A thesis on Gibson and cyberpunk

Mariusz B. [1] *

> "My intention is to tell of bodies changed to different forms." (Ovid, Metamorphoses)

INTRODUCTION

During the last half of the '80s, critics of cyberpunk identified its central narrative as the breakdown of boundaries between bodies and machines. Much of this critical writing was outright celebratory in its welcoming a new kind of science fiction, which was obviously plugged-in to present-state techno-reality. William Gibson even coined a term for the virtual space people started to spend time in–cyberspace, the other side of computer screens. Starting to make their first appearances in the mid-80s, cyberpunk's technologized bodies seemed to provide images through which the readers could imagine their fates in the near future, especially if they were young white males with access to computer hardware.

A lot of current critical thinking has fallen into the prison of the flesh. (The body as a central philosophical issue is particularly true among French philosophers, like Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre or Maurice Merleau-Ponty.) Even today, there is a determination on the part of many critical thinkers to reinsert the meat into the picture, to resist the dreams of a disappearing body, which have been influenced by technological fictions of its looming obsolescence.

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Although, if there is such an intense fascination with the fate of the body, is it not because the body does not exist any longer? Foucault is concerned with a continually disintegrating body, "traced by language, lacerated by ideology and invaded by the relational circuitry of the field of postmodern power" [Kroker, *Theses on the…* 20] Levin writes about of an Anti-System, "an alloy of classical substance and modern force" [Levin 101], which thinks of the body as an organless, closed and dimensionless surface. This concept of unextended matter and energy, a new body ideal is the manifestation of old and new referents of deconstruction.

The focus of this thesis is the body in interaction with the immersive digital/technological environment in the works of William Gibson. In doing so, I will employ a generous understanding of cyberspace, which is necessary in order to fully grasp the interrelations between physical and virtual space. Thus emphasizing the problems of corporeality, I wish to signal my opinion that the bodies represented in William Gibson's works show signs of potent de-construction and they are not bound to the location we now commonly call cyberspace–this is contrary to the majority of cyberpunk literature of past years [Sterling, Stephenson, Egan, Fabi, among others], according to which the body is inherent in the virtual body's sensory s[t]imulations.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, I briefly elaborate on a cyberpunk framework of concepts based on Ihab Hassan's table of dichotomies. In the second chapter, I start by establishing cyberspace as a location, as a place, both a social and a living space. Cyberspace is a location that certainly has a life of its own, with specific details, folds, peculiarities, representing a particular reality of feedback.

From the location of cyberspace, I pass on to the phenomenon of the body inside and outside cyberspace and two of its avatars [the doll and the idoru] that are called forth by economic imperatives. I will scrutinize both body and mind, separately and in symbiotic terms. From that very definition of the body I will shift to the phenomenon of gendered technologies, to the impact of cyberculture, cosmetic surgery and virtual sex on the gendered body as the sexual aspect of the new body ideal or its new quality of presence.

I have ordered my thesis around the body's relation with the perception/sensuality of space, the mind [as its superior driving force or its inferior ordering principle] and sexuality. I want to prove that William Gibson's universe is an eclectic compound of post-modernist theories in which the body is coterminous with covert intertextuality and is a fragmented entity seeking to transcend itself.

1.0 CYBERPUNK: A FRAMEWORK

Beyond the eclectic and multi-accentual nature of cyberspace lies a strong hybridizing tendency, bringing together the scientific enthusiasm of the Industrial Age, the social enthusiasm of modernism and the sheer disillusionment of postmodernism. I tried to set up a new paradigm shift, a follower of Modernism and Post-Modernism under the name of **cyberpunk**, based on Ihab Hassan's table of dichotomies [Bókay, 247-249].

This classification of CP as a paradigm is far from unmistakable. Cyberpunk is also a genre of literature and music; it is a fashion and art trend and also a youth subculture merging punks, hippies and computer campus geeks to represent a politically neutral, elitist and anarchist point of view. Cyberpunk as a paradigm is an effort to speak for all the before-mentioned aspects.

MODERNISM	**POSTMODERNISM**	**CYBERPUNK**
Form (conjunctive and closed)	Anti-form (disjunctive, open)	Fragmented/hybrid
Hierarchy	Anarchy	Organized chaos, fractals
Proficiencies/logos	Exhaustion/silence	Resuscitation/White noise
Isolation	Participation	Spectator mode
Creation	Deconstruction	Gomi
Synthesis	Antithesis	Ephemeral dogmas
Presence	Absence	Shifting/Overlapping existence
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext	Hypertext
Semantics	Rhetoric	Memetics
Selection	Combination	Storage/Heaping
Interpretation	Misreading	filtering
Signified	Signifier	Hyperlink
Visible	Scriptable	Executable/Functional
Type	Mutant	Hybrid/Heterogeneous
	Trace	

Origin	Immanence	Presence through traces
Transcendence		Immanence/Imminence

Hassan admits that he has not defined Modernism and he can define Post-Modernism even less. I suggest, though, that the complexity and unfinished nature of postmodern discourse has evolved into an open, evolving and at the same time, stable paradigm. Cyberpunk is determinate and open-to-analysis characteristics are due to its integrity with technology.

It is observable that cyberpunk as a tendency is defined by a process of three steps, namely those of fragmentation/dissolution; a re-combination which forms a whole in which original components are still observable, and the re-introduction ["execution" as in running a program] of the new "hybrid" form into the environment from which it has been ripped away. The new hybrid will–due to its enhanced nature–establish connection with the old environment from the *outside*. It analyzes, organizes, stores and filters while not returning wholly to its previous state. It will act just as cyberpunk does in general–merge the most applicable functions that are most appropriate in any given state.

Flesh becomes integrated with machinery, in the process of something that is rightly called the dissolution of the body by Weinstein and Kroker and Kroker. Weinstein claims that the mind is being exteriorized (which I call the "spectator mode" in which the entity is capable of analyzing/filtering, seeing, immersing yet not being there in physical reality), Kroker and Kroker reveal that "we are being processed through a media scene consisting of our own (exteriorized) body organs in the form of second-order simulacra" [21] The body, according to them, is immersed in multiple subordinations to power apparati, ideologically, epistemologically, semiotically and technologically. In due order, these refer to the screen-like phase of the mutating body being inscribed by the fashion industry; a process of conditioning of the body for possibility for the operation of postmodern power; the body as a floating signifier of the imperatives of advanced capitalism and the subordination of the body to hyper-functionality.

Bodies as self-contained wireless information entities [cf. chapter 2.0], in terms of information theory are hypertexts, pieces of information con-

nected by hyperlinks. Hypertext, as the concept for a non-sequential form of writing, which could only exist in a computer environment, was coined by Ted Nelson in 1965. Nelson suffered from ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) which caused him to forget a train of thought if interrupted, getting lost in a plethora of other associations. Ironically, hypertextuality/hyperlinking is a memory aid by which one can completely forget what they are looking for.

Bodies, entities of unity are not forgotten, though but are under the knife of the new paradigm, namely, the **update**. Cyberpunk age offers brochures advertising new implants and body parts instead of clothes. The inner [metabolical, psychologial, psychosomatical] harmony is facaded by a cascade of chaos, one of systematic randomness. Gibson's characters exist in traces left in logs of computer transactions, notes of illegal clinics, memory fragments of ominous oracle-like figures (like the Finn or Ratz). What they are is built up of what they had done or seen. The life of Molly, for example, swarms with

> galaxies of supposition, rumor, conflicting data. Streetgirl, prostitute, bodyguard, assassin, she mingles on the manifold planes with the shadows of heroes and villains whose names mean nothing to Angie, though their residual images have long since been woven through the global culture. [Mona Lisa Overdrive, 285]

The chapter "40: Pink Satin" of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* and chapter 23 of *Neuromancer* are one of the best examples of fragmented, and at the same time, completely organized way of perception.

Combination of the old and the new implies a resuscitation of obsolete materials and themes. However, fragmented bodies of combination may be and whatever parts they might include their union results in *white noise*, by this I mean a total masking of the self. Bodies are masked, dissolute, hidden by their existence in fragments. The very same semblance is used in Mark Fabi's *Wyrm*, describing the facilities of a military complex,

> "Your guest cards […] adjust the settings for things like temperature, illumination level, even what kind of Muzak plays when you're on the

> elevator. [...] You can customize your settings now–in fact, I'd strongly advise it–the Muzak default is Mantovani."
> "What if there's more than one person on the elevator?" George asked.
> "Then it compares the various lists of preferences and tries to come up with the best compromise. If it's a total loss–say, Brahms, Anthrax, and Yanni–it'll just pump in some white noise." [187]

2.0 CYBERSPACE: THE PHENOMENA OF VISITATION

Cyberpunk's eclecticism and multi-accentuality is paralleled by those of its related phenomena of Virtual Reality [VR], or also known as cyberspace. "Virtual Reality", the phrase coined by the computer scientist and visual artist Jason Lanier in the late 1980s, is "computer-created sensory experience that allows a participant to believe and barely distinguish a "virtual" experience from a real one. VR uses computer graphics, sounds, and images to reproduce electronic versions of real-life situations." [Franchi, online]

The body immersed in the virtual environment of cyberspace crosses over to the domain of the hybrid, for its humanity is irreversibly connected to non-human apparati. For example, Case, the console cowboy protagonist of *Neuromancer* who lived for the paradise of cyberspace, is "a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix" [Gibson, *Neuromancer* 12]. He experiences his exultation from cyberspace as the fall as well as involving "a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. […] Case fell into the prison of his own flesh." [Gibson, *Neuromancer* 12]

The interpenetration of the organic and the inorganic elicits ambivalent responses, on one hand, technology is viewed as a magical potion, which multiplies human powers ad infinitum, on the other, and technology is associated with the engulfment of the human by the machine. Either way, the body constructed via technology displaces the binary opposition between wired and organic corporeality. [I will elaborate upon this matter in chapter 3.4, concerning the symbiosis of the body in mind in cybernetic symbionts.] This binary opposition is resolved in the idea of Arthur Kroker and Michael

A. Weinstein, transcending the concept of the wired nervous system buried in living flesh,

> The hyper-texted body with its dedicated flesh […] wants to be an Internet. […] Operating by means of the aesthetic strategy of over identification with the feared and desired object, the hyper-texted body insists that ours is already the era of post-capitalism, and even post-technology. Taking the will to virtuality seriously, it demands its telematic rights to be a functioning interfaced body: to be a multimedia thinker, to patch BUS ports on its cyber-flesh as it […] goes wireless. [The Theory of the Virtual Class, online]

Gibson's bodies are similarly **not** interfaced to the Net via modems and miscellaneous software; they become their own self-contained nets, as in cruising cyberspace the players get physically involved with oceans of data that impact directly on their nervous systems and senses. Black ICEs are the most notorious picturesque example for this. These are mechanisms produced by artificial intelligences, which can literally kill hackers initiating illicit incursions.

Gibson's cyberpunk takes virtual technology further by posing the possibility of a NIL (neural interface link) between the human brain and the computer. This connection is effected by means of sockets situated behind the ear that can receive chips and thus grant access to digital memory. Once these gadgets function, human bodies and minds are not only in a position to enter an intimate relationship with computers, they also become able to access the ultimate virtual space and interact with other bodies and minds; they transcend the individual and the community to form a location which is built up of themselves.

2.1 THE PHENOMENA OF VISITORS

The ominous Dixie Flatline of *Neuromancer* best represents this narcissistic totalization of the self. It is "a ROM personality matrix… given sequential, real time memory" [99], de facto, the personality of a top hacker burnt into ones and zeroes, who [which?] acts as if he were "there", on location

with Case in c-space. Without an access to Case's memory banks, he [it] is just a [relatively] simple flood of logic and catchwords:

> "'Hey, bro,' said a directionless voice.
> 'It's Case, man. Remember?'
> 'Miami, joeboy, quick study.'
> 'What's the last thing you remember before I spoke to you, Dix?'
> 'Nothin'.' […]
> 'Okay, Dix. You are a ROM construct. Got me?'
> 'If you say so,' said the construct. 'Who are you?'
> 'Case.'
> 'Miami,' said the voice, 'joeboy, quick study.'"
> [99-100]

The motif of transcending into an entity of higher integrity (Dixie becoming a part of Case) is turned upside down in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, where characters are ridden/possessed by voodoo gods/demigods.

In *Count Zero* cyberspace riders are thus not only situated along the symbolism of hi-tech societies but also along a religion that is close to that we know as Voodoo. Names and functions of loas connote a double referentiality, those of Voodoo and Christianity. This postmodern cyberanthropology is stripped to the bone, formed by the connectivity of an artificial intelligence, the one that had been formed during the Straylight action minutely described in *Neuromancer*.

Cyberspatial existence in *Count Zero* is extended through suspension vats and sensory links and most importantly, biotechnology that take over silicon. The motif of parallel worlds [existences] and their overlap climaxes in biochips, hybrid cancer cells transplanted into circuitries, cyberspace and manipulated human memory spontaneously intertwines. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* the Finn becomes "a construct, a personality job, […] real-time memory if I wanna, wired into c-space if I wanna" [164] and Bobby Zero appears as a corpse wired into an Aleph, which is "completely interactive.

And it's a matter of scale. […] he literally could have anything at all in there. In a sense, *he could have an approximation of everything*…" [154]

2.2 THE APPROXIMATION OF LOCATION

Digital technology is a language in which we–for the first time–have the possibility of manipulating, controlling and having responsibility over language to create the references we want. By controlling and manipulating it we create a location, even if it lacks any "real-life" spatial settings–a location that lives a life of its own, with its details, peculiarities, a place that doesn't allow external breathing, it's captured, *approximated*–and we're captured within. Cyberspace is the result of what once seemed impossible: the creation of space in the electronic frame. The creators of [im]possibilities make up a perceptual understanding complete with physical experience and comprehension. This phenomena translates into an awareness of how images function on various levels of the communication scale, creating an architecture that does not only put forward prospects for viewing, but most of all creates spaces with which the images interfere, so as to gain their own topology *in loco*. Space is still a necessary place, but architecture is no longer bound by the static conditions of locally defined place, but as architecture in data space, as it is shown by its most famous representation in *Neuromancer*:

> Cyberspace. 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. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding… [67]

Jorge Luis Borges in a short story ("The Aleph", 1949) evokes an image of something called the Aleph. According to his definition, "...an Aleph is one of the points in space that contains all other points […] ...the only place on earth where all places are–seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending" [Borges, online]. This contention does

not stand far from the Barlowian quotidian and vague idea of cyberspace, "the place where you are when making a phone call". Borges' revelations further clarify this, "...I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive." [Borges, online]

In Gibson's brief description of the c-landscape,

> ...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. [Gibson, Neuromancer 69]

Perceivable is the notion of implacement applied to cyberspace, a further representation of united components of the "natural world" and the "generated world". If we perceive images and building blocks, like spiral arms, chessboards and pyramids realities of space that create the environment, their presence and participation will contribute to the creation of spatiality.

The counterbalance of perceived constraints in corporeal society and the envisioned freedom of an electric self raise questions about how physical reality is valued in relation to its virtual counterpart. VR enthusiasts sometimes speak of VR as an alternative to the physical world, a place where constraints can be overcome and new freedoms can be discovered. On one level, this is classic techno-rhetoric. New technology always promises more. For some, VR suggests that electronic identity offers something greater or more fulfilling than bodily existence. As Case says in *Neuromancer*, "the body is meat". For Case, jacking into cyberspace is a life-enhancing experience that is more meaningful than being in his body. In cyberspace, Case, a marginal figure in real life, displays a cunning intelligence in break-

ing through barriers to crack information codes, and he shows considerable courage in maneuvering his way through a cascade of intrusion countermeasure electronics. In a world of collapsed boundaries between the artificial and the real, the symbolic world of the net becomes for Case a more intense and expansive reality than his corporeal one.

Neuromancer offers us a scenario in a world where the real is no longer a point of reference. Being is convertible into infinite forms, and values of identity are constituted primarily through the manipulation of technology. The materials that constitute the substance of design have already gone through so many transformations that their essential nature is no longer evident. Cyberspace is a simulacrum, standing on its own as a copy without the real model, its relation to the old model of old materials and ideals is so attenuated that it can no longer properly be called a model.

In addition, cyberspace constructs–data constructs organized in the shape of real-life architectural constructs are both **immanent** [containing and hiding something, protected with passwords and/or ICE mechanisms] and **imminent** [reflecting their inner essence]. Cyberspace is then realized through this bi-polarity in the totalizing memory [which is superior, since it is equipped with the interface that interprets the world and reacts accordingly]. We are facing a generative structure that does not get organized around a centering axis but is actually spread in all directions. It is the real Baudrillardian simulation, the substitution of signs of the real for the real. Cyberspace constructs and the very fabric of c-space itself stands for nothing but itself and refers only to other signs. They are of course grounded by the gravitational pull of contextual meanings but without them component images run together, dissolve and become interchangeable.

It is obvious that the age of ideologies is gone; we are participants of a paradigm shift of electronic transformation, which is first envisioned in the cyberpunk scene in *Neuromancer*. We have [both in the Gibsonian setting and in real life] a society of intense information, instead of one that is of intense energy exchange. [Nagy 38] The possibilities and new concepts that are introduced by the electronic [re-]production and sharing of data changes not only society but our frame of mind as well. Leibniz's concept of space that is abstracted from matter by the mind to explain simultaneity

and the displacement of matter is no longer working. Cyberspace expands the concept of space through its reductionist environment where everything is reduced to icons, binary codes, height and depth and perpendicularity. It exists independently from what is visible, conceptually embedded in an intelligent mechanism. Cyberspace is spatially transparent, in which physical and electronic realities overlap, in which realities can be constructed, observed and experienced. It is the union of seven "co"s, namely: co-existance, communion, communication, cohesion, continuity, compensation and concept[uality].

Foucault calls these kinds of space "heterotopias" [contrasted with "utopias"] which are nearly always described as highly political and primarily social spaces designed within the constraints of a well-meaning tyrant's imagination, and which do not exist.] Heterotopias are textured spaces that exist in the real world, differentiated social spaces, similar to the cinema, where several contradictory social spaces are juxtaposed in a single real space.

As for the aspects of reality in his definition, they match the Gibsonian cyberspace perfectly, namely, heterotropias exist outside all places and yet they are localizable; they create a space of illusion to show that space is illusory.

All these features and characteristics of cyberspace imply a certain presence of a particular atmosphere and the body's power responding to it. The implied framework is defied by Michael Clynes, one of the forefathers and creators of the "cyborgs" of the 20th century. He says that humanity lives in a "real virtual reality" given to us by our senses. According to him there are no colors, sounds or smells as our brains create the sensory world. "When you see anything", Clynes affirms, "you see it out in space, even though the light touches your retina. […] when you hear a sound coming, you don't feel it normally at your eardrum, unlike when your body is touched. Evolution has figured out a projected virtual reality that your brain creates for you." [Gray 52]

This problem of reality in reality in (or over) reality is reflected in several key scenes in the *Sprawl trilogy*, the continuous harassment of actors [Case, Bobby Quine] hi-jacked from their own reality to a virtual construct

[in a virtual construct!], the appearance of allegedly virtual loas in real-life characters, the mere existence of simstim as the greatest entertainment business in the novel's setting all point towards the fragility of the source of experience. Whenever the user jacks into the matrix, he connects to "virtually" countless levels of potential sensory and intellectual experiencing. The priorities of those different levels are supervised by imperatives, which instantly redefine power and gender hierarchies.

When, in *Count Zero* Jaylene Slide grabs Bobby Quine to his own LA flat, a female hacker emerges who has the power to kill all unwanted trespassers in cyberspace, who lives by the entertainment of creating hallucinatory settings in the matrix. The relation to the dark goddess is obvious: she functions as the virtual cold-blooded killer counterpart of Molly Millions' corporeal assassin self. Women are far more powerful with technology than without, and I will elaborate on this in chapter 4.

Summarizing the notion of cyberspace so far, I suggest that it is a game of transmutation that unites location and "non-location", beyond the real and the imagined. In itself, it is a multiple spatiality of radical openness, where everything can be found, where the possibility of discovery is endless, where the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the repetitive and the differential come together. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* the cyberspace community itself receives a fatal blow–however infinite and omnipresent the cyberspace seems to be, biotechnology opens up the prospect of forging new personal universes [which is the Aleph, the extract of the data comprising cyberspace, rigged to *Count Zero*] and the world of loas comes apart from the realm of cyberspace–and at the same time it populates the virtual terrain of human brains. The last fragments of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* serve as an answer to show what virtuality is like, without human beings.

> "'I don't understand,' she said. 'If cyberspace consists of the sum total of data in the human system…'
> 'Yeah,' the Finn said [...] 'but nobody's talkin' human, see?' [...]
> 'My own feeling,' Colin said, 'is that it's all so much more amusing, this way…'" [308]

The gradual dissolution of the human factor thus becomes the precondition of the gradually re-interpreted, overlapping and deconstructed cyberworlds. In *Neuromancer*, the artificial is unbounded by any presence outside it. Gibson's characters have no grounding in the real; they are constructed of motives and impulses that are facilitated by the manipulation of artificial products. While some characters are more human than others, none possess any inherent resistance to the incursion of the artificial in their bodies or their lives and some, like Wintermute (an Artificial Intelligence that intervenes in social life) are totally artificial. Part of the fascination with *Neuromancer* outside the cyberpunk scene is Gibson's portrayal of a world in which the artificial is dominant and where the ability to manipulate it is the most potent human activity.

3.0 THE BODY

Every human being is by default located in a certain space and time. Space is either a physical location or it can exist simply as conceived by the mind. The reason of the necessity of "implacement" is that individuals need to interact, to engage in the creation of relations, propelled by the need to understand our limits within the existence that surrounds us. Space functions on the base of intrinsic bonds. These bonds give us parameters for our activity of "signification" in the world. Individuals are immersed in space, from where they obtain all the necessary information to build their physical and mental spheres, gaining an image of the world that goes beyond the communication of sensorial organs. The opportunity/possibility to travel among multiple environments without violating borderlines [like a gap in the continuity of the experience] relies on two things, firstly, on the individual cultural availability, secondly, on the considerate opinion of the concept of space. In western civilizations, we usually think of space as a homogeneous and isotropic entity, in which the subject moves without breaking the continuity.

In technological society, [I simplify Gibson's information-processing culture here for the sake of clarity], claim Kroker and Kroker, the body is of a "purely rhetorical existence", it is a "metaphor for a culture where power

itself is always fictional". As they center the body as the "rhetorical centre of the lost subject of desire after desire," they differentiate economic, political, psychoanalytical, scientific, and sports rhetoric. [22] A rhetoric of economics targets the body as a site for the acquisition of private property, forging the archetype of the "possessive individual", investing it with ideologies of desire. A political rhetoric constitutes the body "in the form of 'public opinion' as an elite substitution for the missing matter of the social, and massages, manipulates and mediates public opinion at will" [22]. The psychoanalytic rhetoric recovers the body as the signifier of the unconscious, the scientific rhetoric would "speak now of the existence of the teleonomic body at the intersection of genetic biology, structural linguistics, and cybernetics." [22] Finally, the sports rhetoric would celebrate the commoditization of certain body parts related to certain sports [feet-soccer, arms-basketball,etc].

This drives me to Kroker and Kroker's postmodern panic theory and the recycling/customizing of the physical body: the projection of the existential crisis onto the enemy without overwritten by the introjection of the public crisis, causing a revision of the body surrounded by a whole contagion of panic virii and panic mythologies [AIDS, herpes, bulimia, anorexia etc.]

> KROKER'S POSTMODERN PANIC THEORY - Panic is the key psychological mood of postmodern culture." [Panic Encyclopaedia, 13] Kroker argues that his interpretation of panic has the reverse meaning of the word's classical sense. The classical meaning refers to the appearance of the god Pan, a moment of arrest, calm, "a resting point between frenzy and reflection" [16], the Krokerian panic signifies firstly, the dissolution of the internal entity, secondly, the disappearance of "external standards of public conduct". His panic theory includes a fully technologized self at a point where culture and science are mirror-images of each other. Panic materializes the catastrophic and the hyperreal.

Kroker and Kroker's custom-made/customized panic body is a discursive, symbolic entity, a deleted body that is held together by the memories

of the mind, by names, by the gloss of the Japanese fashion zines. It is not an invitation to action, a potentiality of movement as it had been. As a result, the meaning of the body has become a strategic concept that exists pragmatically at the interface of design and use. Gibson's characters have designed themselves, without any external ethical imperatives or an inner sense of self to guide them.

3.1 The Mind Without Body: The Mind Exteriorized

The concept of the mind as an interface is no longer viable. Marshall McLuhan's assumption that the media-net would become merely an extension of the human nervous system with the humanoid core remaining its "same old self" provided a touch stone for both the liberation rhetoric of writers such as Howard Rheingold and for televangelists seeking the redemption of the free market through the virtual corporation: a model of business as the management of flows that is at once homely and sublime.

Disembodied intelligence is often a con in cyberpunk literature. Glowing elite minds having migrated into data-space at some point recognise a co-dependency with the material world and a new kind of physicality emerges, something like what J. G. Ballard imagines in his metaphor of the supercession of civilisation by the crystalline. The entropic and troublesome flesh that is sloughed off in cyberpunk fiction allegedly of strongly masculine essentialism is implicitly interwoven with the dynamics of self-processing cognition and intentionality that are relegated to a substance called mind.

The first step of the body's reconfiguration emerges in Kevin Kelly's description of the body in the 21st century:

> We know that our eyes are more brain than camera. An eyeball has as much processing power as a supercomputer. Much of our visual perception happens in the thin retina where light first strikes us, long before the central brain gets to consider the scene. Our spinal cord is not merely a trunk line transmitting phone calls from the brain. It too thinks. We are a lot closer to the truth when we point to our heart and not to our head as the centre of behaviours. Our emotions swim in a

soup of hormones and peptides that percolate through our whole body. [online]

Out of this body, which is muddied with peptides, hormones, viruses, pesticides, sugars and illicit substances emerges the cognitive body. To avoid the dread of the mechanic body, let me acknowledge that the homo sapiens evolved as a result of a deep, co-evolutionary intimacy with the "in-human", with tools, with the machine-like. At the very core of our development lies the gradual bootstrapping of the brain which according to neo-darwinist evolutionary theory, is by great likelihood the result of a possibility space opened up through the development of the opposable thumb. A mutation in a part of a body with far-reaching side effects on all others opens up an explosive array of relations with other forms of matter–the greatest sign of our real post-human state.

Computers are embodied culture, hard-wired epistemology and in the area I am focusing on two parallel sequences. They are implicitly related but operate in different ways. One is the renewal of encyclopaedism.

At the centre lies the desire for the enforcement of meaning. The encyclopaedic organisation of data preserves a point of privilege from where the eye can frame the objects of its desire. There are no obstacles in cyberspace, only straight paths cleared to open unimpeded vistas. Within this space, intention steps toward the user, to be understood without the hindrance of literary convention. All can be conveyed from within the universal iconic language, a visual and pre-linguistic key, clearly carrying reference to the ciphered world. The virtual architectural space has been constructed by an unseen author, whose intention is usually to impose a closure on a narrative, to provide the goal to be reached by means of one of many approaches, the reader/user/participant/player, can wander, but must not stray from the intended thoroughfares. From any point, it is possible to look back and take solace in the fact that everything experienced is recorded, marked, referenced and ultimately retraceable.

The other sequence is the bureaucratisation of the body into organs and the privileging of the eye in multimedia.

3.1.1 The Bureaucratization of the Body Into Organs

Much has been made of the notion of the eye as the primary organ around which bodies–literally–organise. The eye is seen as a unifying and explanatory media in its own right.

Within multimedia, the desire to transfer information without transforming its integrity has remained strong and the senses have been prioritised and valorised in order that this system should work efficiently. With the eye situated as the locus of authority, assurance is passed to the other sense, which are called upon to further validate the evidence presented before them. Following the sales mantra "Image, text, sound, video!", graphical interfaces reinforce this rigorous separation of the senses into a hierarchy of feedback devices.

Within the sight-machine of contemporary multimedia then, the mind has to be re-thought or re-programmed as a simple processor of information graphics. Once recognised and regulated, sense can be made and order imposed on data.

Through a representation, stacking a mind-melding transparency can be achieved: interfacing the disembodied mind and disinterested data. The mind is immersed in the encyclopaedic data-space. That the eye, sloughing off the meat in an attempt to fuse mind and data, one electronic pulse with another, chooses to confirm its conferred status shouldn't be a surprise. The eye, released from constraint, with a "mind" of its own, can take any position it wishes. What is remarkable is that this pursuit of the eye realises itself in most contemporary multimedia as nothing much more than a subset of behaviourism.

3.2 The Body Without Mind: The Body Exteriorized

In an "age of affordable beauty" [Gibson, *Neuromancer* 9] the body is dealt with in terms of manipulation. Implants, the availability of aphrodisiacs and the differentiated conjuncture of plastic and cosmetic surgery shifts the contrast from natural to artificial, from flesh to metal, from real to the ungraspable. Manipulation appears as a multi-layered add-on virus, dehumanizing subjects, legitimizing tendencies of cyborgization.

Among manipulating techniques concerned with the relationship of the organic/mechanic, bioengineering and bionics play a prominent role. Bioengineering focuses on the possibility of applying technological principles to the body by studying organic structures in analogy of the mechanical properties of substances (like muscles and bones). Bionics works on the premise that the human body's design principles may be used as models for new mechanical devices. Gibson offers an imaginative articulation of these developments in techno-science to show that the body as a product is in fact a shifting territory of specific cultural contexts, of competing structures of meaning that cannot be explained as parts of nature. Gibson shows exactly what Wajcman notes about technology, that "...it also fundamentally embodies a culture or set of social relations made up of certain sorts of knowledge, beliefs, desires or principles" [Cavallaro 74]

The systematic management of the body's minutest functions by medical technologies seems to annihilate its materiality, pointing towards an evacuated and disintegrating organism. Though I propose that this is not the demise of the flesh, it is the materialization of the transcendence myth, transcending, **updating** the body through disembodiment to telecommercial data fluxes, personality engineering, mind recordings and simstim comas. Gibson alters his bodies but he does not yet transcend them. Materiality in his images of vat-grown flesh, organ commerce or exoskeletons plays a crucial role as it underlines the heavy physical setting of his stories. McCaffery presents him as a "gomi no sensei", a master of junk as his planet is filled with gomi [waste, garbage]. Gibson's fascination with the bodily qualities of gomi mirrors his own stylistic proclivities. In the McCaffery interview, he describes his method of writing like this: "stitching together all the junk that's floating around in my head. One of my private pleasures is to go to the corner Salvation Army thrift shop and look at all the junk." [McCaffery 277]

The "average" cyberpunk landscape is choked with the debris of both language and objects. Gibson concentrates on the surface to get to the aesthetic of the age he describes. Does this mean that the human inside becomes completely interchangeable with the artificial outside? Darko Suvin points out that "for cyberpunks technology is inside, not outside, the per-

sonal body and the mind itself" [McCafffery 352] It is quite clear, then, that technological editing is not something that can be cherished unproblematically. Self-reinvention through consumer desires benefits only the hyperrich. "Now, some night, you get maybe too artistic", Case is told at the beginning of Neuromancer by Ratz, the bartender, "you wind up in the clinic tanks, spare parts." [11]

3.3 THE BODY AS COMMODITY: THE BODY WITHOUT MIND

I have previously shown that the body is not impregnable. In fact, the commoditization of corporeality is largely based on the illicit trade of body parts, dictated by ideological and economic imperatives.

Neuromancer's Case is subjected to enhancing neurosurgery so that he may become the perfect pawn in the service of corporational battle. His female counterpart, Molly has deliberately chosen to improve her body to gain power in a social structure that would otherwise identify her only as a ruthless mercenary. The cyber-aristocracy on the other hand who own the economies in which the likes of Case and Molly are manipulated, are able to postpone death–but none of them is ever lucky enough to return to the realm of the flesh–the realm of life. *Count Zero's* multimillionaire Josef Virek has the power to project simulacra of his body in a wide range of simulated contexts but these apparitions are not homogeneous, the gaps between them are all linked to the real body torn by cancer.

Gibson's bodies–both the powerful and the disenfranchised–are symbiotic with medical technologies that are both enabling and oppressive at the same time. Gibson's short stories collected under the title *Burning Chrome* highlight the ambiguity of the body/technology relationship. "*Johnny Mnemonic*" depicts the protagonist with data storage in his brain, which has been modeled through microsurgery. Though his brain is made to resemble a computer, he cannot know or recall any of the information filed in the storage in his head. Despite Johnny's eventual success with making good money with the help of a so-called Squid mechanism, there are hints throughout the story that Johnny's condition is comparable to some unnameable disease or a demonic possession. "The program. I had no idea what it contained. I still don't. I only sing the song, with zero comprehen-

sion." [Gibson, *Burning Chrome* 17] Right at the end, Johnny fantasizes about the removal of his condition as if it were a cancer: "...one day I'll have a surgeon dig all the silicon out of my amygdalae, and I'll live with my own memories and nobody else's" [22]

The "*Belonging Kind*" [co-written with John Shirley] dramatizes the body's boundaries. A mysterious woman and her drinking companions whose bodies alter drastically from one bar to the next in all physiognomical signifiers of age, status and class are as fluid as the famous T-1000 model of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Both the technological and the mythological connotations of sudden metamorphoses that are evoked by Gibson's narrative is reminiscent of Franz Kafka,

> ...it was there, in the light of a streetlamp, like a stage light, that she began to change. The street was deserted.
> She was crossing the street. She stepped off the curb and it began. It began with tints in her hair–at first he thought they were reflections. But there was no neon there to cast the blobs of color that appeared, color sliding and merging like oil sticks. Then the colors bled away and in three seconds, she was white-blond. He was sure it was a trick of light until her dress began to writhe twisting across her body like a shrink-wrap plastic. Part of it fell away entirely and lay in curling sheds on the pavement shed like the skin of some fabulous animal. [Gibson, Burning Chrome 46]

The body here is encoded as a function of interior design. The protean bodies the protagonist, Coretti, follows are postmodern items of decoration. They are merely fixtures defined entirely by their sartorial attributes.

In "*The Gernsback Continuum*" the ephemeral nature of the human body uncertain of its own reality is paralleled by the transitoriness of the body/form of built space. The narrator–an architectural photographer–receives a severe blow when he finds himself penetrating the membrane of probability and when he envisions an airliner breaching the boundaries of his own body. The narrator's frailty stems from his exposure to a culture that makes the body redundant and iconizes it at the same time.

"*The Winter Market*" questions the body's materiality by turning it into a vehicle for simstim (simulated stimulation), i.e. commercially edited dreams. At the same time, it emphasizes physical dimension in its least savoury manifestations in the character of Lise. She is defined by a fatal illness, which induces extreme pain and may only be kept at bay by an exoskeleton. Lise is incapable of tolerating the sensation of total passivity, the exoskeleton accentuates her bodiliness by mapping the body's inside on the outside, doubling her materiality. On the other hand, her interfacing with technology attenuates her corporeality for her the ultimate aim is the final escape from the prison of the flesh, which she happens to achieve.

"*Burning Chrome*" embodies Gibson's recurring concerns of the body/technology relationship. It emphasizes, on one hand, the ambivalent nature of cyberspace as a map of incorporeal geometrical abstractions, on the other, a physical world in which ICE mechanisms can literally kill illegitimate users (i.e. hackers). Furthermore, it highlights certain analogies between the physical organism and computer technology. Its main male characters are portrayed as "Bobby Quine and Automatic Jack. Bobby is the thin, pale dude with the dark glasses, and Jack's the mean-looking guy with the myoelectric arm. Bobby's software and Jack's hard; Bobby punches console and Jack runs down all the little things that can give you an edge." [Gibson, *Burning Chrome* 170]

"*Burning Chrome*" typifies cyberpunk's configuration of the body by simultaneously presenting the natural body as an incomplete entity [dependent on the possibility of a prosthetic enhancement] and emphasizing the central role played by that body in the acquisition of the prosthesis. Rikki is driven by the desire to purchase the Zeiss Ikon eyes, which will enable her to become a simstim star. She has to edit her natural form in such a way that her body may be transcended in the pursuit for fame in the simstim scene. In this respect she is one with Molly of *Neuromancer*, none of them has any choice save the sacrifice of their bodies, short-cutting their sensory perceptions for the delight of "closet necrophiliacs" [Gibson, *Burning Chrome* 187].