

Cyborg Agency in the Digital Age: On William Gibson's *Neuromancer* by Shigeru Suzuki

I. Introduction

William Gibson's first novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), is one of the contemporary classics that deal with our postmodern conditions and phenomena in the highly-advanced nations such as late-capitalism, globalization, cyborg and flesh bodies, posthuman, electronic media, and information technologies. In the history of cyberculture, the name of William Gibson is inscribed as the person who coined the word, "cyberspace," which many scholars and critics point out often as the beginning of the extensive discussion on cyberspace.¹ However, interestingly enough, when Gibson wrote *Neuromancer* with its innovative descriptions of cyberspace in the early 1980s, he was writing with a manual typewriter (not a computer), and it was far before the pervasion of the Internet and even before the invention of World Wide Web (WWW) by which we became promptly familiar with the idea of cyberspace. Cyberspace, in our reality, is a virtual space (without actual physical space), a new dimension, where a number of different activities and factors are occurring and generating such as investments, interests, desires, powers, surveillances, creative activities, and illegal activities. In cyberspace, our social, economical, and cul-

¹ Cyberspace is hard to define partly because the speed of technological inventions and developments causes the rapid transformation of cyberspace itself. In my discussion, I intend to signify the imaginary and virtual space where we associate when we use e-mail, BBS, and other activities on the Internet. On the definitions of cyberspace, see Michael Benedickt's *Cyberspace: First Steps*.

LORE 3.1 (2003)

tural practices intersect, negotiate, and conflict with each other so that cyberspace re-creates itself, self-generates and in much regard is a “work in progress.” It is true that Gibson’s description of “cyberspace” and our cyberspace have many differences, but there is a possibility of the emergence of a more Gibsonian “cyberspace,” in which human personality (or human consciousness) “jacks-in” into the Matrix and rides through the graphic representation of information.

However, Gibson’s interest is never in the prediction for the future of our society. In an interview², Gibson comments on the role of science fiction: “I don’t think science fiction has a lot of predictive capacity, but it’s an interesting tool for looking at the world you live in” (Olsen, 11).³ Thus, it is not so important that we have different kinds of cyberspace from the Gibsonian one; rather, we should see how his novel contextualizes and articulates the current human situation in a highly-technological society. His fiction provides many intriguing insights into how we regard humanity and human conditions; and, how we situate our own “self” in the age of information technology.

First, let us see how Gibson recalls how he conceived the idea of cyberspace:

“I was walking down Granville Street, Vancouver’s version of “The Strip,” and I looked into one of the video arcades. I could see in the physical intensity of their postures how rapt the kids inside were. It was like one of those closed systems out of a Pynchon novel: a feed back loop with photons coming off the screens into the kids’ eyes, neurons moving through their bodies, and electrons moving through the video game. These kids clearly *believed* in the space games projected.” (272, “An Interview with William Gibson” in *Storming the Reality Studio*)

The “feed-back loop” in the quotation is a concept that comes from cybernetics established by Norbert Wiener. As the title of his book, *Cybernetics; or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948) shows, cybernetics is a discipline of studying the communication between the organic and the inorganic. Wiener’s cybernetics also includes the study of any system that contains an information feedback loop. Although his study was innovative in the 1940s, our everyday life is now filled with many kinds of feedback loops. For example, watches, elevators,

² Martin MacNair, “Mainframe Voodoo.” *Montreal Mirror* (Montreal, QC: Montreal Mirror, 1989), p.23

³ Lance Olsen quotes Gibson’s this comments from above (notes 2) in his book, *William Gibson*.

credit card readers, bank databases, cars, traffic lights, flight controls, fax machines, TVs, VCRs, and computers. In the current digital age, we are living in and with electronic and computer technologies, which are becoming crucial to our own existence.⁴

II. Cyberpunk Fiction: Technology is Inside Us.

The transformation of social infrastructure and centralization on information technology also changes our human identity and subjectivity. Cyberpunk fiction in the 1980s succeeded in grasping this kind of social structural change. The term cyberpunk was popularized by Bruce Sterling, a science fiction writer, and cyberpunk fiction became fashionable and popular in practice and even to general readers in the 80s. In 1986, Bruce Sterling published the anthology of cyberpunk fiction entitled *Mirrorshades* (1986). In this book, Sterling collects several short stories by cyberpunk writers such as William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, Lewis Shiner, John Shirley, and Sterling himself. In the introduction of *Mirrorshades*, Sterling explains some characteristics of cyberpunk novels. Bruce Sterling summarizes: "For the cyberpunks, [. . .] technology is visceral; [. . .] it is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds." (xiii) As for the themes of cyberpunk fiction, Sterling enumerates the following ones:

"The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry --- techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self" (xiii).

Cyberpunk novels are the first series of novels that respond and contextualize this kind of shifts in technology, which signifies that cyberpunk fiction examines implicitly and/or explicitly examination on the contemporary human conditions with the rises of new technologies even though their setting are oftentimes in the future. Among others, as a 'guru' of cyberpunk writers, Gibson's works provide us a new perspective to think about our humanity, identity, and self in the age of information technology. Along with the pervasion of information technology in the 1990s, several academics and scholars started responding to cyberpunk novels with enthusiasm. To name a few for example, Larry McCaffery's *Storming the Reality Studio* (1991), Scot Bukatman's *Terminal Identity* (1993), Katherine Hayles's *How We*

⁴ In this regards, Y2K problem, which we were so concerned about just before the beginning of year 2000, exemplifies our society's exceeding dependence on the electronic and computer technology.

Became Posthuman? and Dani Cavallaro's *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture* (2000). Like these scholarly works, the successive academic interests from early 1990s have made William Gibson one of the 'serious' writers who are interested in the contemporary society and human conditions in it.

III. Cyborgs in Reality and in *Neuromancer*

As Sterling mentions in the introduction of *Mirrorshades*, Gibson's *Neuromancer* directly deals with the current human conditions in the age of information. The first sentence of *Neuromancer* signifies the milieu of our postmodern everyday life, which is encompassed by high-tech and electronic media and images (or simulacra) generated by those technologies: "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." (*Neuromancer*, 1) In another place, the postmodern city is described with a VCR metaphor: "Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept on thumb permanently on the fast-forward button (*Neuromancer*, 7). These writing styles with high-tech metaphors are appropriate in describing our postmodern technological cityscape where technology is ubiquitous, familiarized, and in many cases, naturalized. In 1991, Frederic Jameson commented on postmodern culture and society in his influential book, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), "'culture' has become a veritable 'second nature'" (Jameson ix). Nevertheless, our city life is exponentially filled with high-tech and electronic media and digital and information technologies (both in visible and invisible ways). It is perhaps more appropriate to rephrase Jameson's phrase like this: "technology has become a veritable 'second Nature.'"

As Bruce Starling points out, the technology already invades our body's physical demarcation. According to Katherine N. Hayles, the human-machine subjects, that is, cyborgs already exist in literal and metaphorical ways. In her essay, "The Life Cycle of Cyborgs: Writing the Posthuman," she mentions, "about 10% of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skins." (322) Katherine Hayles also adds up the number of cyborgs in metaphoric sense such as people who use computers, neurosurgeons guided by fiber optic microscopy during an operation and teenage videogame players in arcades (322).⁵ Thus, our biological and daily existences are supported by

⁵ The last one example, "teenage videogame players in arcade," as one of cyborg in Hayles's discussion obviously point to Gibson's interview on the moment of his conceiving the idea of cyberspace, which I quote above.

high-techs and we are coexisting with or in many high-tech products that reconfigure us cyborgs in both literal and metaphorical ways.

In Gibson's *Neuromancer*, almost all of the characters have modified their bodies. The protagonist, Case, is a hacker (called a "console cowboy" in the novel) whose brain is impaired chemically not to "jack-in" cyberspace. Molly, whose sunglasses (mirrorshades) are implanted into her cheeks, which enables her to see in the dark, and her fingernails are also modified to be retractable steel, razor-like weapons. Jane and Jean are clones constructed by DNA splices. In short, these characters are living in man-machine symbiosis; that is, cyborgs.

Gibson's world does have an affinity with high technology, but Gibson's view on technology is always ambivalent. When Gibson wrote the body-enhanced cyborg characters, he suggests the frightening possibility of the use of high-technology to control people. For example, the protagonist, Case, has been controlled by having mycotoxins (poison) injected to his nervous system so that he has to behave according to other's direction. In the world of *Neuromancer*, hegemonic power is represented by multinational corporations. At some point, businessman ("sarariman" in the novel) are described: "M-G [Mitsubishi-Genentech] employees above a certain level were implanted with advanced microprocessors that monitored mutagen levels in the bloodstream" (10). In these examples, the technologies in bodies are used to control or oppress characters. Indeed, as Molly comments on herself, the cyborg characters in the novel are "wired" and, thus, become "meat puppets" by somebody else (however, in the case of *Neuromancer*, the ultimate control comes not from humans but from AI). Control and dehumanization by technology are not a new theme in the history of science fiction, but in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, repressive control comes (almost unexpectedly) from inside, their cyborg bodies.

While Gibson depicts human characters who become cyborgs with enhanced bodies, he also introduced machine "characters" who act like humans. Dixie Flatliner is one of the typical examples. Dixie is physically dead, but his memory is contained in a ROM (read-only memory) construct. In it, his consciousness is still alive and can be accessed to and communicated with. Dixie is not only an accumulation of information but also he (or it) does have a personality. However, Dixie confesses his unbearable limbo status of ROM (106), and eventually asks Case to erase him. In a word, Dixie, a Rom construct, desires for his own deletion, his own real 'death.' Along with his humorous repeated comments, Dixie's indefatigable, pas-

LORE 3.1 (2003)

sionate desire for death problematizes humanity; specifically, in contrast of other human characters who are emotionless, passive, and moving like machines.⁶

Another inorganic creature, Wintermute also has a human nature. Wintermute is an artificial intelligence (AI) living in cyberspace. AI is a program with autonomy, but in this novel, it does have a "character." Later in the novel, every major character realizes they have been just pawns of Wintermute, which wants to merge with another AI called Neuromancer.

These characters (cyborgs, AIs, and ROM personality) problematize and reconfigure our traditional idea of identity, subjectivity and even humanity. As Hayles suggests, cyborg exist in our reality both in the technical sense and in metaphorical sense. With the highly-digitalized milieu in our society, our subjectivity exponentially transforms into a new subject, man-machine hybrid subject; that is, cyborg. To Gibson, this perspective has ambivalent effects. The cyborgian fusion between human and machine provides both empowerment and disempowerment. On the one hand, Gibson shows that a cyborg subject is able to acquire capability beyond ordinary human power (like Molly's mirrorshades and finger-nail weapons), but on the other hand, Gibson warns of the possibility of being controlled with the very act of enhancing bodies.

IV. Cyborg Agency

In philosophical context, cyborg subject materializes the de-centered subject discussed in the field of critical and cultural theories such as structuralism and post-structuralism for the last two decades. In critical and cultural theories, human subject has been discussed as a socio-cultural and historical construction ---for example, subject is constructed by ideology (Louis Althusser), by language (Jacques Lacan) or by discourse (Michel Foucault) --- so that (the modern idea of) human subject is de-centered and de-powered in several senses. These theories deconstruct 18th-century modern subject, which is a rational, autonomous, creative subjectivity, and revealed that human subject is a social, historical, and ideological construction. Their views critically facilitate re-examination of modern human deeds and human-centered views. Although they are useful to articulate the problems of modern historical subject, it also divests an independent autonomy and initiative potentials. Thus, after the decentralization of human subject by critical theories, the idea of

⁶ Dixie is, of course, a fictional character, but our technology might be able to make this kind of personality --- life after death --- possible. A robot scientist, Hans Moravec, argues in his book, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* that it will soon be possible to download human consciousness into a computer (109-110).

agency appears in the reaction to the decentralization of human subject as an inactive, passive construction by social forces. By the term, agency, scholars and theorists imply an ability to perform an action, in many cases, with political intentions. The agency is never a restatement of the same, former modern subject. The term, agency, suggests the historical development of critical theories and willpower (usually political willpower) to act out against any repressive, invisible power structure.

Donna Haraway's influential essay called "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) proposes the similar politics and creates a new politics for cyborgs. In her essay, she provides a positive perspectives on cyborgs with political agendas. Haraway defines a cyborg: "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction" (150). The significant concept of her cyborg theory is that she creates the transgressive, interdisciplinary (or meta-disciplinary) domains which deconstruct the traditional boundaries and binaries such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, real/fiction with a wide range of critical aims. The even more important perspective of her theory is that Haraway discusses cyborg in social reality and in fiction as well. Thus, Haraway's conceptualization of cyborg opened up the theoretical and philosophical dimension which we can discuss cyborgs in both our social reality and in our imagination (that is, literary fiction).

Haraway's cyborg theory serves for consideration on Gibson's punk politics of cyberpunk novels. Similar to Haraway's cyborg theory, the punk elements of Gibson's cyberpunk novels undoubtedly have political implications. In Gibson's fiction, technology is not only for the ruling classes; on the contrary, the socially marginalized people use it in subversive ways. In a short essay in *Cyberspace: First Steps* edited by Michael Benedikt, Gibson writes:

"The Street finds its own use for things --- uses the manufacturers never imagined. The micro-tape recorder, originally intended for on-the jump executive dictation, becomes the revolutionary medium of magnetisdat, allowing the covert spread of banned political speeches in Poland and China. The beeper and the cellular phone become economic tools in an increasingly competitive market in illicit drugs. Other technological artifacts unexpectedly become means of communication. . . . The aerosol can give birth to the urban graffiti-matrix. Soviet rockers press home-made flexidisks out of used chest x-rays" (Gibson, 1992, 29).

LORE 3.1 (2003)

The phrase in the first line, “the street finds its own use for thing,” is a mantra in Gibson’s street politics.⁷ These examples of technological appropriations in the “street-way,” which decontextualizes the intentions of original makers or producers, can be summed up as a punk sensibility in Gibson’s fiction. As Dick Hebdige demonstrates, punk is a sign and subversive gesture against any kind of repressive, control systems.⁸ In our society, high-tech gadgets have oftentimes military-industrial origins such as (parts of) TVs, computers, rockets, and the Internet. That is, they come from huge systems which we cannot usually resist. But “punkish” appropriation of technology decontextualizes and re-directs the technology to critique against such oppressive system. With “street” and “punk” sensibility, cyborg agency can refurbish and reconfigure the intension of producer or manufacturer into our own use (or deprive the utilitarian use of technology). Gibson’s street-tech subversive appropriation is a strategic decontextualization of technology. This is what cyborg agency --- that is, “we,” cyborgs-- should act out in the age of digital information technology.

⁷ This phrase is repeated exactly in Gibson’s short story, “Burning Chrome” (186).

⁸ In his influential book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige suggests that subcultures such as the Mods, Punks, Skinheads tried to differentiate themselves from the parent culture “borrow” objects, styles, and music from different ethnic cultures such as the African Caribbean culture or West Indian cultures. This punk sensibility perhaps is related to Gibson’s affinity to Voodoo cultures, too.

Work Cited

- Benedickt, Michael. *Cyberspace: First Steps*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992.
- Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books, 1984.
- . "Burning Chrome" *Burning Chrome*. New York: Ace Books, 1986.
- . "Academy Leader" *Cyberspace: First Steps*. Edited by Michael Benedickt. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Hayles, Katherine N. "The Life Cycle of Cyborg: Writing the Posthuman" *The Cyborg Handbook*. Edited by Chris Hables Gray, Heidi J. Figueroa-Sarriera and Steven Mentor. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Methuen, 1979.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- McCaffery, Larry. Ed. *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Fiction*. London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Moravec, Hans. *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Olsen, Lance. *William Gibson*. Mercer Island, WA: Starport House, 1992.
- Sterling, Bruce. Ed. *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. New York: Ace Books, 1986.