VIRTUAL AND PHYSICAL TECHNO-DYSTOPIAN LANDSCAPES IN WILLIAM GIBSON'S EARLY NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

A few of William Gibson's early stories and all the novels of Sprawl trilogy are known for their elaborate depiction of the virtual world with the purpose of interrogating the representation of reality in fiction. Gibson's early short stories and the novels of Sprawl series broach diverse themes and perspectives such as fluidity of the gender roles, collapsing of boundaries between nature and technology, human-machine interface, futuristic technology and gadgets, bioengineering, body enhancing surgeries, virtual spaces, artificial intelligence, transgression and criminal behaviour, media saturation, the waxing power of multinationals and the waning influence of nation-states, dilapidated urban landscapes, use of drugs for enhancing body and beauty and many more. His writing career is marked by the development of a distinct poetic style and cyberpunk aesthetic that would go on to extrude significant influence not only on science-fictional works of other writers but also on the mainstream literary culture. It is not just that Gibson wanted to create brand new poetics that reflected the contemporary conditions and redefined the trajectory of science fiction; he was also responding to what he considered to be limitations or constraints of established science fiction literature. In this paper, I will be examining the way Gibson depicts virtual and physical techno-dystopian landscapes in some of his early stories and all the novels of his sprawl series. I will be arguing how his distinct depiction of Sprawl as the physical landscape and Cyberspace as the virtual landscape impinge upon the way we make sense of postmodern landscapes.

Keywords: dystopia, cyberspace, narratives, science fiction,

From the time of the publication of his first short story, "Fragments of a Hologram Rose", in 1978 till the year 1988 when he published the last novel, *Monalisa Overdrive*, of his *Sprawl* series, William Gibson's writing career is marked by the development of a distinct poetic style and cyberpunk aesthetic that would go on to extrude significant influence not only on science-fictional works of other writers but also on the mainstream literary culture. It is not just that Gibson wanted to create brand new poetics that reflected the contemporary conditions and redefined the trajectory of science fiction; he was also responding to what he considered to be limitations or constraints of established science fiction literature. In this paper I will be examining the way Gibson depicts virtual and physical techno-dystopian landscapes in some of his early stories and all the novels of his *sprawl* series. I will be arguing how his distinct depiction of Sprawl as the physical landscape and Cyberspace as the virtual landscape impinge upon the way we make sense of postmodern landscapes.

A few of Gibson's early stories and all the novels of *Sprawl* trilogy are known for their elaborate depiction of the virtual world with the purpose of interrogating the representation of reality in fiction. Noting the difficulty in defining the concept of reality in science fiction and in cyberpunk stories, Dani Cavallaro observes that, in cyberpunk narratives, "reality and identity are rendered unstable by their reduction to the status of commodities, namely interchangeable and disposable products doomed to a fate of planned and rapid obsolescence" (Cavallaro 14-15). In fact, everything in the cyberpunk world is a commodity. There is nothing that does not come under the influence of or produced by evil capitalist multinational corporations. According to Cavallaro, cyberpunk fiction "occasioned" the "reorientation of science fiction" through its "treatment of the themes of identity and body metamorphosis" (18).

As conceptualised in his early story "Burning Chrome" (1982) and the *Sprawl* trilogy, the single most significant aspect of science and technology that got appropriated into the world of science fiction is the concept of cyberspace. According to David Seed, 'cyberspace', invented by William Gibson in the year 1982, is one of the two most famous neologisms employed by

science fiction writers; the other being 'robot' invented by Karel Capek in the year 1920. Both of these words have found broader usage outside literature (Seed 48-49). The idea of cyberspace took shape when faster communication of information was thought to be possible by establishing connectivity between various mediums from geographically diverse locations. The concept of cyberspace is hard to pin down into a limited range of meanings due to its use in different fields with a wide range of meanings. Though it connotes the physical medium through which information travels or resides in a fundamental sense, it is assumed to be a starting point to get into the puzzle of pinning down the possible meanings of the concept. Scholars who specialize in the study of cyberspace with their range of reading covering several disciplines like David Bell assert that the concept of cyberspace has evolved into a 'cultural artefact', meaning, the way 'cyberspace' has evolved into the mainstream cultural dimension (Bell 1). Though the concept of cyberspace is used extensively in many areas such as computing, media, philosophy and so on, it has received unique treatment in literary narratives, both science-fictional and fantasy narratives. Also, the concept has gained a solid discursive treatment in literary studies.

Analogous to cyberspace is the Sprawl, also known as Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis (BAMA), the urban landscape that includes some of the major US cities on the east coast. As a dystopian cityscape, it plays a significant role in the narratives. Gibson first introduced Sprawl as an urban landscape in the short story "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981) and fully developed into a complete narrative topography in another short story, "Burning Chrome" (1982). In the *Sprawl* trilogy, he deploys it as a parallel physical space to cyberspace. Though not so popular as the matrix, Sprawl comes about as a competent futuristic trope representing dystopian space. In the *Neuromancer* Gibson visualises the nature of Sprawl in terms of language associated with computing:

> Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. Up your scale. Each pixel a million megabytes. At a hundred million megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in

midtown Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parks ringing the old core of Atlanta…. (Gibson, *Neuromancer* 43)

According to Miller, this representation of Sprawl conjures up "a sprawling urban populace so intensely packed and drenched in information that it threatens to burn out a computer's attempt to visualize it" (Miller 58). As it is a commonplace now to use computing concepts to refer to space and objects, Gibson's imagery sounds very much familiar to his readers in the twenty-first century. With a view to give us an idea of the geographical limits of Sprawl as an "intensely constricted space available for habitation on Earth", Gibson contrasts it with the "limitless virtual space of the matrix" (58). The presence of two contrasting spaces, the matrix as the culmination of communication technologies and Sprawl as an over-populated urban cityscape, allows Gibson to infuse interesting authorial perspectives as a part of the narrative discourse. For example, in *Monalisa Overdrive* Sprawl takes on sentient existence when Turner felt that the whole Sprawl was "breathing, and its breath was old and sick and tired, all up and down the stations from Boston to Atlanta" (Gibson, *Count Zero* 207). These lines hint at the kind of priority that Gibson ascribes to Sprawl as a physical space in his narratives as against the matrix.

Gibson developed his major themes and motifs in the short stories written in the early years of his writing career. He coined the word `cyberspace', representing virtual space, in his short story "Burning Chrome" (1982), published in the *Omni* Magazine. As experiments in a new form of science fiction along with an attempt to remain consistent with the idea of not deviating from scientific foundations of hard science fiction stories, Gibson's early stories "transformed the genre into gritty, character-driven thrillers" (Miller 24). Commenting on the way Gibson's early stories informed and shaped his later major works, Miller argues that his early stories "simultaneously display his disillusionment with contemporary science fiction and chart his aesthetic reaction against what he saw as a stagnation that had become endemic to the genre" (24). Gibson's early short stories also show his experimentation with major motifs and styles that would attain prominence in his later work. The distinct aesthetic of his work that became the hallmark of his major works was shaped in his early short stories. In many ways,

his novels are elaborations of elements and motifs introduced in his early short stories that were published as a collection *Burning Chrome* (1986).

Discussing the short story "Red Star, Winter Orbit" (1983), an early collaborative work by Gibson and Bruce Sterling, Miller notes the way the story reflects the shift in contemporary cultural interest from space travel to technology. As the burgeoning discipline of computing was gaining cultural currency in the 1980s, the allure of space travel was on the decline. Commenting on this change of perception, Miller contends that "in the 1980s, the cultural interest in space travel dwindled as the dream of infinite expansion throughout the galaxies turned inward via the computer" (38). Noting that the story concludes with the reiteration of "humankind's need for new frontiers, for escape from oppressive political regimes, for the ability to start anew", Miller observes that: "As the prospect of space as a new home for large groups of individuals began to wane, humankind started to look for other frontiers, frontiers provided by the personal computer and the internet" (38). As Gibson would go on to explore technology as a central theme in his novels, his work, in a way, mirrored the contemporary cultural preoccupations. His powerful depictions of cultural transformations initiated by technological developments show his prescience of future information economies and the commodification of culture.

Though Gibson introduces several narrative techniques in *Neuromancer*, the most significant one is the conceptualisation of cyberspace--a global network of computers where his characters often live and travel. As the term cyberspace was being discussed in the academia and in the mainstream media with the popularity of his narratives and as his idea of cyberspace was essentially similar to the global computer network that was built in the late 1980s, the tern became "de facto" term for the world wide web during the 1990s. The power of the new technology to induce a drug like experience has been elucidated by Gibson in *Neuromancer* by depicting how his protagonist constantly longing to be in the "matrix". Case, the protagonist in *Neuromancer*, wants to leave his body behind and join, "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation" (Gibson, *Neuromancer* 51). He lives for "the bodiless exultation of cyberspace" (51). When Case jack into cyberspace, his experience of the virtual space borders on hallucination:

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 (51).

In the novel, cyberspace is depicted as a parallel dimension to reality: the narrative action takes place on both planes simultaneously. As the representation of cyberspace is similar to the scientific hypothesis of event horizon--a phenomenon that warps time and space--it allows the author to play with the narrative fluidity of space-time dimensions. On the cyberspace, the cowboys can be anywhere at any time, meaning, they defy the physical laws governing space and time. The presence of cyberspace as a narrative device that allows escaping from natural limitations offers endless possibilities for the storyteller. More than its usefulness in explaining the technological complexities of the real world, cyberspace functions as a powerful narrative device in exploring narrative possibilities. The characters move freely to different places, travel in space and time, enter someone else's body, experience their senses and thought, and exist as constructs after death; all these representations are possible due to the single main motif of cyberspace.

In this way, *Neuromancer* became iconic as a new experimentation in the representation of space. This new approach impinged on the ideas of representation of space in the narratives. Though cyberspace as a narrative device and literary motif helps in holding the narrative together, it plays a much larger role in the way the whole plot of the novel revolves around it. Cyberspace as a virtual space is as essential as the real space (real world) for the novel's denouement, and Gibson plays out the action in both spaces until the end. *Neuromancer* can be understood as the postmodern (cyberpunk) reimagining of the archetypal story of personal discovery. Instead of travel to hell, heaven or an unfamiliar world, we have the protagonist travelling in the electronically generated virtual world.

In this way, Gibson's early short stories and the novels of *Sprawl* series broach diverse themes and perspectives such as fluidity of the gender roles, collapsing of boundaries between nature and technology, human-machine interface, futuristic technology and gadgets, bioengineering, body enhancing surgeries, virtual spaces, artificial intelligence, transgression and criminal behaviour, media saturation, the waxing power of multinationals and the waning influence of nation-states, dilapidated urban landscapes, use of drugs for enhancing body and beauty and many more. Through the depiction of contemporary manifestations of radicalism defined by technological obsession, drug culture, punk lifestyle and criminality, Gibson's works offer a powerful social critique. Also, with the eclectic mix of various styles, techniques and borrowings, Gibson presents before us authentic postmodern science fictional texts that match the narrative verve of mainstream texts. With the narrative advantage of science-fictional world-building, Gibson, in these texts, thoroughly interrogates the contemporary techno-social condition.

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