

**Theses: *Neuromancy – The question of technology in the novels, essays,  
and poetry of William Gibson* by István Zoltán Szabó**

This thesis attempts to interpret the first three novels of William Gibson in order to reveal specific technical philosophical concepts within them. William Gibson's technical conceptions resonate with the most important trends of the philosophy of technology of the second half of the 20th century, especially with Martin Heidegger's approaches to technology that state radical statements on the field of arts as well. It is not possible to apply the findings of his study – *The Question Concerning Technology* – to the Gibsonian concept of technology – and this is not the aim of this thesis at all – still, to reflect on these questions might lead to interesting outcomes.

It follows that one of the purposes of this thesis is to reveal the statements and the concepts of Gibson's novels about technology in general, about technical development and its impacts on the society and on the individual as well. Because of this, we have to deal with the questions of arts, as in the Gibsonian thinking technology is always in connection with the concept of arts, of identity, and of memory, while technology also functions as an epistemological category in the novels. The inventor of cyberpunk is regarded as a visionary in popular culture since 1984 (when Gibson published *Neuromancer*) because of his statements about technology, so it is crucial to examine these statements, while the researcher must beware of becoming rapturous. The author of this thesis considers this point of view as an *imperativus*.

This work contains three main chapters that named after emblematic matters to evoke the atmosphere of cyberpunk novels. These substances are overrepresented in the

Gibsonian prose and the trilogy as well. Chapter “Carbon” contains the theoretical basis of the thesis, chapter “Chrome” contains the interpretation of the Sprawl-trilogy, while chapter “Cobalt” deals with the essays and the poetry of William Gibson. Naturally, the titles of the chapters are motivated, as it will turn out in the detailed description below.

Accordingly, the “Carbon” chapter contains the theoretical frame of the thesis. The outcomes and results of this chapter provide the starting point of the interpretative activity of the next chapters and interlate the building of interpretation as flexible but still stable carbon fibers.

As a first step, we will compare the statements of the mentioned Martin Heidegger text about technology and the Gibsonian concepts of technology and arts based on the novels and the respective studies. We attempt to expose the relationship between the Heideggerian and Gibsonian concepts. Hereafter we explain the „meaning” of the word „deconstruction” as we use it in this thesis. Deconstruction designates an operation that affects the structure and the traditional building of the essential concept of the Western metaphysics and ontology. Virtually, a possible another purpose of this dissertation is to show the relationship between the deconstruction as operation and the Gibsonian novels. We will spend a longer time to map out the concept of deconstruction after all the actual interpretation will start at this point after we have built the theoretical basics. Finally, the features and the peculiar position of the cyberpunk genre will be analyzed, especially its relationship with postmodern, science fiction, and deconstruction as contemporary ideology. It is important to mention that the work deals with cyberpunk only as a literary genre and does not deal with the other forms of it in popular culture (for example fashion, music, or political movement). We don’t examine the cultural and ideological environment of cyberpunk.

Of its many forms, cyberpunk can be seen as a dead cultural phenomenon as a literary genre. It might be needed to insert an explanation why could be interesting such a research from an academic point of view.

The time of cyberpunk is over – as William Gibson said in person to the author of this thesis. The main motif of the cyberpunk genre is the fusion of man and machine through cybernetics. The anti-humanistic ideology and the postmodern methods of text building are predestinated to depict this nightmarish vision of the dark future. However, the technical background of the cyberpunk worlds became obsoleted without real impact on the real world. Since the emerging of nanotechnology, nobody wants to implant silicon chips into his brain when there is a new, available, and more sophisticated technology. For this reason, it would be extremely out of date if the contemporary science fiction texts would envision similar technological solutions in their imagined future, but the *differentia specifica* of the cyberpunk genre is the technical development depicted through cybernetics. Therewith the typical cyberpunk text organizing operations have also become obsoleted in a certain way. These operations have the characteristics of the postmodern rhetorics and are inseparable from the configuration of cyberpunk. Therefore, the cyberpunk is dead and it has revealed everything that it can as a literary genre. Those contemporary texts that were published decades after the death of the genre could be considered as the reflexes of the dead body of cyberpunk; these are repeating the inventions of the important texts (so, the cyberpunk is repeating itself in them), or they use the worlds of the iconic novels as atmospherical tools and embed it into a plot with linear narrative that fundamentally against the features of the cyberpunk texts.

However, this doesn't mean that the most important questions and problems that emerge in the novels – fusion of human and machine, the relationship between human and machine, the unclear boundaries between these two concepts/entities, and the impact of

technology on the everyday life of the human – are not relevant anymore. Maybe cybernetics is not the aspect of modern technology that has the biggest impact on the human life, maybe it does not “haunt” us on the most direct ways, but human life – no doubt – is more technicized than ever. This thesis considers technology as the approach of the human toward the world around him, so technology is an inevitable part, an engine, and a consequence of the human evolution since the first human set fire or manipulated his environment by a stick. From that moment, when the human “outsourced” certain manipulative processes outside of his body by using his brain, technology is the part of our evolution. So this thesis – at least at the beginning – uses a classical, anthropological approach to the term: technology. In this sense, human life has been always already technicized, but the emerging of virtual reality gives a new level, a whole new scale to this statement – this is why human life is more technicized, or over-technicized than ever. This thesis does not deal with the possibility of the technology before the human life forms while for example, Spengler takes this possibility into account in his works. He postulates a certain level of technology usage in case of animal life forms. From this perspective, the approach of this thesis is more like the technological concept of Bernard Stiegler who considers technology as everything that does not inherit by a genetic way. In his work, he bounded the emerge of technology to the emerge of the human. The concept of technology that will be built in the thesis is similar to Stiegler’s concept as both approaches relate to Heidegger’s theory with criticism. We will not discover in depth the similarities between William Gibson’s and Bernard Stielger’s conceptions about technology for that reason that comparing the Gibsonian trilogy with the Heideggerian theory on technology provides a more prolific basis for the thesis like the Stieglerian system that is based on the critics of Heidegger (correspondently with the review of the Aristotelian argumentation). At the same time, it would be interesting to compare the mythos of Prometheus (which is

thematized by Bernard Stiegler) and the mythos in the Gibsonian trilogy. Virtual reality (cyberspace) is one of the most important configurations and innovation that manifest in the cyberpunk texts. Cyberspace is the interface between man and machine, so it can't be possible to overestimate the importance and relevance of the analysis of virtual reality.

Consequently, in the first chapter („Carbon”) we will think about the Gibsonian approach of technology and arts, its relationship to other philosophies, the features of the cyberpunk literary genre, its position within world literature, and the most important inventions and effects of the genre.

The second chapter called Chrome contains the interpretation of William Gibson's Sprawl trilogy based on the outcomes of the first chapter. At the starting point of our interpretation, we consider Gibson's first novel (*Neuromancer*) as an act of deconstruction which realizes the subversion of the most significant dichotomies of the Western metaphysical thinking. Dichotomies such as man versus machine, man versus god, nature versus technology, body versus spirit. This act of deconstruction is analogous with the thinking of Jacques Derrida who is one of the most influential French thinkers regarding deconstruction. The deconstructive function of the novels lies in querying the independence of the human from the machine. Human and machine are not separable without question. Furthermore, the separation is impossible as the novels try to show it. The opposition of human and machine is homologous with the opposition of nature and technology.

It is not possible even in a thesis to interpret the whole trilogy by close reading; this dissertation will not execute it. But it will argue on the deconstructive acts of the novels along with the examples quoted from the text. From this perspective, this work focuses on the first novel of the trilogy (*Neuromancer*), but in more important or more interesting cases it deals with the second (*Count Zero*) and third (*Mona Lisa Overdrive*) volumes of

the Gibsonian trilogy. This method is reasonable because we think that within the trilogy *Neuromancer* represents one unit and the other two novels (*Count Zero*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) together represent another main unit. However both volumes (the second and the third) are autonomous and independent pieces of work, they belong to the same problematic field by their topics, so it might be fruitful to consider them together.

We will deal with the theoretical questions and problems emerge from the second and the third novels as well because we can create a detailed picture about the question of technology depicted in the trilogy only with this method. In the cyberpunk subculture, chrome symbolizes the future. As a hard, shiny, sterile surface it symbolizes the cyberpunk genre as well. This is why it seemed sufficient to name the chapter about the novels that created the cyberpunk genre after this matter.

The title of the last main chapter of this thesis is Cobalt. We leave the territory of the cyberpunk, we will analyze the only poem of Gibson and interpret his non-fictional works from the point of view of the original concept of this thesis. We'll focus on technology, arts, and the relationship between them.

The essays of *Distrust That Particular Flavor* are extraordinary because the author makes statements about technology and his concepts about future without the veil of fiction. This is another possible position of the interpretation.

Gibson has only one poem: *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)*. The poem has 300 rows and has an infinite number of possible interpretation. It becomes even more complex when we take into account the whole context of the poem: the medium, the events belong to the poem, the discourse tried to interpret the phenomenon around Agrippa. We will speak about all of these topics in details in the last chapter of the thesis. This poem connects the topics of the research, so it is reasonable to have a look on the *Agrippa*. The third and last

main chapter is about texts that are as rare in the Gibsonian literature as the cobalt in nature.

The dissertation has a closing that sums up the results of the research and expounds the most important achievements of the three main chapters.

## **GIBSON'S POSITION IN LITERATURE**

Cyberpunk has numerous connections with the science fiction literature and on a certain level cyberpunk has its origins rooted in the science fiction, but it is a mistake to think about cyberpunk as it is only an episode of the inner development history of science fiction. However, Samuel Delany does exact the same thing.

Cyberpunk was not created in a sterile literary environment, none of the literary genres was. Our aim is to present that the origins of William Gibson's trilogy (and the cyberpunk genre as a whole) are retraceable to the great technical philosophical streams of the twentieth century (for example the works of Heidegger, Spengler, Mumford, or Virilio) and to the operative praxis of the deconstruction. So cyberpunk is a literary configuration inevitably enforced by the cultural field and environment that it is rooted in. We want to prove the statement that the cyberpunk genre and the works of William Gibson are not interpretable with the acceptable level of elaboration if we do not explore the relationship of the novels with the postmodern and with the effects of the authors and their works out of the genre.

Frederic Jameson was one of the first theorists who combined the cyberpunk genre (and William Gibson's works) with the discourse of postmodern in his work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

According to Jameson, technology is a representation itself, because it represents „frozen” or „grumous” human work. This half-dead work is stored by machines. It is not far from the Heideggerian approach. Of course, Jameson's rhetoric is based on not only Heidegger's theory but on Marx's theory as well: goods as objectivated work are the topics of the first volume of *The Capital*. This momentum and the idea of Jameson about the machines as unnatural storages of the human work have the feature of uncanny (*Unheimlich*). The human work haunts in the force stored by machines. Frozen or grumouros human work that does not belong to the human anymore, but it is objectivated and is working independently from the human, that is why it considered as unnatural or uncanny (if we use the Derridean – Marxian concept). This frozen work stored by machines finally returns to us in a form that is irreconisable. This irreconisable form of the work haunts us. So the antiutopian horizon of postmodern is opened by the uncanny force stored by machines.

Veronica Hollinger emphasizes the importance of the ontological dominance of cyberpunk. In the case of detective stories and science fiction text, epistemology has a dominant role in the narration and the logic of the texts. Cyberpunk is hardly understandable without the concept of postmodern as the cultural logic of the late capitalism (and multinational capitalism). The technological priority of postmodern was presented in the most dominant way in science fiction texts because the technology was in focus of the science fiction text from the very beginning. In this sense, cyberpunk is the postmodern science fiction literature.

Although the most „energetic” postmodern texts are not only cyberpunk texts, but technology has an important role in most of them. Some of them actively shaped the narrative features of the cyberpunk texts and of William Gibson’s novels. This statement, however, is true even if we turn it upside-down: many features of the cyberpunk texts find their way back to the literary mainstream.

### **INTERPRETATION – AIM AND METHOD**

The aim of our interpretation is to present the subversion and deconstruction of the dichotomic order (human – nature, human – god, human – machine, nature – technology, etc.) in the novels. It partially happens through the interpretation of the story and redemption of Case. Case is a console cowboy in *Neuromancer*, who is working for an artificial intelligence. The other part of the interpretation is focusing to the myth of the two artificial intelligences who merge with each other. Finally, we have to examine the concept of virtual reality (or cyberspace as William Gibson coined the term) which does not only support the deconstructive interpretation but bounds the trilogy to other literary traditions. Through this connection, we can stretch the semantical horizon of the trilogy which leads us to the question refers to the literary position of the trilogy. These point of views are correlating each other to have a better understanding of the works of William Gibson.

We will examine the texts on three different levels that correlate each other.

The first level is the level of the tropical features: we will analyze and compare the tropes within the texts.

The second level is the level of action. We will interpret the peculiar elements of the story.

Finally, the third level is the level of narration. This level incorporates the other two levels in a certain way. We will examine the territory of language usage.

The deconstructive acts within the novels disperse through the text. These elements are fragmented and do not create a coherent, closed formation. Their dissemination makes the interpretation harder in a practical sense. But it also has a gesture of proof, because the peculiar operation of the text is analogous with the nature of the problems emerged by the novels.

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