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TOPIC

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William Gibson's Seminal Novel *Neuromancer*: An Analysis of Post-Modernist Element of Virtual Reality

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ABSTRACT:

William Gibson's seminal work *Neuromancer*¹ paved the way for the cyberpunk movement. Cyberpunk has almost all the elements we would love to figure out with regard to the Post-modern period of hyper reality and virtual reality. *Neuromancer* provides the best example of how the modern man is puzzled between the real and virtual. There are characters which force us to suspend our beliefs. This paper aims to ascertain as to how virtual reality has been manipulated in cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* and how it corresponds to one of the overriding themes of post-modernism called Virtual reality. Moreover, it is also indispensable to note that the power of virtual world as delineated in *Neuromancer* has been detrimental to the warmth of natural life. This virtual reality of the cyberspace has been the source to the postmodern idea of the blurring of reality. This specific feature of the cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* brings it in line with one of chief elements of postmodernism such as hyperreality.

Key words: *Neuromancer*, Virtual reality, Cyberpunk, Post-modernism.

Introduction

Virtual reality refers to how the three-dimensional image or environment is created on a computer that can be experienced in an apparently actual manner or physically by a person with the help of some electronic device designed for it. This way the fictional world is made to seem more real than the real and extremely delightful. In addition, this also corresponds to the post-modernist view of reality which says that there is no reality but imitation and simulation. Jean Baudrillard believes in the theory of Simulacrum which renders similar notion of reality. According to Baudrillard², we are living in copies of copies and there is no original. He gives the example of a computer disc. One disc can be copied into millions of copies and this makes it very difficult to figure out the original disc.

McCaffery³ explains Baudrillard's theory in the following words:

'Postmodern desert inhabited by people who are, in effect, consuming themselves in the form of images and abstractions through which their desires, sense of identity, and memories are replicated and then sold back to them as products'.

Same is the situation with the virtual world of computer and our daily life. We are lost into copies and there is no way to ascertain the truth of things. The virtual world of computer blurs everything with its cyborg characters, with its characters having super human and post human qualities, with scenes in the future, with places in the space, three dimensional figures. In the same way Lyotard⁴ talks about the grand narratives. To him, there are no grand narratives but micro and mini-narratives. He rejects all the grand narratives that have been leading us for centuries. Postmodernism is about globalization, media culture, consumerism, high technology, crisis of identity, hybridity, fragmentation, distortion, decenteredness, deconstruction, complete play and motion, fluidity

and flexibility. There is ambiguity of meaning to prove that there is no fixed reality. Prior to the elements of virtual reality in *Neuromancer*, it is very important to understand cyberpunk genre. Cyberpunk genre explores an urban and dark future. We have mega-corporations, bleakness and social disorder. We find in it anti-authoritarian characters who are well-versed in technology and who use technology as a source of their illegal enterprise in the form of hacking and enhancing their natural human powers. Dinello⁵ talks about the post-human nature of the cyberpunk characters at the cost of the normal and natural life: "Rapidly accelerating computer intelligence joins an escalating series of ego-smashing scientific breakthroughs that diminish human self-image. Copernicus pushed us from the centre of the universe; Darwin linked us to apes, slugs, and bacteria; Freud showed us that we often do not control our own minds".

The term cyberpunk comes from the short story of Bruce Bethke, but *Neuromancer* is widely believed to be pioneering work with regard to the genre cyberpunk. Cyber means technology and is linked with cyberspace and cybernetics attachments to the human body. There can also be other technologies such as biotechnology and nanotechnology. Punk on the other hand, are the people and their attitudes. These characters are non-conformists, outlaws, corrupt, and culprits. These characters function to subvert everything around them. William Gibson coined the term cyberspace to refer the inside worlds of computer. The characters in *Neuromancer* are professional hackers and digital oriented. They enter the world of computer networks and move at very fantastic pace between many worlds of the virtual reality. There are places in the space and everything seems to be real in the virtual world of computer. The world of *Neuromancer* was called a virtual world by the critics soon after it was published and readers responded overwhelmingly to this seminal work of William Gibson. This is because there is computer language and new coinage in the Novel *Neuromancer*. The actions and scenes in the story of *Neuromancer* move from cyberspace to cyberspace exactly the way we see hypertext on a computer screen. This allows us to experience the virtual world of computer. After the publication of *Neuromancer*, many writers resorted to the virtual world of computer as the setting of their stories. They were purely impressed by William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. The virtual world vocabulary coined by William Gibson came to be used as part of the normal lexicon. Thus, the world has come to accept the world of computer called virtual reality. *Neuromancer* came up with a revolution in the world of media. In this world of virtual reality, the natural world has been annihilated and the virtuality and the originality are not easy to separate from each other. Everything is blurred as it should be in the Post-modern world.

'The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel', that is, 'white noise'. These initial words of the novel *Neuromancer* depict the destruction of nature and the hegemony of technology and media. The future world of *Neuromancer*, both characters and settings, being so detached from nature and nationalities are also part of the virtual world. The following lines may well portray the virtual reality: "Under bright ghosts burning through a blue haze of cigarette smoke, holograms of Wizard's Castle, Tank War Europa, the New York skyline. . . And now he remembered

her that way, her face bathed in restless laser light, features reduced to a code: her cheekbones flaring scarlet as Wizard's Castle burned, forehead drenched with azure when Munich fell to the Tank War, mouth touched with hot gold as a gliding cursor struck sparks from the wall of a skyscraper canyon”.

There are many characters in *Neuromancer* who represent the virtual world of computer such as Linda who is reduced to a code, and other characters who have lost their natural body and who have been changed into cyborgs. Molly has mirrors in her eyes and blades under her fingernails. We have got cloned characters that are kept to freeze in freezers and manipulated by the artificial intelligence whenever they are needed for their vested interests. Armitage is also one such character who has been transformed. He is revived from death and is completely at the beck and call of artificial intelligence. Case's mentor is a data which is downloaded to a computer from his brain when he dies. Characters' brains are wired to computers and such characters are at the mercy of computers. They are humans who have no real and natural bodies in the virtual world of computer. Still these humans without bodies have everything such as sex and go every where. Case prefers brain over meat and enjoys his bodiless experience in the cyberworld. This is a true depiction of the virtual reality which is the opposite of real life, yet we have to believe everything with our beliefs suspended in this virtual world. This is reminiscent of the postmodernist feature of the ambiguity of truth and meaning. This novel portrays the inevitable influence of the cyberspace world as source of subversion. The hackers feel at liberty and enjoy their powers in the virtual world of computers without being controlled and tamed. This cyberspace world is extremely attractive the way it gives liberty to the hackers to enjoy their expertise and the reader enjoys the free movement employed by the character in the virtual world. We can guess the amount of pleasure due to this free movement in the cyberspace from the character of the protagonist Case when he re-enters the virtual world after a long period:

“Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray. Expanding— And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach. And somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face”.

It is very interesting to note that the variety of virtual realities experienced by the *Neuromancer* are somewhat in line with the spirit of magic realism in a way that real is associated with the magic type of things with the help of cyberspace. The visual representation of virtual realities brings this work in line also with the spirit of Postmodernism. The free movement through cyberspace is associated with drugs in the novels. There are characters in the novel who use drugs. They solace themselves with the help of drugs when they wish to enjoy the cyberspace world of virtual reality.

For these characters, cyberspace is itself a kind of experience parallel to the intensity of drugs. The characters want to enjoy the freedom provided by the virtual world of cyberspace at any cost. They prefer the cyberspace over the original and natural world. Such feelings remind us of the spirit of Postmodernism where real mingles with the unreal and original is hard to distinguish from the copy.

The virtual world is an ideal world in the sense that one can change the version of reality, something which may not be very easy to do in a natural world. There are worldwide thinkers who think compute can function as a power to democratize technology so as give liberty to the people at their personal computer. And this is something very much believable in the present age of technology where we all enjoy the power of virtual world through social media. We are free to vent our emotions and express those views which may not be possible to express publically. Such people also believe that drugs together with cyberspace can allow us such a liberty. A close reading of *Neuromancer* also seems to portray this idea of the power of the virtual world and drugs. There are also critics who criticize William Gibson the way he presents the power of drugs and cyberspace reality. But it is also true that William Gibson's basic point is to portray the perils of the virtual world power that weakens our understanding of natural world. Case for example, is more impressed by the virtual world which to him is more appealing than natural world; he feels very upset when he loses his powers of moving through cyberspace: "For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh".

But this virtual world is the devastation of the natural body. This immersion in the virtual world brings you at the mercy of technology. When Case gets back his powers to move through virtual world during his job with the Armitage, he also comes to know about artificial intelligence called Wintermute who is behind the whole project. Wintermute is one half of the *Neuromancer*. In this cyberspace even there are such relations as sex, but such sexual experience may not have the warmth of real life.

The human body is shown to be at the mercy of technology: the data are downloaded from human brains. This is something which does not have any possibly except in the movies and literature where you have to suspend your beliefs. Though, scientists are trying hard to develop such a technology. But such developments will be the annihilation of natural body and natural world of human beings. There are characters in *Neuromancer* who live on ROM construct. Such characters are used as computer software and they can also be turned on and turned off. Such characters are not autonomous same as any computer software. Even protagonist Case is manipulated time and again like some computer software. This proves that in the virtual world of advanced technology, there is no difference between computer software/data and human beings. The virtual world is even used to control human body and mind in a very convenient manner.

Brande highlights that the cyborg characters in *Neuromancer* "express the underlying market forces that condition their environment." There is comodification of characters

in the globalised postmodern world of technology. There is no room for psychological processes. According to Arthur⁶ the novel *Neuromancer* depicts the strength of the virtual world of computer in our present and future.

Whereas, Sterling⁷ points out that in the world of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, due to the hazardous manipulation of virtual world of computer people have to bear pollution; nature is distorted and destroyed. There arises a sense of fear from the power of this virtual world of extreme manipulation at the hands of aliens. It appears that in the time to follow, artificial intelligence would take the form of super humans who will control every part of the human body from brain to the heart. Such a destruction due to computer technology is what the virtual world of *Neuromancer* delineates in a very forceful manner. The artificial intelligence Wintermute wants to be all powerful and wants to join his other half so as to get release from the control of humans. Wintermute does not forgive anyone who comes to stop his way towards his goals. Thus, the virtual world reality is marked by corruption, dystopia, illegal trade, selling of body parts and the underworld. There are places in the space and free movement in the virtual world. Wintermute has many characters at his disposal including the protagonist Case. Thus, Case has no choice but to be manipulated by Wintermute for achieving his ultimate goal of becoming one with his other half called *Neuromancer*. Finally, the protagonist of the novel, Case quits the virtual world and rejects the idea of becoming eternal in the form of data. This reinforces the idea that William Gibson does value the worth and warmth of natural life and body over the artificial and virtual world of technology, no matter how powerful and attractive that may be.

But there are paragraphs in which the ICE (Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics) is cracked which again is the depiction of the ultimate power the cyberspace:

“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— “Christ,” Case said, awestruck, as Kuang twisted and banked above the horizonless fields of the Tessier-Ashpool cores, an endless neon cityscape, complexity that cut the eye, jewel bright, sharp as razors.”

And once again it is very exciting experience to read the following words in *Neuromancer* that depict how the power is exercised in the virtual world by the protagonist Case:

“And then—old alchemy of the brain and its vast pharmacy—his hate flowed into his hands. In the instant before he drove Kuang's sting through the base of the first tower, he attained a level of proficiency exceeding anything he'd known or imagined. Beyond ego, beyond personality, beyond awareness, he moved, Kuang moving with him, evading his attackers with an ancient dance, Hideo's dance, grace of the mind-body interface granted him, in that second, by the clarity and singleness of his wish to die.”

The Postmodern writer Kroker⁸ renders very much valid arguments about the status of cyberpunk today saying that it now seems obsolete. According to him the main reason is “the fact that 80s cyberpunk metaphors don't really work anymore in the virtual 90s.”

He further says that:

“In the age of Neuromancer we could still believe for one charismatic moment that the body could deep-dish its way past screenal telemetry into galactic flows of data, that Molly could vamp her way to mind fusion, that Case could jump out of his flesh and byte-fry his way to Starlight, that somehow we could become data, and it would be good.”

Conclusion

Having said it all, it may be reiterated that the cyberpunk is so much multivariate in its structure, but on the whole, it fails to be cyberpunk when the virtual world and cyberspace is detached from it. In simple terms, cyberpunk is all about the virtual world of computer. As far the other elements, they can be part of the story but it is the computer technology that provides the underpinning to the whole structure. All these points can best be substantiated in the seminal cyberpunk novel of William Gibson called Neuromancer. In this novel, there is an extensive use of computer technology that helps to form the virtual reality. The novel makes are difficult to distinguish real from the virtual because of the delicate workings of the cyberspace world. It is through the technology that we find cyborg characters in the novel Neuromancer; there are posthuman characters and artificial intelligence who depict the virtual world at its best. Power can only be exerted if one has the skill to manipulate the cyberspace. This virtual world not only blurs the concept of reality, but also gives birth to the problems of identity, ecocide, dystopia, corruption, illegal trade, superhuman characters, the helpless of man being at the mercy of machines and paranoia.

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