

13. CYBERPUNK AND DYSTOPIA: WILLIAM GIBSON, *NEUROMANCER* (1984)

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1. Background

1.1 Terminologies and Definitions

As with any literary genre, a clear-cut definition of cyberpunk is hard to find. Among scholars of science fiction (sf), many differentiate between a historical group of writers who met at the beginning of the 1980s, were originally known as ‘the Movement’, and consisted of William Gibson (*1948), Bruce Sterling (*1954), John Shirley (*1953), Rudy Rucker (*1946) and Lewis Shiner (*1950), and a sub-genre of science fiction that emerged at that time with that group but soon expanded beyond it. Its themes were appropriated and re-imagined by other authors, its tropes transported into other media and the subculture became absorbed into the mainstream, something that the proponents of the Movement deemed the death of cyberpunk (cf. Sterling 1998; Shiner 1991). Thomas Foster, however, points out, that “the transformation of cyberpunk into a full-fledged concept rather than a loose association of writers” needs to be understood not as its death but rather as “a sea change into a more generalized cultural formation” (2005: xiv). The term itself originated in the title of a short story by Bruce Bethke, but was used to refer to a specific sub-genre of sf writing by Gardner Dozois in order to describe an “80s generation in sf” adhering to a specific set of “goals and aesthetics” (1984: 9; cf. Heuser 2003: 7). These goals and aesthetics have been best documented by author Bruce Sterling, who as a preface to his *Mirrorshades* anthology has written the ultimate “Cyberpunk Manifesto” (1986). Sterling clearly situates cyberpunk in the literary tradition of sf (indebted to both Golden Age’s hard sf interest in technology and the New Wave’s experiments with human consciousness as well as its literary playfulness; see chapter 8). At the same time, Sterling positioned it as a counter-cultural revolution against what he perceived as the safe and lifeless science fiction of the late 1970s. In claiming cyberpunk as the “literary incarnation” (ibid: xii) of an “overlapping of worlds [...] the realm of high tech, and the modern pop underground” (xi) he maps out the two main elements of the term, which also define many of cyberpunk’s common themes.

Cyber referring to the genre’s interest in techno-scientific developments, in computers, virtual reality, artificial intelligence and information technology as well as in what Sterling calls “visceral” technology: “prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration” (xiii). Many cyberpunk stories display a fascination with the idea of “cyberspace”, a secondary world consisting of information that can be accessed by humans via direct bodily linkage: “the consensual hallucination that was

the matrix” as William Gibson famously described the term in his novel *Neuromancer* (1984: 5; subsequently abbreviated *N*). Similar descriptions of virtual reality can be found in many cyberpunk stories, beginning with Vernor Vinge, who might have invented the idea and in his novella “True Names” named it “the Other World” (1981: 243). Neal Stephenson calls it the “Meta-Verse” (*Snow Crash* 1992), Pat Cadigan refers to “Artificial Reality” or simply “AR” (*Tea from an Empty Cup* 1999) and Jeff Noon uses a biology-based but similar idea when he describes “Vurt” (*Vurt*, 1993). In cyberpunk, the body becomes a prison of the consciousness and technology becomes a means of escaping the ‘meat.’ But cyberspace is only one escape route, while body augmentation or consciousness transfers are others, which are equally explored in cyberpunk fiction. Gibson’s own “Johnny Mnemonic” (in *Burning Chrome* 1987) has a data storage device implanted in his brain, whereas *Neuromancer*’s Molly has an augmented nervous system, implanted mirrorshades and razorblade-fingertips. In Sterling’s *Schismatrix*-story cycle a whole race of augmented “Mechanists” wage a war for dominance and eternal life in a posthuman empire (cf. *Schismatrix Plus* 1996). And in Rudy Rucker’s *Software* (1982) an aged cybernetics designer is offered the chance to transfer his mind into a computer.

Returning to the second element of the term, ‘punk,’ Sterling describes this as a political stance, “a return to the roots” (1986: x) of a purer artistic expression before co-optation by the mainstream, an anarchic violence and rebellious stance against both science fiction’s literary condition specifically and the late-capitalist world of the 1980s in general (cf. Olsen 1992: 14).

Cyberpunk worlds are not set in some far distant but in a near future world, in which technology and hypercapitalism have become dominant and the urban landscape has increasingly usurped nature. The worlds of cyberpunk deal with mega-corporations, which rule the planet, with a fierce form of capitalism and an increasing shear between rich and poor, leaving most of humanity down and out. Consequently, cyberpunk’s protagonists are low-lives, criminals, outlaws and anarchists who will rebel against the established order. Especially the figure of the computer hacker, or “cyberspace cowboy” (*N* 5) such as Case in *Neuromancer*, Roger in “True Names” or Hiro in *Snow Crash*, is a common feature of cyberpunk, as are the augmented soldiers-for-hire like Molly in *Neuromancer* or Sarah in Walter Jon Williams *Hardwired* (1986). To stress the connection with punk further, many stories deal with what Sterling calls the “underground world of pop culture, visionary fluidity, and street-level anarchy” (1986: xii). Music, arts and film, or the entertainment industry in general, are an important factor in Cadigan’s *Synners* (1991) as well as in Gibson’s Bridge-Trilogy (1993, 1996, 1999) or Sterling’s *Holy Fire* (1996). And of course the easiest escapes towards other states of being – drugs and illegal mind trips – consistently crop up in cyberpunk fiction, especially in connection with youth-culture, as for example in Cadigan’s *Synners* and Noon’s *Vurt*.

Cyberpunk deals with the breaking down of boundaries: personal, physical, social, economic, national and political. For many critics, especially for Fredric Jameson, this

is an extrapolation of the developments of late-capitalism and of postmodernity in which “accelerated cycles of mediation and consumption tore up any sense of historical grounding” (cf. Luckhurst 2005: 198). The political and economical realities of Reagan’s America and Thatcher’s Britain favored free markets, self-regulating corporations and minimised social security. As Roger Luckhurst so aptly puts it: “Postmodern subjects lived in a world tilted towards the immediate future, the next instant of gratification” (ibid.), which is an exact description of the world that cyberpunk captures and the reason for Jameson to argue that cyberpunk is “the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself” (1991: 419).

1.2 Utopian Tradition

It is at this point in the theoretical debate on cyberpunk that discussions of utopian/dystopian thought usually set in, arguing for its postmodern late-capitalist dystopian worlds presenting an “alternative, not of (community/socialism/traditional values/transcendental vision), but of supreme, life-affirming *hipness*, [...] against the spectre of a world-subverting (artificial intelligence/ multinational corporate web/evil genius)” (Csicsery-Ronay 1991: 184). The cyberpunk dystopia is thus firmly set against the 1970s feminist critical utopia as represented in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Joanna Russ’ *The Female Man* (1975) or Ursula LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), all of which “posited near-present dystopian worlds,” in which utopian enclaves exist that present us with “potential emancipatory alternatives” (Nixon 1992: 219; see chapters 8 and 9 in this volume). As Samuel Delany has pointed out, this “feminist explosion [of the 1970s...] without which there wouldn’t *be* any cyberpunk” has infiltrated the genre in its close-to-the-present scenarios and “political cynicism” (176f.). On the other hand, however, feminist dystopias also influenced cyberpunk strongly by triggering a reactionary turn towards an “endless, anxious search for fathers” (177) and the genre’s early attempts at erasure of any literary ‘mothers’ and their emancipatory alternative, as Karen Cadora points out: “Cyberpunks are almost invariably male – hypermasculine ones at that – and, as a rule, they have little time for issues of sexual politics” (1995: 157). That is, until the appropriation of cyberpunk conventions for feminist purposes with the rise of a second-generation cyberpunk authors and what Cadora calls “Feminist Cyberpunk” by the end of the 1980s.

But the feminist critical utopias of the 1970s are not the only reference points that cyberpunk dystopias react to, as Tom Moylan points out: “Yet, another body of work that feeds cyberpunk’s intertextual web is the classical dystopian tradition: that is, the novels from Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell to those by Wolfe, Bradbury, Vonnegut and Atwood” (2010: 84). He reaffirms cyberpunk as another step of that tradition but also warns, that especially in its early masculine variant cyberpunk “often works as a late capitalist version of [...] affirmative culture [...] offering up] utilitarian calculations of the odds of ‘making it’ through speculative (ad)ventures” (Moylan 2010: 92). Later stories, more in the vein of Cadora’s feminist cyberpunk, he argues, are better able to “stimulate a more discomfoting reception which is stronger in its evocation of a [...]”

critical utopianism [...] – offering strong critiques of the present” (ibid.). But no matter how to evaluate specific texts of cyberpunk within the dystopian tradition and discourse, the genre’s general presence and influence are hardly debatable.

2. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984)

2.1 Late-Capitalist Dystopia

Choosing Gibson’s debut novel as the primary example text for an analysis of cyberpunk dystopia is completely logical and problematic at the same time. As many authors have pointed out, Gibson – out of all the cyberpunk authors – is “the one major writer who is original and gifted enough to make the whole movement seem original and gifted” (Csicsery-Ronay 1991: 185), is in fact the “king of cyberpunk” (Hamburg, qtd. from Nixon 1992: 222), the “godfather of cyberpunk” (Olsen 1992: 1) or the “undisputed champion of cyberpunk” (Disch, qtd. from ibid.). His debut novel *Neuromancer* then is “a touchstone which gave shape to the emerging sub-genre” (Murphy/Vint 2010: xiii) and “provided the formal and thematic template for much of the subsequent writing in the sub-genre” (Luckhurst 2005: 205).

The text is thus well chosen as an example of cyberpunk, but on the other hand, because of its template character, it describes only the prototypical centre of the genre and not the creative fringes, where boundaries are tested and more radical innovations occur. Taking a descriptive genre approach, *Neuromancer* would be what Andrew M. Butler calls a “pure-bred generic text” (2004: 208), which is in contrast to, for instance, a text like *Schismatrix* by Sterling or *Tea from an Empty Cup* by Cadigan, both of which are, in terms of generic cyberpunk, “hybrid” texts that allow for genre “transgression” (ibid.). Especially when considering cyberpunk’s potential for emancipatory alternatives (cf. Nixon 1992, Moylan 2010, Cadora 1995) Gibson’s text might be lacking more radical aspects of the cyberpunk discourse. With that restriction in mind, we can now proceed in analysing *Neuromancer* in more detail. Lyman Tower Sargent famously defines a dystopia as a “non-existent society [...] that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (1994: 9), a definition which in regards to *Neuromancer* proves the novel to be slightly less prototypical as is generally argued. Gibson himself commented that creation might be “a neat place to visit” (Hamburg qtd. from Nixon 1992: 230), whereas many critics have pointed out that Gibson’s worlds are merely “twenty minutes into the future” (Olsen 1992: 20; Moylan 2010: 86) and thus capture “a minimally extrapolated near-future, whose hypercapitalism barely intensifies the global finance flows unleashed by Reagan and Thatcher” (Luckhurst 2005: 206). Gibson’s dystopia is full of contradictory attitudes towards its world, on the one hand “astutely captur[ing] the mise-en-scène of the capitalist culture” (Moylan 2000: 197) and portraying its values as rotten and inhumane, while on the other hand remaining ‘neutral’ towards many of the technological means that provide for the status quo, and accepting it “a bit too readily as inevitable and unchangeable” (Suvin 1991: 357).

In *Neuromancer*, global corporations rule the world and the society presented has no need for nature as the opening sentence of the novel already depicts: “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel” (N 3). The metaphorical equation of technological and natural phenomena is pervasive within the novel, as the city is described in organic terms with “Ninsei as its heart” (4), “ferro-concrete roots” (43) taking hold and streets looking “like a neat incision, laying the city open” (87). The urban sprawl that is the result of a technologised world becomes almost life-like.

It is fitting then that this urban landscape is dominated by global corporations that produce any kind of commodity imaginable. Everything in and about life can be bought, from body augmentations that radically alter human looks and abilities to eternal life in form of a consciousness transfer or cryogenic freezing. The need to consume and to continuously search for ‘more’ is represented in the novel’s constant mention of drug use, both Case and Linda Lee in Chiba City displaying a “raw need, the hungry armature of addiction” (8) or Riviera’s almost artistic rendition of injecting himself with a potent drug (cf. 107).

Gibson describes human existence as a commodity in itself, functioning according to laws controlled and manipulated by the desires of the *zaibatus*, the corporations that become “global economic power-wielders as the arbiters of people’s lifestyles and lives” (Suvin 1991: 353). The capitalist system referred to in the novel is, according to Suvin, an “ideal template for the new feudalism of present-day corporate monopolies” (ibid.), which extends its rigorous hold on people beyond even their life. The world of *Neuromancer* is one, where many live in the private ‘arcologies,’ safe but owned by the corporation, “working all their life for one zaibatsu. Company housing, company hymn, company funeral” (N 37). The anaphora of Gibson’s prose here beautifully ties together all aspects of the corporation’s bio-political power over its workforce: material as well as spiritual life, even beyond this existence. For the lower caste of this society a similar cut-throat capitalism exists, only dominated by the laws and forces of criminal enterprises, represented in the economy of the black market:

Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button. [...] Biz here was a constant subliminal hum, and death the accepted punishment for laziness, carelessness, lack of grace, the failure to heed the demands of an intricate protocol. (7)

In either case, the material reality reveals itself to us, the reader, as a dystopian nightmare of the capitalist world and Case is a pawn in its power struggles: “Power, in Case’s world, meant corporate power. The *zaibatus*, the multinationals that shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers. Viewed as organisms, they had attained a kind of immortality” (N 203).

Another important aspect of the dystopian world of *Neuromancer* is its lack of national borders, exemplified by life in Chiba described on the opening pages of the novel. Gibson uses German, East-European, African and American nationality markers in the Japanese location as a reference of post-nationality in a world of global capital-

ism in which “the key role of any nation lies in the cachet its name can lend to commodities” (Bould 2005: 220). Whereas the book is set in geographically distinct locales such as Chiba in Japan, Beyoglu in Turkey, and the “BAMA, the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis” (N 43) – the national governments are not interfering, and in the case of the United States the nation itself is never even mentioned. Rather, the series of arcologies, hotels, airports and entertainment districts that Case and his team encounter on their journey become confused and Case at some point goes to the window of his room in Turkey, “almost expecting to see Tokyo Bay” (N 88). Brian McHale refers to this conflation of distinct urban spaces and national orders into a “heterotopian space of a future megalopolis” as the “Urban Zone” (1992: 250), taking the term from William S. Burroughs concept of “interzones,” which represent fragmented multiple-world spaces. Juxtaposing the “maximally diverse and heterogeneous materials” (251) (such as the blending of cultural markers in Chiba) and the conflation of national identity in the Urban Zones marks them as “postmodern hyperspace” of late capitalism as described by Jameson, wherein “the individual human body” is unable “to locate itself, [...] and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (1991: 44).

2.2 Utopian Enclaves

Against this dystopian hyperspace in which the individual is lost, fragmented and without safety or orientation, Gibson positions two possibilities of opposition, which might be argued as utopian enclaves: the world of Zion and cyberspace. In case of the Zion enclave, Moylan argues that even though it “plays an important role in the resentment and resistance of the main characters and represents the persistence, the traces, of utopia in the dystopian landscape” (2010: 86) the enclave’s utopianism is unconvincing. On the one hand, the enclave members are mere helpers, “racial Others” who work hard in resisting the dominant forces, but “conveniently step aside as the white heroes finish up the work” (ibid.: 89). On the other hand, the critique on capitalist domination becomes undermined by the economic position of Zion, as well as the other enclaves in the Sprawl-trilogy: the Brotherhood and the Factory, in the depicted society function as “micro-enterprises” that do not offer newly formed utopian communality but rather resemble “residual forms of small, paternal and patriarchal [...] risk-taking institutions that are occasionally useful to the corporate giants” (ibid.: 90-91) and are therefore commodified by the system. By containing the utopian enclave thus firmly within the corporate construction, by co-opting any kind of opposition, the utopian impulse gets redirected not to overthrow the system but to refine it from within.

The material world dualism of the dystopian zaibatus and utopian Zion is further complicated by what McHale refers to as “meta-worlds” or “inset worlds (worlds-within-worlds)” (1992: 251) and which in *Neuromancer* represent a second possible utopian enclave:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators [...] A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in

the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding ... (N 5).

On the one hand, cyberspace becomes the central metaphor of the novel, the city landscape with its information highways forming the ideal image for global capitalism itself, where data is the “fundamental economic resource and vehicle of the new world order” (Moylan 2010: 86; cf. Bould 2005: 220) and the circulation of information in cyberspace comes to represent late capitalism’s global flow of money, commodities and labour. Again, on a socio-political level then, the “consensual hallucination that was the matrix” (N 5) is not utopian in outlook but rather metaphorically represents the dystopian system.

Its utopian quality on the other hand, lies in its potential for personal transcendence and the possibility of leaving the “Cartesian dualism of mind and body” (Luckhurst 2005: 208) behind, getting rid of the body altogether: “The elite stance [of cyberspace cowboys] involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh.” (N 6). At the beginning of the novel, Case is trapped in the material world, incarcerated in his body. Molly’s offer to restore his ability to ‘jack in’ allows Case a return to his personal utopia, which the novel describes as “a kind of superdrug vying in intensity with sexual love” (Suvin 1991: 355). In phrases like “data made flesh” (N 16) the poetic conflation of sexuality and cyberspace becomes noticeable, but it is also apparent in Gibson’s description of Case’s first cyberspace visit after the restoration of his nervous-system: “Disk beginning to rotate [...] Expanding – And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country [...] distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face” (52). For Case, being in cyberspace is an emotion of bliss, a connotation of sexuality evoked in the choice of words (“flowering”, “release”), as well as symbolizing a return home that becomes tender and sensual in this passage (“caressing”). In a similar poetic merging, a sexual act with Molly (before his return to the matrix) brings Case associations of the so long denied utopia: “the images came pulsing back, the faces, fragments of neon arriving and receding [...] his orgasm flaring blue in a timeless space, a vastness like the matrix” (33). Case equates sexual with technological pleasure, conflates sexual desire and a longing to lose himself in the endlessness of cyberspace.

Suvin describes the “tough-guy lyricism of erotics” and the “excitement of cyberspace” as “privatized utopias – or in fact utopian surrogates” (1991: 357) and thus argues for an individual transcendence that masks an underlying inability of collective and public utopianism. Gibson’s description of cyberspace is, as Nixon argues, deeply gendered. The body is, in his prose, equated with the female, represented in the tough assassin Molly and ultimately demonstrated in her former profession as a “meat puppet” (N 147) – a prostitute without a mind or consciousness present in her body: “Automatic pilot. A neural cut-out” (146). The female body becomes a canvas for the virtual sexual desires of its male customers: “Renting the goods, is all. You aren’t in when it is all happening. House has software for whatever a customer wants to pay for” (147).

Gibson confirms this body representation, not only in the constant image confluences of cyberspace hackers ‘penetrating’ the virtual defenses or ‘jacking in’ into the matrix, but most vividly in his description of Case ‘riding’ Molly via a simulation recording device: “The abrupt jolt into other flesh [...] a passenger behind her eyes” (56). With Case’s consciousness penetrating her and filling her head, Molly becomes the embodiment of otherness. The Cartesian duality becomes literalised in Case (mind) and Molly (body). The utopian possibility of the matrix thus is, as Nixon argues, a “macho” (1992: 228) utopia, which needs to be understood as the “reassertion of male mastery [...] and] a virtual celebration of a kind of primal masculinity” (231). Gibson’s iconography and poetic wordplay reveal a controversial stance on utopianism – allowing only for a very personal and limited utopia – that needs to be understood as ethically and politically ambivalent at best.

2.3 Technology

This ambivalence can most prominently be found in the novel’s use of technology, the effects of which, Gibson himself claims, are impossible to shut out: “trying to ignore [technology] would be like trying to ignore oxygen” (qtd. from Olsen 1992: 71). This stance takes up Sterling’s sentiment, that technology itself has changed, is not the incomprehensible and distant Big Science of Golden Age anymore (something you could choose to ignore, at least on a personal level) but needs to be seen as “pervasive, utterly intimate” (1986: xiii) and inherent in postmodern life. But recognizing the technological potential for change does not mean that Gibson sees it as utopian change necessarily, as we have already seen with the matrix of cyberspace: “In *Neuromancer*, one form of technology – cyberspace – stands as a gateway to a universe of visionary intensity. At the same time, it is also a tool used to control information and people” (Olsen 1992: 71). The potential for good or bad, either way, is inherent in the ‘morally neutral’ technology and Gibson’s descriptions of the late capitalist world show one possible demarcation line in the sense of classism, as Cadora remarks: “Technology is a tool of both oppression and liberation. Poverty is pervasive in cyberpunk, and technological resources are expensive luxuries. Those without access to computers are effectively kept in the underclass” (1995: 359). This is true of Gibson’s world and its potential of utopia as well. Without the money that Armitage has to offer, Case is barred from cyberspace, he has no means to effect an escape into utopian cyberspace. Similarly, Molly needed to sell her body as a meat puppet in order to afford her own escape. Becoming the cyborg assassin with enhanced nervous system, extendable blades and inset mirrorshades comes at a price in this world.

The most ambivalent treatment of technology can be found in the form of bodily transcendence, parts of which have been discussed above in regards to cyberspace. But the other aspects of transcendence do not seem more successful or rewarding either. Ashpool chooses cryogenics as a means of eternal life but sacrifices all hold on reality and eventually turns mad, killing his wife and one daughter and ‘lives’ just a couple of days every few years. Even worse seems to be the fate of the Dixie Flatline, the hacker

whose mind was transferred into a computer construct. Dixie is eternally preserved and has completely transcended human existence but does not live in any human sense of the word, as the following conversation makes clear:

‘How you doing Dixie?’
 ‘I’m dead, Case [...]’
 ‘How’s it feel?’
 ‘It doesn’t.’
 ‘Bother you?’
 ‘What bothers me is, nothin’ does.’ (N 105)

Gibson describes Dixie’s reality as devoid of emotions, “a kind of immortality” that is “nightmarish” (Olsen 1992: 71) because he can never again have any sort of recognizable experience or memory, which leaves him wishing for his death: “This scam of yours, when it’s over, you erase this goddam’ thing” (N 106).

The most extreme ambivalence lies in Gibson’s position towards the artificial intelligences Wintermute and Neuromancer, which represent what Jean-François Lyotard has termed “the inhuman”, which he believes systemically inhabits “what is ‘proper’ to humankind” (2) and is in part represented by the concept of the postmodern, slaving to the idea of “development”, which he sees as being “reproduced by accelerating and extending itself according to its internal dynamic alone” (ibid.: 7). Whereas humanism strives for the perfect state of the human, envisioned in an “Idea, like that of the emancipation of reason and of human freedoms”, the inhuman of development “has no necessity itself other than a cosmological chance” (ibid.). In the duality of the AIs lies development itself: “Wintermute was hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the world outside. Neuromancer was personality. Neuromancer was immortality” (N 269). By their joining at the end of the novel, they become the ultimate moment of the inhuman, as explained by the new entity, where development brought them: “Nowhere. Everywhere. I’m the sum total of the works, whole show” (ibid.). There is no purpose or goal other than the dynamic of change itself. But it is unclear and remains so in the end, how this change, this inhuman development effects the humans involved, as Case points out “I’ve got no idea at all what’ll happen if Wintermute wins, but it’ll *change* something” (260). But Case is not afraid of this development, rather he embraces the change and willfully gives himself over to the new system: “Beyond ego, beyond personality, beyond awareness, he moved” (N 262). In the end of the novel, Gibson denies us a resolution, leaving Case simultaneously in the dystopian reality and the AI generated construct of a privatised utopian surrogate (cf. 270-71). The dystopian system of the inhuman, represented in a world controlled by the hive mind of a corporate AI construct, thus develops a new situation with potential for both dystopian and utopian change, as Csicsery-Ronay describes it:

This new situation is, then, either the promise of an apocalyptic entrance into a new evolutionary synthesis of the human and the machine, or an all-encompassing hallucination in which true motives, and true affects, cannot be known. *Neuromancer*’s myth of the evolution of a new cosmic entity out of human technology is perhaps the only seriously positive version of the new situation – but even it offers only limited transcendence, since the

world is much the same in Gibson's second novel, *Count Zero* [...], set some years later. (1991: 191)

2.4 Critical Stance

It is here, in the "new cosmic entity," that is human-made but not human itself, where the text offers the most intriguing reading for utopian potential. Moylan points out that dystopian narratives can be located along a continuum defining their position towards a utopian possibility (cf. 2000: 155-58, 2010: 85). On one end of the spectrum he sees "an open (epical) dystopia that retains a utopian commitment at the core of its formally pessimistic presentation", while on the other end one can find "a closed (mythic) one that abandons the textual ambiguity of dystopian narrative for the absolutism of an anti-utopian stance" (2000: 156). I would position *Neuromancer* further along the open end of the spectrum, as Csiscery-Ronay has correctly pointed out the potential of the new situation developed at the end of the novel.

Moylan further argues that open dystopian forms tend "to privilege the setting [...] by developing its surplus utopian possibilities in the extensive details of the alternative world" and thus "stimulates the potential for an effective challenge and possibly change by virtue of human efforts" (ibid.). Whereas most dystopian narratives negotiate the human social terrain, *Neuromancer* (and more generally: cyberpunk) opens up the discussion to include the possibility of a society beyond the human, shifting social ground towards the posthuman (as represented in the novel's cyborgs such as Case himself, Molly or even the construct Dixie Flatline, which still retains the human element) or the inhuman (as represented by the AIs Wintermute and Neuromancer). But Gibson clearly does not favour the posthuman (for that we will have to turn to Sterling's *Schismatrix Plus*), as the meat, the human, is tainted and remains a prison. As Olsen points out, the technology-dependent humanity of *Neuromancer* is limited: "They lack genuine free will [...] the immachinated individual in Gibson's world does not govern him or herself" (1992: 71). The human (and part of this remains in the posthuman) is unstable, it is prone to destruction, manipulation and limitation. Instead, Gibson formulates the only site for potential social change in the novel, within the inhuman system. It is the fusion of the AIs that allows for new communication, for a potential shift in the matrix that represents the dystopian system so iconically: "They become the metanarrative of the matrix itself. Like a god, they become omniscient and omnipotent" (Olsen 1992: 76).

At the end of the novel then, utopian social criticism is to be initiated not by "virtue of human efforts" but rather through the cybernetic monster, the inhuman, that has been created in a Frankenstein-like manner by Marie-France Tessier in her search for human immortality (cf. ibid.). Taken by itself then, the novel allows for this reading of utopian potential in the dystopian world. It is only with reading on into the second novel of the trilogy (*Count Zero* 1986) that we discover how Gibson undermines this potential and shatters his godlike AI creation, dissolving the perfect state of unity between logic (Wintermute) and emotion (Neuromancer).

3. Post-Cyberpunk

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is without doubt the key text for cyberpunk literature and represents "the furthest horizon of cyberpunk" (351) in the 1980s, as Suvin put it. But as with many other subcultural phenomena, cyberpunk after *Neuromancer* soon developed beyond its original confines. The genre became a cultural formation and was commodified. Critics began to analyse it, finding precursors in literature (such as Vernor Vinge's "True Names" or Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962); see chapter 6 in this volume) as well as film (where Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1981) became infamous for visualising Gibson's sprawl so closely that the author is rumoured to have fled the theatre; cf. Bould 2005: 225; see chapter 7). Cyberpunk elements cropped up in films such as Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* (1987) and *Total Recall* (1990), in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985), Steven Lisberger's *Tron* (1982), David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) and Katsuhiro Ohtomo's *Akira* (1988). At the same time, TV had its own version of cyberpunk with the short-lived series *Max Headroom* (1987-88), while music groups such as Sonic Youth extended the concept further away from narrative media.

With the popularity of the genre, as Pawel Frelik argues, came a split into "a hell of definitions" (2012: n.pag.) in which the term was re-used and re-appropriated to fit a massive number of texts and styles. On the one hand, Frelik names generic spin-offs such as steampunk, which takes cyberpunk attitudes into the Victorian age times or similar times of steam engines and mechanics instead of computers and electronics (examples include Gibson's and Sterling's 1990 cooperation *The Difference Engine* and Paul Di Filippo's *The Steampunk Trilogy* from 1995) or biopunk, which McHale discusses as the biological equivalent of the cybernetic in cyberpunk, replacing genetic transmutation for cyborg appropriation (examples are Greg Bear's 1985 novel *Blood Music* and Sterling's own *Schismatrix* from 1986).

On the other hand, Frelik also mentions terms like "post-cyberpunk" and "feminist cyberpunk" (2012: n.pag.), which have been argued to represent a "second-generation" (Levy 2009: 160) of authors and to which one could also add Butler's term of "cyberpunk-flavoured" (2000: 17) novels. All of these describe a renegotiation of cyberpunk under new approaches, reaching beyond the confines of the original Movement and their aesthetic and political agenda. Feminist cyberpunk, especially represented in Cadigan's work but also (at least in parts) applicable to Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) or Laura Mixon's *Glass Houses* (1992), specifically addresses cyberpunk's neglect of emancipatory and gender issues. Post-cyberpunk or cyberpunk-flavoured narratives take on the heritage of cyberpunk, assimilating it to new and ever-changing realities of the developing 1990s and 2000s, as well as opening up the genre's confines and crossing over into other genres and subgenres of sf, including space opera or 'humanist' sf. The most prominent examples of this second-generation (or post-) cyberpunk are Neal Stephenson, whose *Snow Crash* (1992) is probably the second-best known cyberpunk novel after *Neuromancer*, and Noon, who shifted cyberpunk to-

wards a British perspective and a gritty biological virtual reality in *Vurt* (1993). Even in the 2000s new cyberpunk is being written by new British hard-sf authors such as Richard Morgan and Paul McAuley, who display a great affinity for cyberpunk styles but take the genre beyond its limitations of punk aesthetics or late-capitalist dystopian visions. Cyberpunk (in the sense of Movement literature), as well as the 1980s socio-economic realities that fuelled it, may have faded out of our view, but as Vint notes in her “Afterword” to the most recent essay collection on the genre, *Beyond Cyberpunk*, this fading of the specific literary form should not be equated with “a fading from relevance as a literature best suited to help us understand life in information-dominated technoculture” (2010: 230).

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