary between man-machine, and creating a hybrid organism, which guarantees the elimination of natural differences existing between the sexes. If the skin is no longer the borderline for the body, the cyborg has the power to subvert the natural order. This blurs the boundary between the body and technology, nature and culture, and thus between femininity and masculinity. There are no boundaries. There are no divisions into men and women. There is no grammatical gender connected with sex. We play with names, with verbs, with language. There is no feminine or masculine. Everything is fluid in cyberspace.

Molly’s life in cyberspace in *Neuromancer* is similar to Rikki in *Burning Chrome* both try to subvert the gendered-identities. Highly focused on elevating their poor human lives to the level of supergirls they start to raise their funding. Giving consent to the technological implantation to disengage their conscious minds from the bodies while participating in their clients’ sadistic fantasies as mere meat puppets define their quench to

have-all, and also best suited to the unsavory requirements of closet necrophiliacs^{viii} as suggested by Dani Cavallaro in his book *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*. Molly turns out to be a famous simstim^{ix} star crossing the boundaries of so-called 'nature/ culture' binary opposition and becomes a Supergirl whose "glasses were surgically inset"; she has silver lenses on her "smooth pale cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag" and "the fingers curled around the fletcher were slender, white, tipped with polished burgundy. The nails looked artificial." (Gibson 24).

This Molly also turns out to be a projection of another's fantasy in this virtual-space and the identity is at flux in this "terminal space"

Riviera was in bed now, naked. His clothing had been a part of the projection, but Case couldn't remember seeing it fade away. [...] Molly's body. Case stared, his mouth open. But it wasn't Molly; it was Molly as Riviera imagined her [...] The head was there, the image complete. Molly's face with smooth quicksilver drowning the eyes. (Gibson 140)

Riviera's ravenous sexual gratification projects Molly as a 'doll' and as we all know that 'doll' is an ancient symbol of unattained beauty turns out to be an atrocious assemblage of scraps of memories and desires. The libido of the imaginary world penetrates reality through the symbolic projection conjuring the female figure slowly, in a crescendo of distressingly vivid metonymic fragments. As Boyer has detected that dolls, like puppets and mannequins, also "represent the mass-production of identity, whether woman as a commodity (that is a prostitute or doll) or man as an automaton," as suggested by Andrew Hewitt in *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (146). Dixie Flatline a.k.a. McCoy Pauly, Case's former teacher whose memory is still available after his death and is hacked by the corporation with whom Case is working.

AI in *Hyperreal* Space

The imagination that draws special attention in Gibsonian world apprehending the near-future turns out surprisingly convincing while Ray Kurzweil, Director of Engineering at Google play announced about “mind uploading” as the alternative version of fluid self is possible and people will become “digitally immortal” by 2045 in his book *Singularity Is Near* (Roy 166). In the end, we of the book, two AI(s)^x are merged creating a new identity of the human-made machine where they no longer need humans. It is now able to create intricate forms, hide personality and change its strategy:

Wintermute was the hive mind, decision maker, effecting a change in the world outside. Neuromancer was immortality. Marie-France must have built something into Wintermute, the compulsion that had driven the thing to free itself, to unite with Neuromancer. (Gibson 269).

We can now discern that the protagonist of the novel is not Case, but Wintermute, the self-aware AI which starts to take control over the entire cyberspace with a brilliant moment of his self-declaration:

“I’m not Wintermute now.”

“So what are you.” He drank from the flask, feeling nothing.

“I’m the matrix, Case.”

Case laughed. “Where’s that get you?”

“Nowhere. Everywhere. I’m the sum total of the works, the whole show” (Gibson 297).

Conclusion

Neuromancer finishes with the idea of digital immortalization in a virtual village which is controlled by artificial intelligence producing a new humanoid cyborg. These

simulated cyberspace and cyberculture are only considered fictional in the 1980s. With the progress of science and computer technology, it has taken the form of reality. Yes, virtual realities problematize our ontological notions of real by blurring the boundaries of corporeality and transcendence, the real and the virtual, where and nowhere, and the real self and virtual self. Thus, the novel, in many ways, takes cyberpunk on a new target that is biopunk, not as a part of it but as a further propagation of refined genre in literature.

Notes

-
- ⁱ “Sci-fi” is the acronym of science fiction, the same as “scientific fictions”.
- ⁱⁱ McLuhan is the famous author known for his on media “extensions of man” for describing contemporary media-driven techno-culture as a “global village”.
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Matrix” is the social, political, etc. situation from which a society or person grows and develops.
- ^{iv} “Reterritorialization” is the re-structuring of a place of territory that has experienced deterritorialization. Deterritorialization is a term created by Deleuze and Guattari in their philosophical project *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.
- ^v “Rhacker” is introduced by Elias Herlander created to explain the merging of both rocker and hacker figures based on Bruce Sterling’s ideas because the Rhacker is somebody who can retrieve and interfere with sound and image (audio-visual) in an age where things are multimedia network and available in "samples". The answer is a manipulation of contents so complex and rhizomatic as the network themselves. (Elias 311)
- ^{vi} “Object petit a” in the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan stands for the unattainable object of desire. It is sometimes called the object cause of desire.
- ^{vii} The term is associated with Jean Baudrillard who in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* used it for the first time. Hyperreality is a representation, assign, without an original referent;

it involves creating a symbol or set of signifiers which represent something that does not actually exist.

^{viii} "Necrophilia" also known as necrophilism, is a sexual attraction or sexual act involving corpses.

^{ix} "Simstim" is literally simulated stimulation and is a logic parallel to VR. Rather than experiencing a full VR or AR experience in which our mind is placed inside the metaverse matrix, a completely simulated reality.

^x AI is artificial intelligence, the domain of autonomous and self-regulated computerized constructions.

Work Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised. London: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Two Essays ("Simulacra and Science Fiction and Ballard's Crash")* *Science Fiction Studies*. Trans. Arthur E. Evans. Vol. 3. Depauw, 1991. 18 vols. Print.
- Bellour, Raymond. *The Analysis of Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. Print.
- Boellstorff, Tom. *Coming of age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human*. Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. Print.
- Cavallaro, Dani. *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and The work of William Gibson*. London & New Brunswick NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000. Print.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. Print.
- Elias, Herlander. *Cyberpunk 2.0: Fiction and Contemporary*. Covilhã, Portugal, : LabCom Books , 2009. Print.
- Foucault, Mitchel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* 16.1 (1984): 22-27. Print.
- Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books, 1984. Print.
- Habberjam, Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara, trans. *Cinema I The Movement-Image* . Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. , 1983. Print.
- Hewitt, Andrew. *Facist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics and the Avant-Garde*. Stanford: Stanford Publisher, 1993. Print.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge, 1964. Print.
- Meyers, Tony. "The Postmodern Imaginary In William Gibson's "Neuromancer"." *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.4 (2001): 887-909. Print.

Miller, Jacques-Alain, ed. *The Seminar Of Jacques Lacan: Book XI The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Norton, 1981 . Print.

Sherman, Kevin Miguel. "An Imagined Community of Avatars? A Theoretical Interrogation of Second Life™ as Nation through the Lens of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities." Astrid Ensslin, Eben Muse. *Creating Second Lives Community, Identity and Spatiality as Constructions of the Virtual*. Ed. Astrid Ensslin and Eben Muse. New York, : Routledge, 2011. 32-53.Print.

Silva, Jason. "*Ontological Designer*", *The Shots of Awe*. 25 November 2014. You Tube. 04 October 2018. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aigR2UU4R20>>.

Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject In Postmodern Science Fiction. Durham: Dukeham, 1993. Print.

Wills, Anne-Marie. "Ontological Designing- laying the ground." *the Design Philosophy Papers*(2006).Web.05October2018. <<https://www.pantagruelista.com/blogeng/being-and-design>>.