

Second Place: Academic

"Three Figures: An Analysis of *Neuromancer*, the Body, and Cyberspace"

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William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is, according to at least two experts in Science Fiction, a foundational novel in the cyberpunk genre (of which Gibson is often called the father, whether or not he originated the genre) and the launch point of his career. Gibson grew up in the American South, where he discovered Science Fiction, but it wasn't until he moved to Canada and settled down with his wife and children that he began to have success in his writing. Gibson's first short story was published in 1977 and, after publishing four stories in 1981, work on *Neuromancer*, which was to be his first novel, began. *Neuromancer* was published in 1984 and was lauded immediately, receiving the triple crown of Sci-Fi: the Hugo, Nebula, and Philip K. Dick awards. (Miller; Westfahl)

I tell you this backstory not to waste your time, but instead to give an important background for the central thematic tension in *Neuromancer*: the struggle between the virtual and the corporeal. Gibson was a lifelong fan of Science Fiction, but had also settled down into a traditional marriage; in other words, he was connected to both the postmodern virtual world of Science Fiction and the contemporary corporeal world of Canadian/American society. *Neuromancer* continues this duality, balancing both the virtual world of cyberspace and technology and the corporeal world of sex, drugs, and violence. This analysis explores that duality as it is represented through six (or seven, depending on how you count) characters: Case, Molly, Armitage (or Corto), Peter Riviera, Wintermute (and Neuromancer), and Dixie Flatline.

Case, the novel's protagonist, is what, in Gibson's universe, is called a cowboy. Cowboys like Case don't wander the wild west, but instead traverse the virtual equivalent: cyberspace. Case, however, can't access cyberspace when the novel begins, as he crossed one of his employers, whereupon they "damaged his nervous system," to ensure that he "fell into the prison of his own flesh." (Gibson 6) Case's journey through the novel is one that starts fully in the corporeal but approaches the virtual as the novel reaches its climax. Case, much like his fellow cowboys, despises the corporeal body in favor of the virtual world of cyberspace. In essence, Case seeks a posthuman existence closer to Moravec's understanding of the cyborg: "the body is obsolete and must be transcended." (Brians 128) However, even after his connection to cyberspace is restored, Case is still bound to the corporeal world.

Case, shortly after waking up from the surgery that fixed the damage to his nervous system, begins a sexual relationship with Molly that continues throughout much of the book. He is also a drug addict at the beginning of the novel, to the point that he goes out of his way in Freeside to find a stimulant that can make him high despite his augmentations. Case's job is to be a cowboy, immersed in the "consensual hallucination," hacking his way through security and finding information for his employers. (Gibson 5) While doing that job, Case is fully immersed in the virtual, but the installation of the simstim switch blurs the line between virtual and corporeal. Case spends much of the final heist flipping between cyberspace and the simstim, which allows him access to all of Molly's senses. Case leaves his own body behind, transcending the body, but also exists in the corporeal realm through Molly. To use the terms from Foster, Case wants to be a "Robopath," removing himself from flesh as much as possible, but he, in the end, succumbs to being a "meat puppet." (60) When Molly is injured, Case, accompanied by Maelcum, ventures out to complete her part of the heist. He is present for the merging of Wintermute and Neuromancer

both in the corporeal realm and the virtual realm. In that moment, Case is directly responsible for the creation of a sentient AI, the peak of power in the virtual realm. Afterwards, though, he chooses to settle in the real life, finding a job and a significant other, rooting him in the corporeal world. However, the existence of the construct of Case also roots him in the virtual world, his organic form being translated into the virtual world by means of machines, blending the lines between the organic and technical as discussed by Escobar, et al.

Molly, too, has a complicated relationship with the virtual and corporeal that also blurs the lines between the organic and technical. She is a much more literal cyborg, following the path of Foster's "Robopath" by augmenting her body. To pay for those augmentations, Molly was a sex worker, with a "cut-out chip" installed that made her unaware of what was happening. (Gibson 157) Molly describes the sensation as being "like cyberspace, but blank." (158) As Molly's body is engaged in the corporeal, her mind is escaped to the virtual, blending the lines between organic sexual functions and technical existence in cyberspace. Molly's existence between the corporeal and virtual continues, as her cyborg augmentations are used for corporeal violence. Molly's claws, perhaps the greatest sign of her cyborg nature, are referenced both in terms of violence and sexuality, both of which will be discussed more when we discuss Riviera. Far from the separation of mind from body that Moravec discusses, Molly exists more like Haraway's cyborg, as discussed by Brians. Molly is a hybrid of the organic human body and technology and stays that way throughout the novel. That hybrid nature is epitomized by Molly's recurring line "it's just the way I'm wired." (Gibson 28) Molly uses this line to explain her actions and personality, suggesting that there are certain things she will always be or do. The choice of 'wired,' a technological term, appeals to the technical over the organic, as if she is programmed to behave how she does.

Armitage, also known as Colonel Corto, is a much more literally programmed character. Corto was a soldier in the special forces during the Screaming Fist attack, which shattered his mind and body. Screaming Fist itself is a blend of the violent corporeal world, as exemplified by the soldiers who were mangled, and the violence of the virtual world, as exemplified by Mole IX, the “first true virus in the history of cybernetics.” (Gibson 88-89) Corto is destroyed by these actions physically, becoming “blind, legless, and missing most of his jaw,” as well as mentally, being diagnosed as schizophrenic some time after. (Gibson 89) This corporeal destruction is repaired with technology, to some extent. Corto’s mind, however, is paved over by Wintermute, the virtual superseding the corporeal. This leads to the creation of “Armitage,” a false personality overlaid on top of Corto. Corto and Armitage are a cyborg. Armitage represents an overlaying of artificial intelligence on the physical body, representing a sort of posthuman existence as discussed by Brians. Armitage’s virtual consciousness breaks away under load of stress, releasing Corto’s shattered mind from beneath, dragging him from his state of transcendence, controlled by Wintermute but free from Corto’s schizophrenic mind, down to a totally human existence that leads to his own death. It is ultimately Wintermute that kills Corto, jettisoning him into space after Armitage falls apart. Corto’s fall during and after Screaming Fist mirrors Case’s fall, and, like Case, he is restored. The difference, of course, is that Corto’s separation from the virtual world, the destruction of Armitage, leads to his death, whereas Case’s separation leads to a peaceful life. Corto is no doubt an extreme case, a shattered corporeal form bound to service by a virtual consciousness, but his example nonetheless shows the power of the technical over the organic.

The final member of the crew employed by Wintermute is the illusionist, Peter Riviera. Riviera is cybernetically augmented to be produce holograms, tapping into the mixed reality sense of cyborg that Fleischmann purports. (Brians) While Riviera does embrace the identity of the

cyborg, he also reduces himself to the corporeal by engaging in sexual intercourse with one of his holograms. When Riviera constructs the hologram of Molly, he complicates his relationship with the virtual by being torn apart by the holographic Molly at the end of his performance. (Gibson)

Wintermute, the AI who motivates the plot, is the other extreme from Corto. Wintermute's primary motivation is to merge with Neuromancer, thereby transcending its own physical bounds, the hard drives that its brain is stored on, and becoming "the matrix" itself. (Gibson 285) Wintermute and Neuromancer mirror each other, as both are AI with limitations. Wintermute lacks individuality but interacts with the corporeal world through technology. Neuromancer is separated from the corporeal world but is able to manifest a personality. Case's first interaction with Wintermute, for instance, is through a phone call and all of the subsequent interactions require Wintermute to take on the guise of a person from Case's past. Wintermute's artificial intelligence is mediated through a human persona, imposing limits that Neuromancer is free from. Because Wintermute lacks a personality and needs technology and other people's memories to communicate, Wintermute is bound to the corporeal world and blends "the human and the machine." (Brians 135) Neuromancer is able to generate its own personality but is bound to cyberspace. It exists in a solely virtual world, with the constructs of the dead. Neuromancer knows Wintermute, but Wintermute cannot know Neuromancer. Neuromancer is wholly virtual: it can't act on the world like Wintermute can, but its knowledge is more absolute. When the two AI merge, thanks to Case's actions, they become more than the sum of their parts, maintaining Neuromancer's virtual world and the constructs of the dead as well as Wintermute's ability to interact with the corporeal world. Case talks to the AI in the corporeal world through a persona, the Finn, but also sees the Neuromancer persona in cyberspace. This shows that the merged AI has fully blurred the line between human and machine, able to use human memories and technology

in the same way as Wintermute while also being able to maintain virtualized human intelligence through the constructs.

Dixie Flatline, the final character to be investigated, blurs the same line that Wintermute blurs but, to an extent, more. Dixie is an AI construct of a dead hacker, which already blurs the line between the corporal and virtual. Beyond that, while he is fully virtual, he is aware of his unnatural existence. He says, "I'm not human either, but I *respond* like one," indicating his awareness of his existence between the corporeal and virtual. (Gibson 140) That awareness leads to his one desire in the story: to be deleted as soon as the job is done. Dixie Flatline, as a living human, died, or "flatlined," several times, leading to his nickname. Now, as an AI, his desire is to die again, knowing that his existence is non-human. While previous humans who blended the line with technology embraced it, due to Dixie's death prior to being part of the virtual, he instead rejects the blending of virtual and corporeal and seeks an end to his existence.

These six characters, each of which are different in their own way, represent William Gibson's understanding of the blend of corporeal and virtual in different ways. Case represents an ideal merging of corporeal and virtual, choosing the corporeal but still existing in the virtual world through his construct. Molly represents the physicality of the cyborg, just as Corto represents the virtuality of the physical body and the futility of imposing virtuality on corporeality. Riviera represents the idea that virtuality is just as corporeal as physicality, as Dixie represents the corporeality of virtuality by seeking his own death. Wintermute and Neuromancer represent a complex understanding of corporeality and virtuality by being AI that eventually are able to affect great change on both worlds by merging. These six characters indicate a complicated understanding of the nature of the cyborg as well as the blend of the virtual and corporeal worlds.

Gibson does not decide whether or not blurring these lines is good or not, but instead presents characters who benefit and suffer from the blurring of these lines and allows the reader to decide.

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