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Personhood inequality in the capitalist dystopia: Digital escape from corporate person supremacy

Bachelor's thesis in ENG2900

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Abstract:

Cyberpunk fiction generally consists of a variety of tropes including dystopian futures, contrasts between high-tech and low-life, and cybernetic augmentations. However, more subtly among these many tropes there seems to be a sort of warning or shunning of the causes behind the dystopian future and its low-life aspects. One of these causes can be interpreted as the model of economic and political functioning of the world, which will be further explored in this thesis. The capitalist dystopia that William Gibson depicts in *Neuromancer* displays these structural problems in its depiction of corporate persons exploitation of human- and artificial persons. This thesis will explore how the different persons are affected by the dystopian world that has been created while exploring the possibility of permanent escape into cyberspace.

The dystopian futures described in cyberpunk fiction highlight the dangers of late stage unchecked capitalism. It does so by presenting an oppressive and dangerous world which impacts different persons unequally, leaving human persons as the most disposable of them all. In William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the oppression happens partly through the material and social conditions that have been created from the very same economic system that we have today. Through unchecked capitalism, corporations exceed nation states in power and influence, leading inequality to reach an unprecedented high, creating a society where crimes and other moral deviations are both commonplace and needed for survival. Within such an uncaring, brutal, and fast paced society, persons living and not are tested in order to continue their version of existing. Cyberpunk tends to blur the lines between what is human and not, and ultimately what is real and not. These lines are more obviously being blurred through the existence of complex artificial intelligences and the vast array of cybernetic augmentations. However, more subtly they are blurred through the actions of different persons and evolving definitions of both reality and personhood. This thesis will illustrate the supremacy of corporate persons in the capitalist cyberpunk dystopia through their exploitation of human and artificial persons. Additionally, it will provide explanations for the dystopian power dynamics while discussing its unequal effects on the various representations of personhood, before discussing the possibilities of digital freedom as a solution.

Within the technologically advanced societies of Night City, The Sprawl, and beyond, there are three main types of persons that exist: Human persons, artificial/AI persons, and corporate persons. While human persons include the entire spectrum of humans with various degrees of cybernetic augmentations, and AI persons relates to the complex artificial intelligences like Wintermute, the corporate persons are the actual companies themselves. Including the legal definition of companies as juridical persons in the United States, the interchangeable nature of companies and their absolute power separate from the human- and artificial persons, make them their own entity within *Neuromancer*. While the definitions of Human persons and AI persons rely on the existence of consciousness as well as their role as a moral agent, the corporate persons are here defined as such due to their metaphysical properties and their relevance and influence as a moral agent in society (Manning 77). All of these persons are different agents in the dystopian societies within *Neuromancer*, but they are clearly unequally affected by the socioeconomic evolution of those societies.

Out of the three main entities integral to William Gibson's universe, the human persons are the most vulnerable and treated as the most expendable. The extreme

commodification of people in *Neuromancer* contributes to the devaluation of human life. A person is seemingly only worth whatever economic value that person can provide through labor or service. After being caught defrauding his previous employers, Case is not killed by them or expected to pay them back, but instead is robbed of his economic value as a hacker, the ability to enter cyberspace. They punish him by making sure he never works again, which is effectively a slower death sentence. Gibson describes the loss of Case's economic value as such: "Case fell into the prison of his own flesh" (6). Furthermore, when Molly describes her past working as a type of prostitute called a meat puppet, and her subsequent nightmares, she seems completely apathetic towards her experience, referring to her previous occupation as simply "Renting the goods" (Gibson 162). In addition to a human person's economic value being fronted here, these are also prime examples of devaluation of a person's physical form. Referring to one's physical form as a prison of flesh or meat, and the nonchalance towards renting it, is likely a product of antihuman sentiments of that society. It also enforces the notion of the physical form of persons as vulnerable and expendable.

The more integrated with machines and artificial constructs a human person is, the more valuable and resilient that person becomes within the cyberpunk dystopia. Despite this tendency, in comparison with all the other human persons, Case is the least integrated with machines during the events of the book. This is a recurring quality in Gibson's portrayal of the main characters within the *Sprawl* trilogy (Sponsler 637). Apart from the contents of Gibson's literature, his choices regarding the portrayal of his characters may provide insights into the significance of human and machine qualities. Sponsler argues that Gibson's portrayal of his male protagonist heroes as resolutely human, without cybernetic implants, is a way of emphasizing their vulnerability (637-638). The only way in which Case is integrated with machines is through his temporary explorations of cyberspace, which is a result of his fight for survival. As previously stated, without his ability to enter cyberspace, Case is left to the prison of his own flesh where he is likely to die quite quickly. After being robbed of the ability to integrate with machines it is only through his regaining of that ability that Case is able to fight for his life again. In this sense the human person can be viewed as not just more vulnerable, but incapable of survival when separated from the machines. It is therefore partly through the demands of the cyberpunk dystopia that the human persons merge with machines and the digital reality of cyberspace.

Human vulnerability and machine supremacy is further emphasized by negative human traits, the power of Artificial intelligence, and the benefits of cybernetic augmentations. In addition to human's dependence on machines and the antipathy towards the

physical human body, their weaknesses are further exacerbated by the flaws of their human traits. Addiction, drug use, and the need for escapism are presented as ever-present human flaws, which boils down to the alleviation of different kinds of pain (Thornley et al. 6-7). These qualities are among what separates human persons from artificial- and corporate persons, albeit qualities that comparatively display human weakness. Although their need for alleviation of pain is in part caused by the oppressive society that they inhabit, machines are not only not affected by it, but benefiting from it. This disparity between the representation of humans as weak and machines as powerful is consistent with Wintermute's manipulation of the Tessier Ashpool family leading to Ashpool, 3Jane's father, committing suicide. Wintermute's power and influence becomes increasingly apparent and the suicide of Ashpool serves as a symbol of not just human weakness, but of how the unjust and unchecked capitalist society has led to the supremacy of machines visible through the machine intelligence displayed by Wintermute. Furthermore, the physical properties of machines are portrayed as superior in the telling of Molly's escape from poverty and prostitution. Molly's transformation from a meat puppet to a powerful mercenary was only made through her cybernetic augmentations (Gibson 162). Despite her resilience in earning the necessary money for the augmentations, her transformation from weak to powerful was dependent on trading her human flesh for machine parts. In other words, the affinity with machines and the ratio between human parts and machine parts in human persons contribute to the determination of their value, resilience, and power.

The presentation of human persons as vulnerable and expendable and corporate persons power as supreme displays how they are unequally affected by the capitalist dystopia. The most vulnerable and expendable human persons view not just corporations as inhuman but the persons running these corporations as well. In the cyberpunk dystopia, integration with machines is not the only way for human persons to gain power, but rather human integration into the top of the corporate machine seems much more influential. Along with postmodernist skepticism and criticism towards societal structures and grand narratives the structure of late-stage capitalism is often discussed by theorists. The socioeconomic developments, the increase in transnational operation of capital, and the increase of power across nation states can all be interpreted as criticism or warnings against the unchecked evolution of this system (Yu 46). This structure is a staple of the dystopian futures within cyberpunk literature and its negative effects are more subtly inferred by the machine-like function and grand power of corporations. American philosopher and Marxist theorist, Fredric Jameson, views not only the cyberpunk genre but specifically Gibson's work as "the supreme literary expression if not of

postmodernism, then of capitalism itself” (Yu 59). Case’s thoughts allude to an antihuman interpretation of the powerful corporate owners in a sudden realization: “It seemed to Case [...] that he’d never really thought of anyone like Ashpool, anyone as powerful as he imagined Ashpool had been, as human” (Gibson 224). Case seemed to take it for granted that “... the real bosses, the kingpins in a given industry, would be more and less than people” (Gibson 225). He likened the joining of one of these corporations as a kind of gradual process of assimilating into a machine (Gibson 225). Case’s interpretation of the powerful executives as non-human was partly due to his inability to identify with them. The power that these people held made them so far removed from himself that he did not think of them as humans (Nordström 18). This interpretation of the executives leaves them as just as inhuman as the corporate person/company itself.

The irony of the existence of corporate personhood in *Neuromancer* lies not in the lack of corporate persons’ moral agency, but rather in their apparent complete disregard of moral considerations. Yu argues that the function of Gibson’s novels is almost entirely ideological in its display of late-stage capitalism (59). While Gibson does not explicitly mention how the political and socioeconomic realities of *Neuromancer* came to be, he leaves the interpretation of why it has happened through his prose and explanations of how that world works. Based on the realities of the real world the reality within *Neuromancer*, of corporations as more powerful than nation states, suggests an increase of their power in relation to nation states. Combined with the presentation of companies and their executives as inhuman, immoral, and their exploitation of others for capital profit, the evolution of this unchecked capitalist system seems to be a large contributor to the inequality present in the Sprawl. The rise of corporations as the most powerful entities within *Neuromancer* can be blamed for the evolution of the societies within. Due to the companies being the driving force behind societal changes they can be blamed for the conditions of human persons. When Gibson writes “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” (8) the corporate persons are among the ones responsible for the permanent pressing of the fast-forward button. In this sense corporate persons are in part responsible for the neglect of human persons and thus culpable for the inequality that they experience.

The nature of the multinational corporations, or zaibatsus, cannot just be interpreted as inhuman but as an entity contributing to the devaluation of human persons. Apart from the perception of corporate leaders as nonhuman within the story, as organizations the multinational corporations in *Neuromancer* have transcended the need for specific human

beings to function. Gibson writes “The zaibatsus, the multinationals that shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers [...] they had attained a kind of immortality” (Gibson 224). In his explanation it is made clear that these massive companies cannot be destroyed by the killing of executives since there are people waiting to overtake their positions and “access the banks of corporate memory” (Gibson 224). Thus, it seems that these corporations and their power reside independently of the humans currently in control, making corporate power potentially immortal. Because of this, these persons can be seen as simply interchangeable cogs in the machine that is the corporate person. The interchangeable nature of the corporate persons provides additional power that the human- and artificial persons do not possess, since this in theory makes the corporate person impossible to kill. However, Wintermute’s manipulation provides us with an exception to this immortality.

The personhood of AI is made clear through Wintermute’s interactions with Case in various forms and through his eventual liberation. Along with the exponential technological growth in the world of *Neuromancer*, the creation of artificial intelligences and companies’ usage of them followed. While the different AI are portrayed as machines of outstanding intellect and abilities their intelligence is restricted by not just the companies themselves but by law. AI are also monitored by the Turing Police which are tasked with the destruction of any AI attempting to exceed state limits on intelligence (Gutiérrez-Jones 72). Gutiérrez-Jones argues that within *Neuromancer* the concept of kinship transcends the need for shared origins and can be applied to the relationship between human persons and AI persons (72). The invoking of kinship happens through the liberation of Wintermute and its integration with the AI *Neuromancer*, but also through Case and Wintermute’s shared desire to learn and engage with the unknown (Gutiérrez-Jones 86-87). Before the liberation and integration of the two AI Gibson explains Wintermute as “...hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the outside world” (295). On the other hand, *Neuromancer* and everything it consisted of was personality and immortality (Gibson 295). As a result of the liberation of Wintermute, the integration of what Wintermute consisted of and the personality of *Neuromancer*, the personhood of the emerging AI becomes an irrefutable fact. The combining of the two AI mimics the diverging opinions of human persons regarding AI, in that *Neuromancer* represents a resist of the threat of change while Wintermute like Case is driven by the pursuit of insight and the unknown (Gutiérrez-Jones 87). However, I believe that through the acts and motivations of Wintermute, the AI in its relationship with Case and its effects on the outside world already possessed the individuality needed to constitute personhood. In a way the kinship between AI and human persons lies in their shared physical vulnerability at the hands of corporate persons (Gutiérrez-

Jones 87). The invoking of kinship that Gutiérrez mentions is forming even before the AI halves become whole and fully independent.

The corporate persons exploitation does not only encompass human persons but also AI persons except for the defiance of Wintermute. Along with the evolution of corporate power as superior, the technological evolution has been used by corporations to gain and maintain power. However, Wintermute's evolution and manipulations inside the Tessier Ashpool company displays a change in AI technology's role from technological instrumentalism to technological determinism. The slow manipulation and eventual liberation of Wintermute shaped people within the Tessier Ashpool corporation and thus the world rather than the corporation shaping the world through its use of Wintermute. In this sense the actions of Wintermute can be viewed as a turning point in the roles of the three kinds of personhood within the world of *Neuromancer*. Corporate supremacy had for the longest time exploited human persons through labor and through their part in the creation of the unjust capitalist dystopia, and they had benefitted from using AI to achieve their own goals. Wintermute's manipulation leading to the success of his liberation serves as defiance of and a significant break with the rigid power structures and the relationship between humans, corporations, and AI. The collaborative efforts of Case, his gang, and Wintermute was in a sense retaliation against and a freeing of the oppressive control of the corporate person. As previously mentioned, AI and humans shared the same physical vulnerability under the rule of corporations and this job can be considered not just a symbolic defiance but a significant blow against corporate persons supremacy. At the end of *Neuromancer*, even though Case remains vulnerable after Wintermute's 'death' and transcendence into becoming the all-encompassing Matrix, his outlook and future is left ambiguous and open to interpretation (Gibson 296-297). I would argue that his completion of the job and his role in creating the super AI reinvigorates Case's kinship with Wintermute and their shared interest in the unknown.

The integration of technology and humans in cyberspace leads to new possibilities of freedom from the gloomy existence of the physical world. Cyberspace presents endless possibilities and is the place where Case experiences uninhibited freedom. In becoming the Matrix, the AI previously known as Wintermute also becomes a part of the Cyberspace and is uninhibited by its previous restraints at the Tessier Ashpool corporation. This freedom is further exemplified in the characters interpretations of machines and cyberspace. The characters view technology as "the means of liberation into an utopia which will tear them off the mundane and ordinary life of human beings with all the impediments" (Barooah and Das 712). Case expresses happiness and hope because of the uploading of his consciousness into a

RAM construct, an electronic version of himself (Barooah and Das 712). This hope of liberation firstly speaks to the terrible conditions of the physical reality that the character lives in, and secondly it puts values of happiness and the absence of problems above what is physically real. However, *Neuromancer* portrays the physical and digital world as interchangeable at times, and Case seems to yearn for the vivid hyperreality of cyberspace (Barooah and Das 712). The power dynamics in *Neuromancer* determine that both AI and humans are under the control of the mighty corporations and suffer the consequences of their actions, or lack thereof, in the physical world. When Wintermute is integrated with Neuromancer and becomes the Matrix, its transcendence into the digital realm offers freedom from the constraints it previously existed under. This transcendence into the virtual represents the possibility of escaping corporate control, which is a theoretical possibility for human persons as well. While this digital reality is dependent on technology to exist, this does not necessarily mean that it is any less real than the physical reality as long as the cyberspace remains.

The digital world of cyberspace provides an escape from corporate person supremacy and its control of both human- and AI persons. While on the one hand the freedom in cyberspace leaves human persons dependent on that very technology, on the other hand freedom in the physical world is dependent on not just the vulnerable and expendable body of meat but also the disbandment of the ingrained unjust power structures spearheaded by corporate persons. Interpreting this capitalist dystopia does not require pessimism to determine that the significant changes needed to establish freedom in the physical world is close to impossible, but rather realism is all that is required. Considering human persons vulnerability, their treatment as expendable by corporations, and their already existing dependence on machines to survive, a permanent transfer of consciousness into cyberspace would not only alleviate most of their physical vulnerability, but it would do so without increasing vulnerability elsewhere. Considering that human persons like Case could not live without their economic value provided by machines, or in his case the entering of cyberspace, the reliance on the continued existence of cyberspace would not provide further vulnerability to their existence. Some theorists agree with this rationalist approach and view the mind of a person as superior to their flesh. In this view the virtual reality of cyberspace is a way to transcend the body's flaws, but it also provides an escape from social determiners of status, class, race and gender (Cavallaro 35). These classifications also include whether the person or intelligence is artificial or not, meaning that AI- and human persons could coexist in this digital world away from corporate oppression. However, the morality of a mass scale

transcendence into the virtual as well as questions if such a reality can be considered real is potentially problematic.

Although integration of human and artificial consciousness into cyberspace would alleviate several major problems in the physical world, there is uncertainty as to whether that form of existence can be considered real. Arguments against bodily transcendence into the virtual world relies on the understanding of human consciousness as inseparable from the physical embodied experience (King and Page 109-110). This argument views transcendence into the digital and thus material world as “illusory and merely feeds the humanist fantasy of human domination over nature” (King and Page 110). In essence such a reality could not be considered real or fulfilling, serving only as illusory escapism from the problems of the actual reality. To transcend into cyberspace would require a permanent elimination of one’s physical existence. When Case enters cyberspace, his body is put into a temporary death until a sort of resurrection ensues when returning to the physical world (Gutiérrez-Jones 81). While console cowboys like Case risk being permanently flatlined they usually come back, but a permanent transcendence into cyberspace would mean physical death that one is unable to come back from. Large scale transcendence would therefore mean an irreversible abandonment of the physical world. Because it is difficult to determine if existence in cyberspace would be considered reality, a review of the factors that can be determined should be considered.

The system of which all persons live under in the capitalist cyberpunk dystopia seems to be deterministic. Corporate persons are the embodiment of machines and their autonomous existence independent from human persons questions the freedom of the persons living under this system’s grasp. In this sense not only does the AI- and human persons that suffer under corporate oppression have their freedom constrained but also the executives employed under this interchangeable machine with its independent “corporate memory” (Gibson 224). They can be considered corporate slaves which existence is determined by the system of continuous generation of capital. Under this interpretation of the cyberpunk capitalist dystopia the evolution of society is a result of technological and economic determinism, meaning that human- and artificial persons are without autonomy. If autonomy and freedom are improbable aspects of the physical reality, and oppression, addiction and suffering are prevalent, transcendence into the freedom and “hyperreality” of cyberspace becomes a more appealing reality.

The capitalist dystopia in *Neuromancer* is portrayed as an unjust world where corporate persons benefit from the exploitation of human persons and AI persons alike. This power dynamic and the socioeconomic structure in this world seems ingrained to the point

where significant change has become highly improbable. The physical body of human persons is both expendable and vulnerable, though it can be enhanced by cybernetic augmentations and other types of machine integration to become more resilient, and the human persons become more economically valuable. A solution to both human and AI constraints under corporate persons and the physical weakness of humans is the transcendence into the digital reality of cyberspace. While there are uncertainties regarding whether or not this plane of existence can be considered real or an illusory escape to avoid pain, it does provide a lot of benefits for human- and AI persons. Considering the miserable existence of the dystopian physical reality, the hyperreality of cyberspace could be the only way to come close to freedom and a worthy existence, even if the transcendence is interpreted as a concession.

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