

The Postmodern Punk Show: The Simulacral Paradigm in the Cyberpunk Narrative of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*

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The literary phenomenon of cyberpunk narrative has emerged in the American literary scene during the early 1980s. A group of young writers has initiated this type of writing within the scope of the marginalised literary genre of Science Fiction. Those writers were preoccupied “with the impact of technology on the present no less than on the future” (Cavallaro 2000, 5). Cyberpunk has its own innovative character that goes beyond the rigid tendencies of Science Fiction by blurring the dualistic parameters of extrapolation/ speculation, hard/ soft, utopia/ dystopia, and high literature/ consumer literature. The reciprocal tensions inherent in the cyberpunk narrative with its simulacral postmodern elements constitute the setting for the critical analyses of Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) as a representative cyberpunk text. Thus, it is appropriate to postulate that this heterogeneity or plurivocity designates the intrinsic postmodern nature of the cyberpunk narrative. In addition to having assimilated stylistic traits and narrative elements from the high literature of the 1960s and 1970s, cyberpunk reproduces the sense of deconstruction, decentralisation, contamination, and the consequent rejection or weakening of strong ideological structures, which pervades postmodern culture. This paper mainly hypothesises that the cyberpunk narrative represents a technological counterculture of a cybernetic punk in a dystopian rhizomatic society taking shape in contemporary reality.

Based on these hypotheses, the paper posits three major questions that it endeavours to answer: (1) what is the cyberpunk narrative? (2) How does it intersect with the postmodern simulacral paradigm? (3) Drawing on Baudrillard, how does the simulacral paradigm manifest itself in Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984)? The paper, through critical analysis and scrutiny, expounds how the cyberpunk narrative in Gibson's text depicts cyberspace and counterculture at work to destabilise the boundaries between reality and imagination. In so doing, the paper reflects on concepts closely pertinent to the

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Cairo Studies in English – 2019(2): <https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/>

critical discussion of both cyberpunk and postmodern narratives such as extrapolation, speculation, simulacra, and rhizome.

The paper is structured along two main sections that respond to the major questions of the study. The first section establishes the relationship between the cyberpunk narrative and two modes of science fiction. It shows how the cyberpunk narrative blurs the boundaries of these two modes and moves beyond them to mould a postmodern wave of science fiction. The second section provides a thorough analysis of the postmodern paradigm of the simulacra as conceived by Baudrillard and its manifestation in Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984).

Two Modes of Science Fiction

Cyberpunk emerges as a postmodern science fiction subgenre that oscillates between the two major tendencies framing the general umbrella of Science Fiction: *extrapolation* and *speculation*. Etymologically, “extrapolation” reflects the mathematical process through which the values of an independent variable are extended beyond those observed ones. Extrapolative Science Fiction, thus, depends on a linear and consequential interweaving of the elements that characterise the sphere of empirical reality. It depicts “linear narratives, heroes solving problems or countering threats in a space-opera or a technological adventure idiom” (Roberts 2006, 195). The worlds proposed by this type are relatively close to the author in space and time. They tend to represent a future development of contemporary science, technology, society and culture. The authors of this type are mainly preoccupied with the adventurous dimension of the narrative. Such a narrative presents itself as the place that envisions utopian instances threatened by an impending catastrophe encountered and overcome by the hero. Hence, authors of this narrative form “proceed by extrapolation, creating a fictional *novum* by logical projection or extension from existing actualities” (Malmgren 1991, 12). It means that this positivist narrative features an uncritical optimism about the future developments of human civilisations. In such a narrative, the authors uncritically take scientific knowledge for granted without violating its temporal-spatial continuum. Based on this scientific reasoning, they seek to “imagine and articulate the resultant situation or conditions” (Malmgren 1991, 12). The authors of this type favour the sphere of physical sciences and, hence, this narrative takes the name of “Hard SF” (Roberts 2006, 3).

Speculative Science Fiction, in contradistinction, “envisions a future based on the extrapolation of the social, rather than the physical, sciences” (Hubble

2013, xiii). Etymologically, speculation is “an intuitive, an almost visionary, mode of apprehension” (Frankfort 1946, 3) that tends to explore the future in an illogical and non-linear way. It presupposes significant leaps of creative imagination that oppose extrapolative SF premises. It implies a profound imaginative gap between empirical reality and literary creation. The fictitious worlds arising from this type inevitably have very profound differences with respect to the contingent reality. In such a narrative, readers interact with the text constantly putting into play the paradigmatic structures through comparing and contrasting actual worlds with fantastical ones. In other words, the speculative text probes into contemporary society, highlighting its limits and revealing its problematic relativity. It narrates distant worlds in space or time, inhabited by very imaginary beings possessing incredible technologies or indecipherable mental and cultural structures. These narrative texts present a self-sufficient nature and require the narrator to explain the models that preside over the physical structure of the worlds or the logic of the behaviour of the characters. In this type, settings constitute the ideal space within which events that have a strongly allegorical relationship with daily life are represented. These events constitute moments of reflection on the material, ethical and moral consequences of the technological and socio-cultural development of human civilisations. Therefore, this type of narrative, by virtue of its speculative nature, is attentive to the “more ‘creative’ or ‘freer’ mental operations, in that the writer who chooses to speculate is cut loose from the current state of affairs” (Malmgren 1991, 12-13). In principle, such a speculative narrative coincides with the so-called “Soft SF” because it is significantly influenced by the human sciences, known as ‘soft’ sciences such as sociology and psychology (Higgins and Duncan 2013, 129). It tends to explore the imaginative realms of human thought.

The 1960s and 1970s have witnessed the emergence of a “New Wave” of Science Fiction characterised by its reaction against the conventions of traditional Science Fiction. The affiliated writers of this wave have produced “avant-garde, radical or fractured Science Fiction” (Roberts 2006, 231). Thus, the “New Wave” is characterised by a clear co-option into “high” literature as “a mode that is necessarily post-modern in its most unself-reflexive state” (Bényei 2006, 52). This explains the ambiguity with which authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, William Burroughs Jr. and Robert Anton Wilson are classified. These authors tend to reject linear narrative through non-referential metafictional strategies that subvert the authorial authority and give leeway to readers to take part in the textual construction.

Around the beginning of the 1980s, the narrative themes of the New Wave SF seemed to have exhausted their originality and cyberpunk made its appearance. As Bruce Sterling states, cyberpunk emerged when a group of young writers, including Gibson, Rucker, Shiner, Shirley, and Sterling, “found a friendly unity in their common outlook, common themes, even in certain oddly common symbols, which seemed to crop up in their work with a life of their own” (Sterling 1986, ix). Those writers shared the same technological imagination and a common interest in socio-cultural issues. At that time, the term “cyberpunk” had not emerged yet and the anonymous term “movement” was in vogue. In 1983, Bruce Bethke entitled his short story with the term that became the label for the group with the publication of Sterling’s *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1986). The cyberpunk narrative is characterised by the adoption of elaborate prose and a formal approach that is anything but naïve. It represents “a new kind of integration” where “high” literature and popular culture overlap (Sterling 1986, xi).

The two parts of the word “cyber-punk” reflect the postmodern nature of this subgenre with its hybrid fusion of opposing elements. Although the cyberpunk narrative seems to restore the synthetic projection of the world, it extrapolates and represents a verisimilar portion of the contemporary world in the narrative dimension. There are many recurrent themes in the cyberpunk narrative. It represents a hyper-technological cybernetic society, dominated by an extreme form of capitalism that already began to advance towards its own decline. The icons and the most conspicuous signs that dominate the cyberpunk novels are the enlarged and often sinisterly distorted projections of high-tech products. It is a narrative essentially made of extremisms such as ostentatious references to processors, interfacing systems, high-tech artificial materials, sophisticated weapons, genetic manipulation products, converted foods, synthetic drugs, and biomechanical entities. In this cyberpunk world, there is no direct reference to everyday human reality. In such a world, the technological dimension is the only one possible. In the cyberpunk narrative, the extrapolative and the speculative are intersected. Extrapolative representation of the narrative uses a precise descriptive language as accurate as hyperrealism. On the other hand, speculative representation relies on an expressionist depiction of a society governed by an extreme liberalism and fragmented into small communities in conflict with each other. In this context, the exercise of power – or the ability to challenge it – depends on the possession of technology and the possibility of accessing information and manipulating it. In the collective imagination, Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) and Sterling’s *Mirrorshades* (1986) mark a significant

stage in the development of the cyberpunk movement. Sterling's anthology became a sort of manifesto of the group's aesthetics. The cyberpunk narrative continues its evolution to maintain an important symbiotic relationship with the sociological and cultural criticism. It becomes more attentive to the phenomena linked to the diffusion of new technologies that become more oppressive and the tools for controlling and surveilling human society. The human characters in such a narrative are low-life punks who usually are at war with pervasive unknown powers. In brief, cyberpunk comes to represent, in John Christie's words, "the possibilities of extending the technological sublime as the trope to figure out the political-aesthetic dimensions and possibilities of the infotech material formation" (Tabbi 1996, 213). It is a tendency within popular culture to embrace the advent of new technologically perfected modes of perception. The term "cyberpunk" itself is very emblematic and already reveals some fundamental features of the relatively complex system of texts to which it gives its name. The label juxtaposes high technology (cybernetics) and punk attitudes (Anglo-American counterculture).

Cyberpunk overlaps with the oxymoronic representation/projection of the postmodern western world where all elements are abundantly disseminated in the narrative produced by "mirrorshades" (Sterling 1986). Moreover, cyberpunk constitutes the juxtaposition of two elements: the technological and the postmodern. The anxiety of the technologically produced postmodern situation creates a sense of hybridity between the two elements. Whereas the technological element has its hegemonic economic-productive system, the postmodern is characterised by its antagonistic subject, the outsider. By means of purely tactical acts such as hacking and phreaking, the postmodern outsider presents itself as an individual rebel-hero who parasitically sneaks through the web of the dominant structure to challenge it. Flanagan and Booth (2002) point out that "cyberpunk is particularly interested in the relationships among cultural binaries such as nature/science, body/mind, human/machine, female/male, and, particularly, real /unreal" (2002, 8).

According to Farnell, Gibson's cyberpunk narrative constitutes "the sublime terror of the postmodern" and induces "the simultaneous apprehension of ecstasy and dread" (1998, 475). This sense of "postmodern sublime" differs from that of "Romantic sublime". Whereas the latter depends on nature as reference, the former relies on technology "to evoke the sublime – the mixed dread and ecstasy in the perceiving self-consciousness as it confronts the unrepresentable yet overwhelming and undeniable felt presence of an ineffable outer reality" (Mascaro 1999, 507). In other words, the cyberpunk narrative

elicits a sense of the postmodern sublime that simultaneously juxtaposes fear of and attraction to technology. Gibson's *Neuromancer* is a cyberpunk novel *par excellence* in reflecting this postmodern sublime with its hybrid continuum of dread and ecstasy. The title of the novel explicitly alludes to a neo-Romanticism where the concept of the sublime was one of the characterising tenets of historical Romanticism. The postmodern ambivalent "dread/ecstasy" formula is at work in the cyberpunk narrative. Dread is one of the consequences arising from the use of high technology, and the pervasive diffusion of telematic networks that characterise late-capitalism. Meanwhile, ecstasy emerges from the potentially positive developments of bioengineering and the opportunities for the expansion of knowledge or human intellectual faculties.

The cyberpunk narrative has developed well beyond the work of canonical authors such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker or Pat Cadigan. In the field of popular culture, it has transcended the boundaries of fiction. It has been applied to "everything from kids with modems who committed computer crimes to people that wear black, listen to tech-pop, read *Mondo 2000*, and drink smart drinks" (Watkins and Marenka 1994, 146). Newspapers and magazines of great distribution (like *People* and *Wall Street Journal*) defined "cyberpunks" as the kids who, for fun, broke the security systems of the telematic networks, decrypted credit card codes, defrauded the telephone companies, illegally copied software, penetrated in the databases of government agencies or that simply flaunted techno-fetishist behaviour. The cyberpunk narrative combines technology and fetishism in a postmodern hybrid form that evokes two contrasting attitudes: technophilia and technophobia. In this respect, Fernbach states "As a genre, cyberpunk celebrates techno-fetishism: those bodies not 'jacked in' or in some other way wired are incomplete. Technology is the fetish of cyberpunk" (2000, 245). This techno-fetishism creates a contact zone or a hybrid interface between man and machine. Such a contact zone dismantles the barriers and crosses the boundaries between cybernetics and humanity.

By its postmodern ambivalent nature, the cyberpunk narrative imagery integrates technology and counterculture in the name of garage and underground aesthetics. According to Sterling (1986), the ambivalent formation of cyberpunk label constitutes an "unholy alliance" between "the technical world and the world of organised dissent – the underground world of pop culture, visionary fluidity, and street-level anarchy" (xii). Being countercultural, the cyberpunk narrative proposes itself as an intentional opposition to "mainstream norms and values"; it is "consciously challenging dominant paradigms of body aesthetics,

economics of cultural production, and sexuality” (Lingel 2017, 6). Therefore, the subcultural narrative of cyberpunk is antagonistic to the dominant economic and productive system, adopting its digital technologies for processing and transmitting information to oppose cultural homogeneity and totalisation. In essence, the countercultural narrative of cyberpunk constitutes a mutated variant of the radical and alternative movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Being aware of the decisive role played by the diffusion and control of knowledge, it acts in response to the dystopian projections of reality endeavouring for the free propagation of information. This response for postmodernity is consciously confrontational. Human subjectivity and narrative are split up into fragments because of the commodification of subjectivity through technology. It is confrontational as it speaks of countercultural attitudes.

The Simulacral Paradigm in *Neuromancer*

The cyberpunk narrative and its ambivalent nature comprise forms of postmodern collage through which high and low cultures are blended in a way that “makes possible the representation of decentring, fragmentation and dissolution in the postmodern aesthetic” (Novotny 1997, 113). In such a postmodern collage, reality and appearance are blurred in a way that lends itself into simulacra. Jameson defines the simulacrum as “the identical copy for which no original has ever existed” (1991, 18). This image or copy without an original is located in a cultural space tending to subvert any notion of originality and subjectivity. As such, the concept appears to be at least insignificant or even charged with a passive impression. In a society that flaunts and celebrates the individual, even in a mystifying manner, the loss of subjectivity can mean death. However, to understand the positive value that the idea of simulacrum can convey, it is useful to follow the historical reconstruction of its development that Baudrillard (1993) proposes. Such a development is consistent with a gradual abandonment of the mythical location of the origin but not, paradoxically, with a parallel loss of the potential of the simulated dimension on the sphere of empirical reality. Baudrillard proposes three forms of simulacra. The primary form of simulacrum, according to Baudrillard, manifests itself in the practice of the counterfeit. It presents itself as the material reproduction of a symbolic object whose copy fraudulently assumes the value associated with the original. At this phase, the direct and transparent relationship between signifier and signified is still very strong. However, the sense of “obliged” relationship no longer exists; but rather, it is replaced with an “emancipated sign that all classes will partake equally of” (1983, 85). In the counterfeit world, “all signs

were governed by the unitary principle of natural law” (Koch and Elmore 2006, 559). Yet, the very appearance of imitation already implies the decline in value of use for the benefit of exchange value. According to Baudrillard, the counterfeit represents “the new ambitions of Renaissance man . . . to exorcise the natural substance of a thing in order to substitute a synthetic one” (1983, 87-88). It is based on the analogy between the real and the symbolic.

In the second order of simulacrum, which manifests itself fully with industrialisation, the industrially reproduced objects cease to have a relationship of subordination with an original model; expression of a symbolic value. While the counterfeit is hiding its origin, the industrially replicated product has no longer a clearly identifiable original. In other words, there is a shift from “analogy” to “equivalence” where “[the] machine is man’s equivalent and annexes him to itself in the unity of its operational process” (Baudrillard 1983, 93). Consequently, the serial (re)production does not seek to flaunt its status as a social emblem that has led to counterfeiting. Instead, it expresses a substantial “equivalence” among the items reproduced. The “analogy” of the original of the first-order simulacra and the “equivalence” of serial (re)production that dominates the second are flanked by the “code” of the modulated production of simulation. This third form of simulacrum emerges with the development of electronic technologies. It specialises in the processing and dissemination of information, thus leading to the creation of the communication industry or mass dissemination. Such a type of modulated economy characterises postmodernity. With its “metaphysics of the code,” there are no “quantitative equivalences, but distinctive oppositions”, [no] longer the law of capital, but the structural law of value” (Baudrillard 1983, 103, 101). The operational simulation materialises its full potential with the diffusion of digital technologies. Digital technologies allow a dissemination of the diffusion systems – from the strictly one-way flow of signs as in television to computers and telematics, which presuppose free interaction between broadcasters. Furthermore, they facilitate constructing fictitious but sensitive entities that, at least in part, they want to replace structures and objects in the real world. Thus, the simulacrum, in its purest sense, is an “artificial construction devoid of an original” or an “image without identity” (Perniola 2001, 169-70). This sense of simulacra results in almost total reduction of value in a partial derealisation of the world. From a postmodernist point of view, the simulacral paradigm implies a postmodern tendency of blurring the boundaries “between appearance and reality in favour of a third dimension that transcends them” (Perniola 2001, 123). It emerges as the transcendent sphere that includes both reality and imagination. It does not

constitute, according to this view, a degeneration of the real, but the possibility of conferring real value to the imaginary through “a liquidation of all referentials” (Baudrillard 1994, 2).

The structures of simulacra have attracted the interest of the writers of the cyberpunk narrative with its countercultural attitudes. Through simulacra, those writers find a virtual space to map out their countercultural tactics and to exaggerate the most subversive and innovative forms through which progress is manifested. From this perspective, the cyberpunk narrative focuses particularly on everything that pertains to the paradigm of the simulacrum, without ever offering an exaltation. On the contrary, it often emphasises the most alarming characteristics, showing how the pure idea, the imaginary, and the de-realised can actually intersect with the world, but not necessarily with the most desirable of worlds. The most striking example of this is the representation of the Gibsonian cyberspace of *Neuromancer* (1984), a hybrid world of dystopian and utopian images, extrapolated from what had been the development of information technology and telematic technology of the early 1980s.

Published in 1984, *Neuromancer* is undoubtedly the cyberpunk text *par excellence*. It has presented in an accomplished and mature form a large part of those stylistic and thematic elements that characterise the genre. The main protagonist of the novel is Henry Case. Case was once a very skilled console cowboy under the control of big multinational companies of informatics. Now, he is incapable of using the *cyberdeck* because of mycotoxin injection that damaged his nervous system. He finds himself forced to survive by hacks – software and drug trafficking – in the slums of Night City, a suburb with a special status of Tokyo, described as “a deranged experiment in social Darwinism” (Gibson 1984, 14). Now demoted to mere survival and condemned to succumb to the ruthless law of the metropolitan jungle, Case is unexpectedly recruited by a mysterious organisation. This organisation is planning to use Case’s impaired computer interaction skills. It tapped him to join the female cyborg Molly, a young expert in combat techniques with retractable digital blades, an optimised nervous system and semi-artificial visual apparatus. Exposed to advanced medical treatment, Case is again able to use computers; but, due to a sort of biological time bomb implanted in his body, he finds himself forced to complete his mission in order to survive. His task will be to provide telematic and IT support to Molly during a complex and murky spy operation that will gradually turn out to be a real conspiracy organised by an artificial intelligence in an attempt to conquer full operational autonomy. Case and his adventure companion are sent to an orbiting station, the residence of the Tessier-

Ashpool, an eccentric family that owns one of the most powerful multinational companies in the world. By using a “flip-flop switch,” (Gibson 1984, 70) given to him by the Finn, Case can ride along into Molly’s nervous system. This hardware, once plugged into Case’s computer, can allow him to access Molly’s *simstim* (simulated stimulation) rig and broadcast her senses to him. This hardware is a sort of digital duplication of the physical world. Case will have to facilitate the entry of the cyborg Molly into the Tessier-Ashpool villa and will guide her to the terminal that awaits the voice input of a passcode through which the artificial intelligence system can start the self-powering process. This is a brief frame of the story, within which the representation of the matrix or cyberspace dominates.

In *Neuromancer*, Gibson introduces the term of the “matrix” or “cyberspace” as a narrative strategy that represents the “cognitive mapping” of the “postmodern hyperspace” (Jameson 1991, 44). The term is a signifier that indicates the dimension of the very fragile boundaries within which human interactions mediated by the digital code take place. In a broader sense, Berardi defines cyberspace as “the global universe of the infinite possible relations of a rhizomatic system” (2009, 69-70). It is “a neuro-telematic rhizome, therefore a non-hierarchical and non-linear network connecting human minds and electronic devices” (2009, 70). Furthermore, Hayles defines cyberspace as “the nonmaterial space of computer simulation” that “defines a regime of representation within which pattern is the essential reality, presence an optical illusion” (1999, 36). This definition underlines how the peculiar paradigm of Gibson’s cyberspace is that of derealisation, that is, of the simulacrum that manifests itself in all its power leading to a significant qualitative change of the lived experience. Regardless of its various interpretations, the cyberspace in Gibson's cyberpunk narrative corresponds to a precise iconic representation, whose objective correlative is “the three-dimensional landscape” generated by the codes of virtual reality (Hayles 1999, 38). This is an obvious example of how a narrative simulacrum generates an objective simulacrum. Gibson conceives the matrix as the three-dimensional graphic representation of a symbolic and generally infinite space within which constellations of signs that take the form of geometric structures are dislocated. The matrix is a map that is the subject and product of the instantaneous interaction between responsive players, both human and humanoid entities. It is not a static space, therefore, but a dynamic one and constitutes a sort of duplication of the objective universe. It is a real dimension “without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1983, 2). Thus, the hyperreal space is paradoxically described as a real place without

origin; it is the map (the replica) that precedes the territory (the original) in the “Precession of Simulacra” (1983, 2). Such a space of hyperreality comprises only simulations or copies that represent the real but with no referential quality. Thus, Baudrillard denies the existence of the real as “it is the map that engenders the territory ... *The desert of the real itself*” (1983, 2).

Gibson describes Case’s admission into cyberspace as the dimension within which the corruptible corporeality – which he often derisively refers to as “meat” – dissolves:

[I]n the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes 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. Please, he prayed, ...

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. (1984, 68-69)

A rhizomatic network of communication lines and nodes of databases constitute the basic structure of the cyberspace. Within this rhizome, the flow of digital signals passes and is processed. The perception of cyberspace does not occur by means of video-graphic screens, but through a direct neuronal connection of the human subject with the machine. The machine, in turn, sends electromagnetic impulses to the cerebral cortex to replace all the sensory stimuli coming from the material world. This results in a total immersion in the simulated space. This space responds directly to the interaction of the subject, ceaselessly reconfiguring his map (replica) and restoring tactile, visual, olfactory, gustatory and auditory sensations very similar to those of the real world.

Gibson provides a description of the matrix, which is presented succinctly indicating its origin, plausible in the eyes of the reader, in the sense that this actually coincides with the extra-narrative reality. The matrix is “[a] graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system”. It is “lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding” (1984, 67). Thus, the

representation of cyberspace appears as the paradigm of the simulacrum that slowly extends its dominion over material reality. It projects the real into the imaginary. The simulated stimuli through which the representation of cyberspace is generated in the mind of the subject are the result of the algorithmic processing of the data present in the network. Thus, the matrix is a sphere within which sentient entities instantly transform their thought into polymorphic action, overcoming many of the constraints that materiality entails. In other words, the matrix is the cyberspace within which disembodied entities cross the threshold from corporeality into hyperreality through their sensory field of experience. In Gibson's novel, *Wintermute* is the artificial intelligence that enigmatically interweaves the plot, within which the protagonist remains entangled – to reveal to Case and to the reader the most radical sense and consequences of a progress which has begun with the very birth of human civilisation: “You’re always building models. Stone circles. Cathedrals. Pipe organs. Adding machines. I got no idea why I’m here now, you know that? But if the run goes off tonight, you’ll have finally managed the real thing” (Gibson 1984, 204).

It is obvious that the concept of simulacrum is not the exclusive product of post-modernity. However, it can constitute a value and assume an effective potential only through the imposition of new epistemic paradigms and through the spreading of recent technological means capable of achieving them: firstly, the computational machine, and then the interaction, visualisation and sound reproduction devices. The words of *Wintermute* trace an evolutionary path. The construction of reality emerges from models or structures increasingly distant from an origin. This means that it emerges from the relatively simpler artefacts with working function and culminates in the computational machine and in the development of sinisterly self-aware and omnipotent algorithmic entities. The ultimate achievement of the power of the simulacrum is outlined in the imaginary dimension, with the establishment of an entirely autonomous, immortal AI such as *Wintermute*. Gibson conceived this superhuman entity as the sum of the intelligences and knowledge present in the network: “the sum total of the works, the whole show” (1984, 316). This is an obvious dystopic representation of the simulacrum, as evidenced by its association with the biomechanical and dehumanising image of the insect. The Tessier-Ashpool family/ corporation villa of *Straylight* is presented as a “parasitic structure”, a complex modelled on the structure of the hive (1984, 267). In turn, *Wintermute* defines the hive as “[t]he closest thing to what Tessier-Ashpool would like to be. The human equivalent” (1984, 204). This is probably the most terrifying nightmare evoked by the narrative cyberpunk.

The field of the so-called artificial intelligence provides a formula that constitutes the horrific projection of a rather rough mystification begun with the publication of Norbert Wiener's book *Cybernetics* (1984). In this book, Wiener establishes an arbitrary and extremely reductive association between humans and machines, identifying a common operating mode in the metaphorical construct of the "feedback loop". This loop establishes the behavioural interaction between humans and autonomous self-regulating machines to provide prompt information on the results of the human controller's action. This functional paradigm "implies that the boundaries of the autonomous subject are up for grabs, since feedback loops can flow not only within the subject but also between the subject and the environment" (Hayles 1999, 2). Thus, this paradigm "has been associated with the deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject" (2). Through the cybernetic model, Science Fiction offers grotesque representations of the human nervous system and mental processes. It has long developed this concept producing dystopian narratives. The cyberpunk narrative, in particular, questions the idea of the cyber brain, through which the biological brain is imagined. In *Neuromancer*, Wintermute itself discredits this mystification, making Case understand that "Minds are not read. See, you've still got the paradigms print gave you, and you're barely print literate. I can access your memory, but that is not the same as your mind" (1984, 204). Overcoming the analogical relationship between human memory and two-dimensional and sequential codification linked to script, the cyberspace entity states that humans use the "holographic paradigm" that "is the closest thing you've worked out to a representation of human memory ... But you've never done anything about it. People, I mean. ... Maybe if you had, I wouldn't be happening" (1984, 203).

The disturbing presence of Artificial Intelligence manifests itself primarily as Finn/Wintermute, a conscious entity that communicates with Case. Its resemblance to a benign interface that represents the powerful multinational Tessier-Ashpool is only confusing: "You're already aware of the other AI in Tessier-Ashpool's link-up, aren't you? Rio. I, insofar as I have an 'I' – this gets rather metaphysical, you see -I am the one who arranges things for Armitage" (Gibson 1984, 145). In *Neuromancer*, Turing Registry, the cyberspace police, is tracking Case. A cyberspace police agent called Michèle draws the attention to the true nature of the digital entity after discovering Case's involvement in a plan to make Wintermute autonomous. In her own words, this entity is assimilated to a sort of almighty and dangerous demon for humanity that, once summoned, could escape any possibility of control: "[Y]ou have no care for your species. For thousands of years men dreamed of pacts with demons ... What would your

price be, for aiding this thing to free itself and grow?” (1984, 193). This implies that the cyberpunk narrative triggers the dystopian future of humanity in a simulated world controlled by autonomous AIs.

Case, unavoidably, has been transformed by the hypertrophy of information messages disseminated in cyberspace into a sort of digital detective. Following the narrative development through his moves, the reader will discover that the significant construct, known as Wintermute, represents the attempt to extend the existence of the Tessier-Ashpool control. This AI entity represents only a portion of the entire simulacrum, which Case is attempting to reunite its two fragments. Marie-France, 3Jane’s mother, operated these two AI models in an attempt to offer an eternal existence to the Tessier-Ashpool family. Meanwhile, she attempts to extend the political-economic power of the family in an unlimited way. This is at the expense of a total loss of individuality and of the material dimension: “She commissioned the construction of our artificial intelligences ... Our conscious decisions, I should say. Tessier Ashpool would be immortal, a hive, each of us units of a larger entity” (Gibson 1984, 271). Moreover, the historical memory and almost the entire existence of the powerful family lend themselves to the paradigm of the simulacrum. The family, frozen in a sort of eternal present, in turn, is enclosed in a private orbiting station that recalls the medieval fortress. The only living organism that lives in the isolated virtual/material labyrinth of Villa Straylight is 3Jane, who grew up in the company of ubiquitous de-realised entities that “represent the fruition of certain capacities my mother ordered designed into the original software” (Gibson 1984, 272).

The comparison between *Neuromancer* and the ROM construct of McCoy Pauley (Dixie/Flatline) is significant. *Neuromancer* is the digital construct that is complementary to Wintermute. Dixie/Flatline is the innocuous entity that assists Case in his cyberspace mission. *Neuromancer* proves to be an immense database of personal memories. It is able to reconfigure itself in response to events and to act independently. Dixie/Flatline is the electronic construct housed in a powerful Sense/Net library. It contains the digital ‘ghost’ of McCoy, a deceased friend and colleague of Case for years. It is described as a static construct, “a construct, just a buncha ROM, so he always does what I expect him to” (1984, 245). In contrast, *Neuromancer*, the counterpart of Wintermute, is a dynamic construct capable of reorganising itself as much as a biological organism, it is “something like a giant ROM construct, for recording personality, only it’s full RAM. The constructs think they are there, like it’s real, but it just goes on forever” (1984, 315). In other words, Wintermute is described as “hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the world outside”. It has both

personality and immortality: “Marie-France must have built something into Wintermute, the compulsion that had driven the thing to free itself, to unite with Neuromancer” (1984, 315).

The project of the union between the two entities turns out to be a Faustian nightmare transferred into the simulacrum. This union can be achieved through the power of the digital code. However, the final pages of the novel reveal that there is an inconceivable reality hidden behind this project. It is a dystopia *par excellence*. Case incurred into the heart of the system in a sabotage operation that develops on the dual plane of physical reality and cyberspace. His incursion does not end with the dissolution of Wintermute and Neuromancer. On the contrary, the union of the two digital constructs produces a superhuman being similar in an alarming way to a god. At the end of the novel, this being manifests itself facing the physical world from the paradigm of the simulacrum and prefiguring the existence of other similar subjects disseminated in the Universe. Thus, such a manifestation suggests that the transition to the virtual dimension is incorporated into the evolutionary parable of any civilisation: “I’m the sum total of the works, the whole show” (1984, 315).

Gibson’s cyberpunk representation of cyberspace ultimately constitutes an extrapolative narrative. According to Sterling, cyberpunk writers are willing “to take an idea and unflinchingly push it past the limits” (1986, xiv). They use the “clinical objectivity” strategy that “is a coldly objective analysis, a technique borrowed from science, then put to literary use for classically punk shock value” (1986, xiv). Moreover, the cyberpunk narrative shows the potential that would “carry extrapolation into the fabric of daily life” (1986, xiv). Furthermore, *Neuromancer* presents positive aspects related to the use of information technology under development. This can turn out to be new ways of effective intercommunicative forms between individuals and groups in the cultural and social growth. Otherwise, the cyberpunk narrative offers, through the active and widespread use of cyberspace, a form of resistance to the totalitarian power systems as claimed by the cyberpunk counterculture.

The interaction of the human subject with the virtual world takes place through the matrix or through the projection of its electronic spectrum. However, the remote control over what happens in the material world occurs through the Sim-Stim, a Simulated Stimulation device. This device has a two-fold function. It exploits the technology of neuronal interfacing that reflects a disturbing mirage of the future. Meanwhile, it constitutes the weakened and degenerate paradigm of the simulacrum. While cyberspace is a network open to the communicative interaction of multiple subjects, the Sim-Stim, in *Neuromancer*, is only a

sophisticated device capable of establishing a pan-sensory connection with the mind of another individual, who transmits strictly through a channel the complete range of his physical sensations, allowing anyone to enter his body as a spectator. The other side of the Sim-Stim is the “cut-out chip” (1984, 177), a device that totally inhibits the activity of self-awareness, leaving the subject at the mercy of others’ will. Therefore, the use of the Sim-Stim represents the self-exit and the passive entry into the arena of another entity. In turn, the “cut-out chip” represents the exit from itself and the entrance into the void that the loss of will and memory generate. Molly, the former “meat puppet”, describes the function of the disturbing device, used by human subjects who prostitute themselves by indulging in the sadomasochistic desires of customers: “This costs a lot ... cause once they plant the cut-out chip, it seems like free money... House has software for whatever a customer wants to pay for” (1984, 177). Therefore, cyberspace is an idealised prototype of communication. Meanwhile, the Sim-stim is the latest version of the information diffusion technology. Such a dimension deprives humans of any agency and dissolves their individuality. Humans become mere spectators of the show in a way that suggests that human life is reduced to a commodity.

Conclusion

Summing up, the poetics and the politics of the postmodern cyberpunk narrative provide a tragic and apocalyptic vision of postmodern culture and society. Meanwhile, the cyberpunk counterculture is situationist in perspective. It reflects the desire to act exactly in that material and cultural space where the order that it intends to subvert is established. In achieving this purpose, it exploits the same technological structures and operating practices of this space. Therefore, Cyberpunk writers make use of the postmodern simulacral paradigm as a strategy that offers an antagonistic and tactical action to the project of an increasingly simulated society. Through the cyberpunk narrative, the simulacral paradigm offers an abnormal representation of the ongoing processes and proposes a catchy imaging of the technological counterculture that is the cybernetic punk. Therefore, postmodern countercultural cyberpunk narrative sees in the simulacral paradigm an instrument potentially capable of transforming strongly hierarchised mass society into non-hierarchical rhizomatic society. A rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari argue, is characterised by its “multiple entryways” (1987, 13). This means that a rhizome has a labyrinthine structure that is not limited to a specific physical space. It is continuously growing and producing new connections, new spaces, and new

worlds with no fixed point of reference. Roger (2013) describes this “rhizomatic society” of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as a society “which facilitates the ceaseless opening up of connections with different semiotic chains” (15). Moreover, the cyberpunk narrative makes use of simulations in producing commodities and commodified or even elitist informational technology. In such a narrative, hyperreality and simulacra displaces reality and truth. Its aim is not to diffuse and consume knowledge but to communicate knowledge as a countercultural act. In this regard, the purely commercial function of simulacra that the Internet is increasingly assuming does not open certain utopian horizons. On the contrary, the narrative represents a dystopian human world in which Neuromancer becomes the ruling deity that constructs the simulacra of the human reality.

Gibson’s *Neuromancer* is an accurate representation of the postmodern simulacral paradigm with its sublime landscape in which humans are signifiers without signifieds controlled and even superseded by cybernetic machines and gigantic AIs. By the virtue of simulations, humans are deprived of any sense of originality, identity, power, memory, or history. In brief, the cyberpunk virtual world or cyberspace of Neuromancers is an epitome of the postmodern idea of the death of the human subject. *Neuromancer*, thus, is a cyberpunk text that envisions the postmodern paradigm of simulacra with its allegorical representation of virtual space and humanity at the brink of death and annihilation.

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