DEATH IN THE CYBERSPACE: THE THEME OF DEATH IN WILLIAM GIBSON AND BRUCE STERLING’S WORKS

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Abstract: This article discusses how the theme of death is employed in the Cyberpunk novels of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. The writers of cyberpunk novels present a dark world in which the human being has lost his place in the centre of chain of being and under the threat of extinction not only in the concrete world but also in the abstract, cyberworld. Human-machine combinations replace man in the cyberpunk world and it is no more possible to view the theme of death in its classical sense, since it also changes by the influence of technological evolvement. This study presents how this theme is handled in the works of aforementioned writers.

Key Words: Cyberspace, cyberpunk, the theme of death, virtual world, William Gibson, Bruce Sterling

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to discuss the theme of death and its ramifications as they appear in context of popular cyberpunk novels of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. The word “death” implies the material end of something, in other words, “to die” means to turn into something that does not exist. Michael Benedict, who is a well-known critic of science fiction area describes Cyberspace also as something that “does not exist” in his article “Cyberspace: First Steps” (1992). Therefore, the title “Death in the Cyberspace” is quite ironic in its essence.

All of the civilizations in the world contain stories that deal with endless life and inevitability of death throughout the history. However, the wave of industrial and technological rise that start through the end of eighteenth century and reached the peak through the end of the twentieth century changed the content of such stories as well. Bruce Sterling puts forward that science fiction has been dealing with the influences of technology on human life; however what distinguishes Cyberpunk from the previous science fiction is that, it regards technology as not just “a phenomenon that has a strong influence on human beings but as something very close to man, even under his skin, in his brain, as a part that is completing him, or even sometimes controlling him” (Sterling, 1986:xiii). The social perception of the phenomena like birth, life, and death are no more regarded as something
that might not be controlled, and the man is no more just a subservient servant of fate but he is able to control the world as he has never done before. The material life in the world which is lived by the body is no more the only option for existence, since it is possible to lead a bodyless life in the virtual world away from the restraints of the concrete body.

The works of Gibson and Sterling can be taken as the examples to present how the technological changes affected the notion of death in the late twentieth century. The word Cyberspace, that define the virtual world, was coined by William Gibson during the 1980s, reflecting the influence of advanced technology and it can be regarded as a place where the body “dies” but the spirit (or the mind) “survives”. In the work of Gibson, and Sterling the phenomenon of death has been treated in an untraditional way presenting how people leave their body behind and prefer the endless opportunities in the virtual world or “matrix” as Gibson calls it. They describe the body as “meat” or “flesh,” or as Case refers to in the Neuromancer “the prison of the soul”. In the cyberpunk works, the body is presented only as a temporary shelter for different identities and death is not a kind of end as it is comprehended in the classical sense.

This paper aims to present how this subject matter is handled in the works of Gibson and Sterling who wrote their novels during the 1980s.

DEATH IN THE CYBERWORLD

First of all, the sub-genre of Cyberpunk should be investigated in order to comprehend the change of of perception of the theme of death in the works of aforementioned authors. Although Cyberpunk appears to be a recent movement in science fiction, it is possible to see its roots are deeply sunk in traditional popular science fiction. The critics of Cyberpunk regard this movement as risen from within the science fiction genre – against the tradition-, and it is not as an invasion but a modern reform (Sterling, 1986: xv). Therefore, its effect within the genre became rapid and powerful.

Cyberpunk is defined as a new “New Wave”, responding to the changing icons of the time, and appealed, or aimed to appeal to a new generation of science fiction readers. The first part of the word “cyber” comes from “cybernetics”, the study of systems in machines and animals, and “punk” from 1970’s rock terminology, meaning young, aggressive, alienated, and anti-Establishment. The writers of Cyberpunk dealt with themes such as body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration and mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neuchemistry – using the techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity and the nature of the self. What separates Cyberpunk from other types of science fiction is that, generally, Cyberpunk occurs in the not-so-distant-future and the events generally takes place on Earth, in a time where technology is prominent. The characters are generally “average Johnny Mnemonics”, an anti-hero’s name that became a prototype to refer to the same type of character created by
Gibson at the beginning of his writing career. Such characters do not present too much virtue and are not after a holy mission like saving a country, protecting a society, fighting for religious ideals or freedom; but just try to save the day and survive through the help of high technology in a ruined world. Cyberpunk delights in the combination of high-tech low-lives, so it is possible to see lots of crime and backstreet stories, in which there are data pirates, drugs, back-stabbing, misdemeanours and so on.

The emphasis on the potential interconnection between the human and the technological is the central characteristic of Cyberpunk. Critics such as Baudrillard and Haraway underline that the human and technology are no longer so dichotomous in the era called the “postmodern”.

Larry Mccaffery claims that “Cyberpunk seems to be the only art systematically dealing with the most crucial political, philosophical, moral, and cultural issues of our day” (qtd. in Olsen, 1992:16) for the period in which cyberpunk has occurred.

In his The Perfect Crime, Baudrillard comments on the extermination of “the Other” in the era of the Virtual that is defined as the era of liquidation of the Real and the Referential. For Baudrillard the era of Virtual witnesses:

The otherness of death – staved off by unrelenting medical intervention. Of the face and the body – run to earth by plastic surgery. Of the world – dispelled by Virtual Reality... If information is the site of the perfect crime against otherness. No more other: communication. No more enemy: negotiation... No more death: the immortality of the clone. No more otherness: identity and difference. No more illusion: hyperreality, Virtual reality. No more destiny. The perfect crime (Baudrillard, 1996: 109-110).

The Cyberpunk world is thus, an output of the “perfect crime”. Baudrillard defines the unconditional realization of the world by the actualization of all data, and the transformation of all our acts and all events into pure information (in short what we see in Gibson and Sterling’s works) as the perfect crime. To him, the history of the world is completed in real time by the workings of virtual technology (Baurillard, 1996: 25). That is to say, the deeds that mankind devoted itself to do are done by computers or machines in very short times, and that makes human beings feel inactive. People are living their lives not in real time, but living and suffering directly on screen or in front of screen – in a virtual reality- having their thoughts encoded by the computers. “Make your revolution in real time – not in the street, but in a recording studio. Live out your amorous passions in real time - the whole thing on video from start to finish” (Baurillard, 1996: 26). Thus, death is also experienced not in the real time but in virtual world, as a part of a game that can be replayed.

Gibson, the popular writer of the “Cyberpunk” movement, who is famous for having coined the word “cyberspace”, has become one of the central points of reference for Cyberpunk
science fiction, having dealt with subjects such as the Internet or Virtual Reality much before either existed during the 1980s. Virtual reality, that Gibson focuses on, is a computer-generated visual, audible and tactile multimedia experience which aims to surround the human body with an artificial sensorium of sight, sound and touch for Featherstone and Burrows (Featherstone and Burrows, 1995).

All of the phenomenon like birth, life and death are experienced in a global computer network, “the matrix” which is entered by the users through “jacking in” via plugs into “cyberspace decks” as Case does in the *Neuromancer* by Gibson. Then, “death” is in a sense not being connected to these plugs. The users can move in the matrix from one three dimensional system of data to another, which appear as cities of data. This is presented as only way of existing in Cyberpunk works.In Gibsonian “cyberspace”, there are other intelligent entities which do not have relations with the outside world but can become more and more powerful in the matrix by uniting. Artificial Intelligences (AIs), like the Wintermute or the Neuromancer in the *Neuromancer* are such powers as referred in the novel: “Wintermute is the recognition code for an AI...Artificial intelligence.” (*Neuromancer*, 73) or “Wintermute was a simple cube of white light, that very simplicity suggesting extreme complexity” (*Neuromancer*, 150). However, it is seen that these entities are depicted as more human-like beings than the human beings, and the act of living is much more attributed to these entities than people.

The novels in the Sprawl Trilogy are all set in a fictional near future world where, characteristic of the Cyberpunk world, the nation state has withered away and power lies in multinational corporations, in which electronic information technology has come to not only dominate forms of life recognizable to the generations of the twentieth century, but to create new and increasingly unrecognizable forms of life as well.

The Trilogy envisions the future in the Cyberpunk framework as a place where humans and machines increasingly interact and technology invades the human body in the form of grafts, implants, cloning and carbon sockets which allow machines direct access to the body. The theme of combination of man and machines, in the form of cyborgs, which became central to most of the cyberpunk works, is realized through the idea of software that can be inserted directly into the body like computer disks, making the body in essence a programmable machine. Conversely, in the Trilogy, machines become more human as well. Technology provides the option of creating artificial “constructs” that create a person’s intellect, image and personality so that the person can “live” even after his/her death.

The characters presented in the Trilogy spend much of their time in the “matrix” for work or other purposes. Thus the nature of sense of reality changes in the work of Gibson. Humans “live” when they are plugged into the “matrix”, but feel dead whether they are in the real world. A common addiction for Sprawl inhabitants are “simstims” (*simulated stimu-
li), a form of virtual reality that allows people to experience a television program, typically soap operas, from the point of view of a fictitious media personality. Therefore, being away from their real selves brings them “life”.

Gibson’s Neuromancer is actually based on the theme of death, birth and re-union. Case the protagonist, feels dead away from the cyber world, since he is under a ban to enter it. In the cyberspace of Gibson, death turns out to be a challenge that the talented ones can overcome, “Well, if we can get the flatline, we’re home free. He was the best. You know he died braindeath three times?” (Neuromancer, 50).

Death, described as “the daughter of Night and the sister of sleep” (Chevalier et al., 1996, 277) is also endowed with powers of regeneration and it is the impermanent and perishable aspect of living, like the “Net” or “Matrix” of Gibson’s virtual world.

Cyberspace is a kind of “hubringer of revelation” (Chevalier et al., 1996, 277) for characters like Case or Bobby as death, and it is considered to be the beginning of a new life like death is considered to be in most of the religious beliefs and classical mythologies. However, death is still mystical because of the unknown nature of it. It is a cover as Earth and it has negative connotations although it is regarded as liberating the ascensional powers of the spirit, since it is uncontrollable. The cyberspace on the other hand, is to be controlled by talented hackers, crackers or the owners of power and wealth that control them.

In the trilogy death, likewise, is presented as something controllable by the owners of power. The ones who control the technology due to their economic and politic power also control death.

Biz here was a constant subliminal hum, and death the accepted punishment for laziness, carelessness, lack of grace, the failure to heed the demands of an intricate protocol. (Neuromancer, 6)

Life is also controlled by some hands as death and speed marks lives of people in the “real” world:

Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button. Stop hustling and you sank without a trace, but move a little too swiftly and you’d break the fragile surface tension of the black market; either way, you were gone, with nothing left of you but some vague memory in the mind of a fixture like Ratz, though heart or lungs or kidneys might survive in the service of some stranger with New Yen for the clinic tanks (Neuromancer, 7).

Thus, cyberspace, in a way, equates death and life as marking both of them to be controllable.

Michael Bruce Sterling wrote The Artificial Kid (1980), Schismatrix (1985) and Islands in the Net (1988) in the same decade in which Gibson has written The Sprawl Trilogy. He points out that, for the Cyberpunks, “technology is not the bottled genie of remote Big
Science boffins; it is pervasive, utterly intimate, inside our minds” (Sterling, 1986: xiii). Thus, he clarifies that the Cyberpunk authors deal with 1980’s street culture combined with technology that is in every day use. Sterling’s works present a similar environment based on technological power, which is not different from the world presented in Gibson’s work in that, united corporations and mega-cartels serve as the controlling power in the Schismatrix, The Artificial Kid, and Islands in the Net. He describes a world marked by terror and anxiety, caused by or tried to be solved through high technology as is seen in the work of Gibson.

Schismatrix is Sterling’s only novel-length treatment of the “Shaper/Mechanist universe” that he had dealt with in his five short stories in which he employed various Cyberpunk themes which he published between 1982 and 1984. Sterling stresses anti-human technologies in the work by depicting a mid-future solar system around the 2200s (though it continues to 26th century) where the people on Earth and people in space agreed never to have any contact with one-another.

Human life becomes longer and easier for some people in the universe of Schismatrix, but on the other hand it is limited and over-controlled for some others who want to survive away from their own world. For example, strict rules are defined for the ones who want to pass to Zaibatsu’s side.

The Zaibatsu recognizes one civil right: the right to death. You may claim your right at any time, under any circumstances...If you claim your right you will be immediately and painlessly terminated...Termination is also enforced for certain other behaviours... If you physically threaten the habitat, you will be killed. If you interfere with our monitoring devices, you will be killed. If you cross the sterilized zone, you will be killed. You will also be killed for crimes against humanity (Schismatrix, 10).

In Schismatrix, Sterling deals with one of the greatest fears of man, to become defeated by machines or biological weapons, which is also felt in the previous Cyberpunk examples, in a more prominent way. How Sterling defines death in his work “Life was the issue. And death would be the proof” (Schismatrix, 5) in fact presents the idea of death in the cyberspace. Contantine says that “Mankind is a dead issue, now cousin. There are no more souls. Only states of mind” (Schismatrix, 59) to Lindsay as he is presenting a Shaper experiment on a virus for immortality. Thus, it is clear that man is also regarded as a kind computer whose brain is the only important part, and this can also be modified or open to process. Another familiar topic to the reader of the end of the twentieth century was the length of human life, which is still one of the most frequently debated concerns of media. In Artificial Kid and Schismatrix, this concern of human beings for a longer life span is referred to in many different parts of the novel. Second Justice in Schismatrix, for example, is depicted as an older woman “maybe close to a century...her constant abuse of hormone treatments had made her metabolism a patchwork of anomalies” (Schismatrix, 52). St-
ling continues to bring up his discussions on life expectancy and life standards which he had started to bring up in his earlier works to *Schismatrix*. The influence of science and technology on the lifespan of human beings is vaticinated in various cases in which the ages of people are referred to. Alexandrina, for instance, is fifty year older than Lindsay but she still looks very young and beautiful. Therefore, inborn or natural elements lose their importance in such a world. Beauty and intelligence become obtainable features if one can afford them: “The Shaper woman floated closer. Lindsay saw that she was beautiful. It meant very little. Beauty was cheap among Shapers” (*Schismatrix*, 70). The Mechanists as opposed to the Shapers use different ways for longer lives. They keep their elders in a matrix of life-support tubes, eyes wired to a video input, in a sterile suite flooded with oxygen at nights.

**CONCLUSION**

Consequently, the writers of Cyberpunk handle death in an avant-garde way by considering the technological and social changes in the world. The experiments for a longer life or immortality and development in the various fields such as genetic engineering and computer engineering reshape the imagery they employ in their works. Virtual life provides new opportunities to the characters depicted by cyberpunk authors, in that new stereotypes are created in this framework as it is mentioned above. As a result, Gibson and Sterling employ the theme of death in cyberspace in a quite unfamiliar way by playing with the boundaries of life and death and reality and virtual world.

**REFERENCES**


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