

## **Abstract**

This is a textual analysis that applies the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics, Donna Haraway's idea of the cyborg, the concept of the social construction of the body, and Marxist theory to William Gibson's 1984 science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, which features a world defined by late-stage capitalism, technofetishism, and extensive transhumanism. More specifically, the concept of the *cyborg*, something partially organic, and partially mechanical, how the cyborg body is more vulnerable to being influenced by biopower, and how late-stage capitalism interacts with the cyborg body and the commodification of the aforementioned body.

## **Introduction**

*Neuromancer* is a novel written by William Gibson in 1984. It is regarded as the cornerstone of cyberpunk literature and art, featuring a japanophilic, technofetishistic, totalitarian late capitalistic world. The main character is Case, a 24 year old man who was crippled by his employers with a neurotoxin when they caught him attempting to steal from them (Gibson 6). This story is of interest regarding the concept of biopolitics because of the presence of the concept of the cyborg throughout the text, more specifically that the mechanistic attributes of the cyborg enhance the surveillant capabilities of the various dominant powers within the book.

Case, before being crippled by his employers, was a console cowboy, someone who frequently ventured into cyberspace, the corporeal representation of data around the world and their interactions, in order to steal data and money. After being affected by the neurotoxin, he was no longer able to jack into cyberspace and do what he loved (Gibson 6). A man named Armitage, who was secretly an Artificial Intelligence named Wintermute waiting to further its

own goals, implanted sacs of a neurotoxin in Case after healing his nervous system and replacing parts of his pancreas in order to sort of turn his love for being a console cowboy into a hostage, forcing Case to do what Armitage wanted (Gibson 50). Foucault's concept of biopolitics, the concept of the social construction of the body, and Donna Haraway's description of the cyborg can be married to analyse the occurrences and dynamics within *Neuromancer*, and perhaps bring insight into the possible implications of the interactions of the cyborg body and authoritarian structures in the concrete world.

### **Social Construction & Bodies**

Turner in *The body & society: explorations in social theory* asserted that "The shape and dispositions of the body are the products of a cultural habitus within the specific location of a certain social class." Later in the book, he described the external world and the human body as "not a given, but an historical reality constantly mediated by human labour and interpreted through human culture."

The physical attributes you possess are disassembled and ran through various societal and disciplinary structures, e.g. sexual characteristics being checked into a category of binary sex, physical characteristics being grouped into a racial category, etc. When it is said that "bodies are socially constructed" it is not the actual attributes, but the perception of them that are assembled and end up performing social functions.

Foucault coined the term biopower to describe the power over bodies performed by larger institutions, disciplinary structures, etc. It is a term composed of two more specific concepts, regulatory controls and anatomo-politics. Regulatory controls are a control and surveillance of the population as a whole, e.g. the census, the medical system, enforced cisheteronormativity, etc. Anatomo-politics is the name of the process used to create docile bodies, which can be more easily explained by a quote found in *The Foucault Reader*:

By the late eighteenth century, the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has “got rid of the peasant” and given him “the air of a soldier.” (Foucault 179)

In short, docile bodies is a term used to describe a collection of bodies that have been moulded by disciplinary practices for purposes by larger institutions, e.g. schools, psychiatric facilities, prisons, barracks, etc. A more palpable example of biopower would be one of intersex infants— their socially unaltered, purely physical attributes are ran through the patriarchy and the sex binary and then influenced by a person such as a surgeon. Their appearance went from sexually ambiguous to that of a male or female, processed in such a way that they fit snugly into the oppressive construct that molded it. The “physicality” of the infant was produced into something more normative. The surgeon is the extension of regulatory controls; they aim to enforce the more general attributes of cisheteronormativity. Biopower is power over bodies, whether it be through discipline, surveillance or other means.

## The (Marxist) Politics Surrounding Cyborg Bodies

Donna Haraway in *A Cyborg Manifesto* described Foucault's biopolitics as "a flaccid premonition of cyborg politics". More usefully, she described cyborgs as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." Many characters within *Neuromancer* could be described as cyborgs: Molly, who has claws implanted in her fingers, Case, with biological modifications, etc. The cyborg body is arguably integral to the book, in that concepts like cyberspace and *simstims*<sup>1</sup> rely on the almost ironic combination of humanity and inhumanity. Case's world is one heavily involved with biopolitics; various structures and powers exist for a myriad of goals, every one attempting to achieve them through the aforementioned biopolitics. In the previous section, the definition of docile bodies was given, and their place in biopolitics. This process is commonplace even in this concrete world, in structures that have been described previously. However, the biopolitics in this book are different from "real life" biopolitics in that a sort of biopolitics is enacted on the cyborg body— what could be called cyberpolitics.

In utilising Foucault's usage of the term biopower, and both the machine-like and animalistic attributes of the majority of the characters in *Neuromancer*, cyberpolitics is biopower through the enhanced potential for the bodies of these cyborgs in the book to be subject to control because of their machine-like attributes. I must stress that these mechanical attributes are not merely concrete additions to their biological matter, but also their abilities granted by these additions, e.g. being able to jack into cyberspace or use simstims— these abilities also enhance the abilities of various powers to conduct surveillance and discipline on the characters. These

<sup>1</sup> See *Woman, Race, Class* by Angela Davis and *Afropessimism* by Frank B. Wilderson III for more insight on this topic.

constructs enhance the ability for larger institutions and powers to conduct surveillance and otherwise subjugate their bodies. There is an additional dimension to this subjugation, another force: submission and commodification under a capitalist system. In his bachelor thesis, Joel Monssen Nordström (Nordström 12-17) describes commodification and *commodity fetishization* in the novel— he uses the example of Armitage being commodified by the artificial intelligence Wintermute in order to achieve the construct’s goals. In the article, he conducted a Marxist analysis, however he neglected the role that the cyborg body played in the commodification of various characters under capitalism.

Firstly, commodity fetishization is a sort of irrational idealisation of the commodity, a construct socially regarded as objectified, but ironically playing a social function, having a sort of biography. The commodity is not just inanimate objects, but victims of oppressive systems are commodified as well— white supremacy commodifies Black people in order to further its oppression<sup>2</sup>.

Further in his thesis, Nordström describes the Marxist theory of the commodification of labour— that the capitalist mode of production forces the working class to sell their labour to their employers.

2 Throughout the book, “simstims” are used as a device to see the recorded sensory experiences of others.

## **Conclusion**

The concepts of biopolitics, the cyborg, and the social construction of the body can be used to analyse the occurrences within *Neuromancer*, and why the systems within the book function the way they do. This analysis is not just isolated to the text, either, or even the entire genre of cyberpunk—it begs the question of the implications of the interactions of present technology and dominant institutions and powers in this present, concrete world.

## Works Cited

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