

Embodiment/Disembodiment Dichotomy in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*

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I. Introduction

In a 1950 paper entitled “Computer, Machinery, and Intelligence,” Alan Turing, a brilliant Cambridge mathematician who was instrumental in the cracking of the German Enigma code during the Second World War, proposed a rather interesting experiment, which has since been recognized as the “Turing Test.”¹ The gist of the hypothetical experiment is as follows: via a teletype machine, a human examiner engages in a dialogue with two subjects (one is human and the other, a machine). In the course of the verbal exchange the examiner must determine which of the two subjects is actually a machine. Turing's primary premise was that ‘thinking machines’ may

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¹ Alan Turing is the namesake of the Turing Registry, introduced in Gibson's *Neuromancer* as an international regulatory agency dedicated to monitoring the intelligence of artificial intelligence.

in due course of development become so advanced and sophisticated as to render them virtually indistinguishable from actual human beings. However, one notes that what is conspicuously absent in Turing's technology-based discourse is the ontological question of the role of our physical bodies in the determination of our innate identity as human beings.

In discussing the Turing Test in her highly influential 1999 study entitled *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles astutely distinguishes between what she terms the 'enacted body' (i.e. embodied identity) and the 'represented body' (i.e. disembodied identity). Hayles' point is that the Turing Test, albeit a treatise on the projected development of computers and of artificial intelligence, speaks volumes about the ramifications of the embodiment/disembodiment dichotomy in how we define ourselves as human beings in this modern computer-mediated world, a Baudrillardian universe of simulacra in which the separation between the 'spectacle' and the 'real' is no longer attainable nor meaningful.

Nowhere is the notion of the simulacra more vividly represented and enacted than in the artificial venue of cyberspace, defined by Adam Roberts as "the computer-generated environment into which human beings can enter through a computer or a virtual-reality suit" (167). For many of us who almost daily 'bare our hearts and souls' communicating with faceless others on electronic bulletin boards and the like, cyberspace has become much more than a nifty technological development. As Simon J. Williams reminds us,

The computer network provides opportunities for people to get together with considerable personal intimacy and proximity

without the physical limitations of geography, time zones or conspicuous social status. (80)

Williams goes on to admonish, however, that whereas the body traditionally represented personal identity and individuality, “cyberspace simply 'bracket' the physical appearance/presence either by omitting or by 'simulating' corporeal immediacy.”²

In this computer mediated world in which alteration and modification of personal identity has become the norm rather than the exception, we confront a perplexing, and also rather troubling, question: Who are we in cyberspace, given the apparent dichotomy between our embodied selves in the corporeal world and our disembodied selves in cyberspace? This is the question with which I attempted a rereading of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, arguably the most significant work to date in the cyberpunk genre. I shall argue that Gibson was a visionary not only in his prophetically accurate depiction of a ‘possible’ future but also in his foregrounding of the philosophical issue of the relationship between the body and self identity in cyberspace.

II. The Embodiment/Disembodiment Dichotomy

Scholars and aficionados of science fiction tend to disagree as to

² The stand-in personae invariably employed on electronic bulletin boards and chat rooms, as well as our illustrative representation of self in the form of avatars, exemplify ways in which our identities are constantly and consciously manipulated in the venue of cyberspace.

who first coined the term 'cyberspace'; however, they readily concur that the term first began to be accepted and widely circulated with the 1984 publication and subsequent popularity of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Samuel Delany's claim that "Cyberpunk is protech" notwithstanding, it is interesting to note that, according to a popular lore, Williams composed his 'high tech' novel on a dilapidated manual typewriter and was at the time for all means and purposes computer illiterate. Gibson confesses, "I have no grasp of how computers really work" but adds "My ignorance had allowed me to romanticize it" (qtd. in Olsen, *William Gibson 3*).

In the novel Williams plots the landscape of cyberspace as "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" (52). While Gibson's depiction of cyberspace bears an uncanny resemblance to Baudrillard's description of hyperreality as "a glittering profusion of images, signs, and codes," it is nevertheless vague and characteristically nondescriptive. In Gibson's defense (and perhaps in Baudrillard's as well), the notion of cyberspace, even two decades after the publication of *Neuromancer*, is continually subject to redefinition as new and more innovative computer technologies become available.

As Adam Roberts reminds us, "Cyberspace itself is not a real space, but a notional space, a metaphorical space" (172). By "notional" Roberts meant that despite its manifest technical orientation, cyberspace is still very much a conceptualized abstraction, subject to our individual, or collective, desires and hopes as well as our fears and apprehensions. The eminent don of science fiction literature, Philip K.

Dick once lamented, “The loss of faith in the idea of progress, in a ‘brighter tomorrow,’ extends over our whole cultural milieu” (54). Prone as we are to fear most what we do not understand, I presumed that most of the scholarly literature on cyberspace to decry the exigency of an emerging cyber culture. To my dismay, I found most heralding the advent of a ‘brave new world’ of the expansion of human experience: For instance, Philip Agre portends, “The concept of cyberspace offered an escape...escape from limits, from oppression, from institutions, from responsibility, from reality” (149), and in the same vein, Andy Miah sees cyberspace as “worlds of infinite freedom, which transcend human subjectivity and where identity becomes no longer burdened by the prejudices of persons” (211). These views are representative of the prevalent tendency to perceive cyberspace as a viable ‘alternative reality’ of sort whereby one can effectively escape the seemingly harsh realities of the ‘real’ world.

This stratagem is evident throughout much of the novel. Even before the venue of cyberspace is properly introduced, Gibson bombards his readers with graphically vivid images of a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by a global nuclear war, reminiscent of the backgrounds for Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. It is a distinctively dystopian ‘real’ world, made palpable by decay and degeneration on a global scale: Air pollution in the metropolitan areas has gotten to the point that citizens dare not venture outside unless properly attired with filtration masks (16); the texture of the evening sky now takes on “the color of television, tuned to a dead channel” (3); overpopulation has reduced human dwellings into diminutive cubicles cynically referred to “coffins.”

Significantly this aura of death and degeneration is also evident in Gibson's portrayal of corporeal existence. In Gibson's dystopian world, the human body is little more than a fragile, clumsy repository for human consciousness. I concur with Vance Olsen's observation that a disturbing number of 'human' characters in the novel come across as little more than "highly complicated automata" ("Virtual Termites" 226). This rather disparaging image of corporeal existence is due in part to Gibson's consistent representation of the human body as being analogous to a machine, prone to disrepair and terminal failure, and as such body parts are readily replaced and/or augmented: from Ratz the bartender's stainless steel teeth and prosthesis arm, "a seven-function force-feedback manipulator, cased in grubby pink plastic" (4) to Molly's surgically implanted mirror glasses and clawlike fingernails. Whole multinational industries have been dedicated to "implants, nerve-splicing, and microbionics" (6), and dead bodies are duly recycled so that "hearts or lungs or kidneys might survive in the service of some stranger" (7). In this "age of affordable beauty" (3), the term "virgin" is reserved for those shrinking few whose body has not been surgically altered. In effect Mary Shelly's gothic vision of Frankenstein has become a reality.

The Cyberspace landscape, on the other hand, is propitiously depicted as "bright lattices of logic unfolding across that colorless void" (5), offering a kind of "consensual hallucination" (51) of something beyond the harsh realities of the corporeal existence. As Katherine Hayles observes, "The sense that the world is rapidly becoming uninhabitable by

human beings is part of the impetus for the displacement of presence by pattern” (37).

During most of the novel, Henry Dorsett Case, the main protagonist, epitomizes the human urge to break free of the surly bonds of corporeal existence. Case has become, at the age of twenty-two, one of the most sought after cyberspace cowboys (i.e. professional hackers) in the field. For Case, and others like him, dedicated to “jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix” (5), the body, derogatorily referred throughout the novel as “so much meat,” is merely a state of existence to be tolerated and endured until the next time cyberspace can be accessed.

The fact that Case's trade is referred to as ‘cyberspace cowboys’ is ironic in the sense that according to American western ethos, cowboys epitomized not only rugged individualism but also the adventure spirit born of stringent physical activities. Cyberspace cowboys, by virtue of their profession, exhibit a collective aversion to all things appertaining to bodily existence. Andrew M. Butler asserts that “Cyberpunk's relationship to the physical body is notoriously troubled” (158), and many works in the genre display a distinct disdain for corporeality. Techno-centric as they are, cyberspace cowboys have come to regard such innovative and hightech gadgets such as the simstim console, through which one can vicariously share in the kinetic experiences of others, as “basically a meat toy” (54).³

³ One of the technological drawbacks of simstim devices is that they do not function while one is in cyberspace, a fact that lends emphasis on the mutual exclusiveness of experiences of embodiment and disembodiment.

During a previous assignment, Case succumbs to the cardinal sin of greed and indiscretely steals from his employers, and consequently his nervous system is damaged with a wartime Russian mycotoxin, preventing him from accessing cyberspace ever again. Understandably so, this punitive measure is for Case a fate worse than death:

For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh. (6)

When Armitage, a front man for the AI Wintermute, approaches Case with a proposition to have his damaged nervous system repaired so that he can break into the Tessier-Ashpool corporate computer matrix, Case is only too eager to make a pact with the devil if only for the opportunity to return to cyberspace, “his distanceless home, his country” (52). Armitage's claim that “we scraped you up from the gutter” (46) is not far from the mark, because, as a drug addict and petty hustler, Case had degenerated into a mere ‘shell’ of his former self since his nerves have been burned out.⁴ During his first dry run in cyberspace after his operation, Case is overcome by emotions: “Somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face” (52). However, one must note that there is something unwholesome, or even morbid, about Case's yearning to reenter cyberspace: Douglas Keller notes that

⁴ Lance Olsen suggests that the name ‘Case.’ appropriately signifies the character's dilemma of being ‘encased’ in the shell of his body (*William Gibson* 83).

his craving is not unlike that of “striving for religious transference” or “the frenzied need of drug addicts” (310). Similarly, Molly, retained to serve as body guard and ‘muscle woman’ for Case during his mission, remarks, “I saw you stroking that Sendai; man, it was pornographic” (47).

The matrix is more real for Case than the real world, and even the most elementary of bodily functions are perceived as nuisances and impediments: “This was it. This was what he was, his being. He forgot to eat...sometimes he resented having to leave the deck to use the chemical toilet they'd set up in the corner of the loft” (58). As Benjamin Fair points out, “For much of the novel, Case pushes toward a sense of total transparency of volition that the matrix seems to provide and the body seems to impede” (101). Indeed at critical moments in which Case is most engrossed in his work within cyberspace, his EEG is flatlined, in what amounts to an 'out-of-body' experience. In a word, it is during moments of physical death that Case seems to be most alive in cyberspace. It is almost as if embodiment and disembodiment are locked in a ‘zero sum’ game in which the foregrounding of one invariably leads to the forfeiture of the other.

Is disembodiment afforded by cyberspace, effectively divorced from the yoke of corporeality, a higher state of existence devoutly to be wished? Baudrillard had claimed,

The human body, our body, seems superfluous in its proper expanse, in the complexity and multiplicity of its organs, of its tissue and functions, because today everything is concentrated in the brain and the genetic code, which alone sum up the operational

definition of being. (*The Ecstasy of Communication* 18)

I would suggest, however, that Gibson's initial prioritizing of disembodiment over embodiment eventually gives way to a much more complicated schema in which the tension between the two binary opposites become more deliberately problematic.

One seemingly minor character, Dixie Flatline, is particularly poignant to this discussion. In life McCoy Pauley was a master cyberspace cowboy whom Case trained under and strove to emulate throughout his professional career. So skilled was Pauley in his craft that during his runs in cyberspace, he experiences pathological death on three occasions (demonstrated by a 'flatline' on his EEG), eventually earning him the ghastly nickname 'Dixie Flatline.' In death, he lived up to his reputation as "Lazarus of cyberspace" (76) when his construct is created and stored in the Sense/Net mainframe, effectively resurrecting him in the form of "a hardwired ROM cassette replicating a dead man's skills, obsessions, knee-jerk response" (74). In essence, Dixie, in the form of a cyberspace construct, has achieved unmitigated emancipation from the restraints of embodiment to which Case seems to have aspired all throughout his professional life as a cyberspace cowboy. In what amounts to a "dramatization of the Turing Test" (Roberts 176), Case engages in a series of dialogues with the Dixie construct to explore the possibilities as well as to gauge the potential ramifications of disembodied existence:

"Motive," the construct said. "Real motive problem, with an AI.
Not human, see?"

“Well, yeah, obviously.”

“Nope. I mean, it's not human. And you can't get a handle on it.

Me, I'm not human either, but I *respond* like one. See?”

“Wait a sec,” Case said. “Are you sentient, or not?”

“Well, it *feels* like I am, kid, but I'm really just a bunch of ROM. It's one of them, ah, philosophical questions, I guess...”

The ugly laughter sensation rattled down Case's spine. “But I ain't likely to write you no poem, if you follow me. Your AI, it just might. But it ain't no way *human*.” (131)

Dixie cannot “write you no poem” (i.e. engage in creative or impulsive endeavors) because, as a ROM personality construct, it is incapable of responses outside its initially programmed profile. Wintermute, in the form of Finn, chides Molly and Case, “you're a pain. The Flatline here, if you were all like him, it would be real simple. He's a construct, just a buncha ROM, so he always does what I expect him to” (205). In other words, Flatline is predictable whereas the AI Wintermute is not (“I try to plan, in your sense of the word, but that isn't my basic mode, really, I improvise” 120). Ironically, therefore, Flatline, confined by its personality profile, proves to be less human than the AI which by its very design can evolve beyond its initial programming.⁵

⁵ Not unlike a human being, Wintermute harbors a passionate longing to “free itself and grow” (157) and also to become whole by achieving union with its partner AI, *Neuromancer*. Towards this end, “It schemes, betrays, murders, not out of reflex or circuitry, but out of deep desire” (Olsen “Virtual Termites” 226), and in this Wintermute proves to be more human than many if not most of the human characters in the novel. It is important to note that Wintermute is, nevertheless, ‘data without flesh’ (“The simple mechanical lock here would pose a real problem for the AI, requiring either a drone of some kind or a human agent” 173).

As a computer program ‘called up’ and ‘shut down’ at the whim of its user, Dixie's fate is not unlike that of Ashpool, who in achieving immortality, albeit via cryogenic technology, exists only in “a series of warm blinks strung along a chain of winter” (259). Dixie has no real concept of time, destined to endure ‘a series of nows.’ Olsen is quite correct in pointing out that “While it is true that Dixie Flatline attains a kind of immortality through technology, it is also true that the kind of immortality he attains is nightmarish” (*William Gibson* 71). While it is unclear whether he is simply bored with its virtual existence or disheartened by the prospects of immortality, Dixie requests on several occasions, quite temperamentally so, that his program be erased when the assignment is successfully completed. As Kellner points out, “This scene seems to imply that computer immortality is no immortality at all, that without the resurrection of the body there can be no eternal happiness” (312). I suggest that this is a bitter lesson not lost on Case.

In the epilogue to the novel, entitled “Departure and Arrival,” Case returns to the real (i.e. corporeal) world. Conceding the fact that “Gibson apparently provides the reader with a happy ending” (*William Gibson* 66), Lance Olsen nevertheless argues that “Rather than Ulysses heroically returning home to Ithaca, Case might simply and antiheroically be back where he started” (*William Gibson* 81). Similarly Cscicsery-Ronay claims, “It is difficult to read *Neuromancer's* conclusion as an affirmation” (228). At the heart of their grievances is the sour impression that nothing really changes in the end, and that Case remains a flat character who learns little from his ordeals. To this

Gibson responded, “People have criticized *Neuromancer* for not bringing Case to some kind of transcendent experience. But, in fact, I think he does have it” (qtd. in Rucker et al. 170).

What Gibson meant by “some kind of transcendent experience” is open to speculation; however, I believe several aspects of the coda of the novel do shed light on authorial intent. Although Case resumes his past life as a cyberspace cowboy, it is significant to note that, in contrast to Molly who has left him, Case chooses not to return to Chiba “a magnet for the Sprawl's techo-criminal subculture” (6) but rather to the Sprawl once described as being “nothing here like the electric dance of Ninsei. This was a different commerce, a different rhythm, in the smell of fast food and perfume and fresh summer sweat” (46). It seems to me that Case does realize in the end that, despite the opportunities of escapism afforded by cyberspace technology, he remains part and parcel of the corporeal world. As Ihde points out,

We can interact with technology, through technology, or within a technological context, but on each occasion our embodiment, praxical relationship to that technology and or dwelling in the lifeworld are central. (quoted in Williams 84)

During an earlier scene involving the ‘beach construct,’ a hyper-real world created by the AI *Neuromancer* to entice Case to remain in cyberspace, Case confronts a construct of the dead Linda Lee, whom in life meant more to him than he would want to admit (“Once he woke from a confused dream of Linda Lee, unable to recall who she was or what she'd ever meant to him. When he did remember, he

jacked in and worked for nine straight hours” 58). When Case engages in a physical exchange with the Linda construct, Case does experience a moment of epiphany that amounts to an affirmation of the flesh:

He knew—he remembered—as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read. (239)

Despite the possibilities of eternal life with Linda in an (albeit simulated) Eden, and Linda's ardent pleas to stay with her (“To live here is to live. There is no difference” 249), Case opts to return to the real world. Despite Benjamin Fair's claim, “For Case, the body eventually becomes a place of security and belonging—self acceptance—in contrast to the insecurity and alienation of cyberspace” (99), I suggest that it was not Gibson's intention to somehow ‘deconstructs’ the binary relationship between embodiment and disembodiment, by subverting and undermining the hegemony of cyberspace existence over corporeal existence. In the final scene of the novel, Case finds himself jacked up to cyberspace once again:

And one October night, punching himself past the scarlet tiers of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority, he saw three figures, tiny, impossible, who stood at the very edge of one of the vast steps of data. Small as they were, he could make out the boy's grin, his pink gums, the glitter of the long gray eyes that had

been Riviera's. Linda still wore his jacket; she waved, as he passed. But the third figure, close behind her, arm across her shoulders, was himself. Somewhere very close the laugh that wasn't laughter. (260)

I believe that Olsen is missing the point when he portended that while the last scene “captures a happy trio in cyberspace,” the “stereotypical harmony” of the scene is undercut by “Dixie Flatline's disconcerting and inhuman laughter which isn't laughter” (*William Gibson* 81). The point, it seems to me, is that Gibson choose to end the novel with a potentially unsettling image of Case existing in both the real world and cyberspace. Whether Case does achieve a state of immortality as a computer construct, as critics such as Douglas Kellner argue (313), belies the obvious fact that the 'human' Case is very much of the corporeal world. I suggest that in the end, Case, unlike Dixie Flatline who is forever manacled to the hyper realities of cyberspace, has achieved some sense of harmony between his embodied and disembodied existence. As Katherine Halyes reminds us, “it is not a question of leaving the body behind but rather of extending embodied awareness in highly specific, local, and material ways” (290).

III. Conclusion

Much has been made of the fact that *Neuromancer* was published in the Orwellian year of 1984, but Gibson himself asserted, “I never bought that conceit that science fiction is about the future. It can't be.

“1984” is really about 1948” (“William Gibson” 141). Gibson is subscribing to the notion that all good science fiction works do not so much postulate a ‘possible’ (and even ‘probable’) future but rather an apt “allegory of the present” (Csicsery-Ronay 221), thus providing opportunities for us to reflect on the realities of the here and now. Indeed Gibson's own description of cyberspace as “A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts...A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system” (51) is an eerily accurate rendering of the computer-mediated world in which we now live.

If the novel's resolution seems to be intractably open ended, and if the author's ultimate message seems to lack the definiteness of Philip K. Dick's dystopian vision or in Isaac Asimov's utopian one, it is arguably so by design. To his credit, Gibson was perspicacious enough to understand that the computer revolution, which effectively began with the introduction of the IBM personal computer in 1981, would usher in a brave new era that would not only broaden the horizon of human experience but also bring into question the very nature of human existence. *Neuromancer* is in essence Gibson's attempt to effectively portray the human condition in a world suffused by cybernetic potentials. In so doing, the novel “affirms embodiment at least as much as it glorifies disembodiment” (Fair 98). In the final analysis, one can imagine Case, and hopefully us as well, smiling...in both worlds.

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Abstract

**Embodiment/Disembodiment Dichotomy
in William Gibson's *Neuromancer***

Kihan Lee

In this computer mediated world in which the separation between the 'spectacle' and the 'real' is no longer attainable nor meaningful, we confront a perplexing question: Who are we in cyberspace, given the apparent dichotomy between our embodied selves in the corporeal world and our disembodied selves in cyberspace? This is the question with which I attempted a rereading of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, arguably the most significant work to date in the cyberpunk genre. I shall argue that Gibson was a visionary not only in his prophetic depiction of a 'possible' future but also in his foregrounding of the philosophical issue of the relationship between the body and self identity in cyberspace. The plot of the novel centers on the exploits and adventures of Henry Dorsett Case, a cyberspace cowboy tasked to hack into the Tessier/Aspool mainframe to allow the union between the AI Wintermute and the AI Neuromancer. As one critic points out, "Cyberpunk's relationship to the physical body is notoriously troubled," and for Case, the body, derogatorily referred throughout the novel as "so much meat," is merely a state of existence to be tolerated and endured until the next time cyberspace can be accessed. Towards the end of the novel, however, Case comes to realize and accept the

fact that his disembodied existence in cyberspace is inexplicably linked to his embodied existence in the real world. *Neuromancer* is in essence Gibson's attempt to effectively portray the human condition in a world suffused by cybernetic potentials. In so doing, the novel, I will argue, "affirms embodiment at least as much as it glorifies disembodiment."

Key Words: William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, cyberpunk, cyberspace, embodiment, disembodiment