

The Fractal Subject and the Hologram Rose: On Baudrillard and Cyberpunk as Media Theory



Jiré Emine Gözen

Johann Wolfgang Goethe University of Frankfurt, Frankfurt (Germany)

AT the conference “Philosophy of new Technology,” which took place at Linz in 1988, Jean Baudrillard stated:

The whole of the human being, his biological, muscular, animal physicality has been transferred to mechanical prostheses. Not even our brain has remained within us, but is now floating in the countless Hertzian waves and networks that surround us. This is by no means science fiction but merely the generalization of McLuhan's theory about the ‘extension of man.’ (Baudrillard 1989, 114)

In the mid 1970s, Jean Baudrillard started developing his theory of simulation, which began with the assumption that modern societies experienced a drastic disruption through the appearance of new media technologies. In this context, Baudrillard proclaimed the dissolution of the subject, of the political economy, of meaning, of truth, and of the social formations of current societies. In order to describe and analyze these processes, new theories, terms, and narrations were needed. Baudrillard's own contribution to the theory of media thus started with the statement: “The real radical alternative is somewhere else.” (Baudrillard 1978, 83). Indeed, this alternative approach, one which asks to reflect on the implications of new media and technology, is to be found somewhere else: in cyberpunk literature.

I argue that cyberpunk should be seen as an important companion to media theories, both in terms of artistic expression and in terms of a method of knowledge production by itself, including its theorization. When I speak about cyberpunk literature I refer to a specific body of work written by authors who gathered in the late 1970s in Austin, Texas (Gözen 2012). Thus cyberpunk literature implies a body of work that revolutionized science fiction writing. This revolution was spearheaded by authors such as Bruce Sterling, William Gibson, John Shirley, Lewis Shiner, Rudy Rucker, and Pat Cadigan. This group published their criticism of the science fiction of their time in the fanzine *Cheap Truth* and in the preface of the cyberpunk anthology

Mirrorshades, which could be seen as the cyberpunk manifesto – the discursive foundation for a newly forming movement.

At the time, ‘technical culture’ began sprawling into everyday life due to advancements in computers, media, and bio- and medical technologies. This formed the basis for the movement. “Technology [...] has slipped control and reached street level,” states Bruce Sterling. “For the cyberpunks [...] technology is visceral. It is not the bottled genie of remote Big Science boffins,” he continues, but is rather “pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds” (346).

The aim of cyberpunk was to reflect on these technological advancements in an artistic way, and to engage with the way they alter the human being and society at large.

These kinds of thoughts and observations are also the basis of many theoretical media approaches. Marshall McLuhan, one of the founders of media theory, claims in his writings that media and technology are interfering with our perception, senses, psyche, and identity. By doing so, they change our behavior, our culture, our societies, and our politics. The basic architecture of electronic media mimics our own central nervous system, and hence technically extends it. It is now very interesting to see that cyberpunk incorporates this idea when drafting future worlds and, by doing so, pushes it further.

By designing fictional virtual worlds that are accessed through an interface with the human brain, the extension of the human nervous system through an electric central system becomes as much a reality as the McLuhan-postulated dissolution of the subject-object-relation between man and machine.

McLuhan’s category of implosion also plays a significant role in the extrapolated worlds of cyberpunk. Virtual realities as a “medium for the meeting of our minds” (Cadigan 243) not only allow its users to take part in the dreams, memories, and fantasies of others; the connection between the human mind and the machine is also used to create entertainment devices, such as, for example, Gibson’s ASP, Cadigan’s madcap, or Effinger’s moddy, which make it possible to experience the neuroses and psychoses of others. This way, seasonal bestsellers allow societies to experience all kinds of collective madness. This inability to comprehend the difference between the inner world and the outer world, the sense of time and space and between you and me that comes with the madness of a collective psychosis is a manifestation of

McLuhan's implosion in the electronic age.

Furthermore, the main categories of Jean Baudrillard's theory—hyperreality, simulation, and implosion—are omnipresent symbolizations in the worlds of cyberpunk. This is especially the case in the superimposition of reality by simulation. In cyberpunk, physical presence has lost its relevance. Instead, virtual worlds frame a new realm of hyperreality that offers a new home to humankind. In this context, Greg Bear's *Eon* is a very impressive example. In the world of *Eon*, Bear describes an asteroid from a parallel universe that found its way to our world around the turn of the millennium. The hollowed out asteroid contains various artificial chambers that used to be the habitat of a future humankind. In each chamber, we find a future city from a different era of the future humankind. Interestingly, the change of the interiors and architectures of the cities of the different eras demonstrate the different states of the Baudrillardian simulation. The advanced media technologies in one of the older future cities enables the contemporary peoples of *Eon* to immerse themselves within a virtual world that creates a simulation of the abandoned city in its former state with its inhabitants that can't possibly be distinguished from reality

“She called up a student's basic guide to the second chamber city. In an instant, Alexandria surrounded her. She appeared to be standing on the portico of an apartment in the lower floors of one of the megas, looking down on the busy streets. The illusion was perfect – even providing her with a memory of what "her" apartment looked like. She could turn her head and look completely behind her if she wished – Indeed, she could walk around, even though she knew she was sitting down.” (Bear 1998, 339)

The sequence unfolding before the eyes of the user shows recordings from a future that did not take place in the user's reality and which probably will also never take place in her future, but still insist in representing a history that has already passed by. Hence, we have here a model that is both true and an illusion—in both cases, truth dissolves into simulation. In this mediated reality, sensual experiences are perfectly superimposed by the virtual, as shown by the divergence between real and simulated experiences of space and body. Digital signs replace the tactility of reality with a field of tactile simulations.

In the final city of the future there is no longer a medial environment, but rather a humankind that has itself become a simulation: The whole of humankind is digitalized and lives in a computer called City Memory.

Death and natural birth are no longer present in this digitized world. A new person or subject is created by the merger of various parts of digital personalities – which means that every new being is a simulation based on the code of already existing models. While these models in the analog world used to be DNA codes, in the digitalized world of Eon, the models consist of bits and bytes. Nevertheless, it is still possible to live outside the City Memory. The ‘outside’ environment of the city memories’ virtual world is composed of a space without contours so that landscapes, apartments, objects, and even climate features can be projected onto it. If one wants to move in the outside parts of the city simulation, bodies could be created and used.

However, these bodies have nothing to do with “natural” human bodies. These bodies are equipped with an implant that records all experiences and memories, just in case something might happen to them. Hence, even death does not have a significant impact on the physical or the virtual existence of a person. In Baurillard’s words, this means that in the world of cyberpunk, even death, fails to serve as a distinction between the real and the imaginary.

The future shows that the difference between illusion and truth lost ground to the play with reality. The simulation is omnipresent; even if there is a body, it only contains digitalized and uploaded minds. The Baudrillardian dictum of self-referential signs finds itself radicalized here: A humankind based on digital bits and bytes that have merged into the endless circulation of signs referring to themselves becomes a model without an origin and eventually a sign in and of itself. In its final stage, the future society of Eon could be understood as the ultimate reign of the technical as humankind itself becomes the most radical form of simulation.

In his novel *Halo*, Tom Maddox not only processed aspects of Baudrillard’s idea of simulation, he even opens his book with a quote from America by Jean Baudrillard: “Everything is destined to reappear as simulation” (8).

Similar to Gibson in *Neuromancer*, Maddox describes an omnipresent and almost omnipotent artificial intelligence. This artificial intelligence, known as Aleph, has used its inherent potential to control all transmission systems to build a city in orbit, whose reality it will henceforth simulate. The initial reality of the dark orbital city without contours and atmosphere disappears through Aleph’s simulation behind a constantly repeating spring and a media-generated blue sky. In Halo City, therefore, the technically mediated experience of the world has quite obviously become a new reality, and the entire system created by Aleph represents a gigantic simulacrum in

the Baudrilliardiansense.

In many cyberpunk worlds, the advanced merger of technology and nature also shows itself in the fact that natural phenomena can no longer be perceived and conceptualized separately from technology. Gibson opens his debut novel with a highly significant sentence: “The sky above the port was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel” (Gibson 1984, 9).

With this description of a technical condition, used as a metaphor to describe nature, the reader is introduced to a world where a total implosion between nature and technology had taken place. In the highly technical worlds of cyberpunk literature, nature is understood as part of the technologies surrounding man. The American literary scholar Lance Olsen describes the frequent use of technological images as a metaphor for describing nature as follows: “If the romantic metaphor makes nature familiar and technology unfamiliar, these postmodern metaphors make nature unfamiliar and technology familiar.” (Gözen 293)

Now the question arises—is cyberpunk simply a literarization of the media theories of McLuhan and Baudrillard, or is there more to it? A close reading of Baudrillard’s lecture “Videoworld and Fractal Subject” and William Gibson’s short story “Fragments of a Hologram Rose”—which can be seen as the prelude to cyberpunk as a genre—might reveal an answer to this question.

Baudrillard describes the subject in the simulation of hyperreality as having been fragmented and disintegrated into its component parts. Hence, difference does not mean the difference from one subject to another, but rather, the differentiation of the subject from itself—the subject becomes fractal and is held together by a network of body prostheses. In his own words:

transcendancy disrupted into thousands of fragments, which are like pieces of a mirror, in which we fleetingly can grasp our reflection before it disappears completely. As in the fragments of a hologram each piece of the mirror contains the whole universe [...] The others have practically disappeared as a sexual or social horizon [...] Humankind itself became ex-orbiton, a satellite. There is nowhere to be local anymore, he is crowded out of his own body and his own functions.” (Baudrillard 1978, 114)

The similarity to the imagery drawn by Gibson in his short story “Fragments of a Hologram Rose” is striking. In this story, the protagonist reflects on the events of

the day, during which his relationship has failed after he shredded a postcard with a holographic rose that was sent to him by his ex-girlfriend:

Parker lies in darkness, recalling the thousand fragments of the hologram rose. A hologram has this quality: Recovered and illuminated, each fragment will reveal the whole image of the rose. Falling toward delta, he sees himself the rose, each of his scattered fragments revealing a whole he'll never know—stolen credit cards—a burned out suburb—planetary conjunctions of a stranger—a tank burning on a highway—a flat packet of drugs—a switchblade honed on concrete, thin as pain. Thinking: We're each other's fragments, and was it always this way? That instant of a European trip, deserted in the gray sea of wiped tape—is she closer now, or more real, for his having been there? She had helped him get his papers, found him his first job in ASP. Was that their history? No, history was the black face of the delta-inducer, the empty closet, and the unmade bed. History was his loathing for the perfect body he woke in if the juice dropped, his fury at the pedal-cab driver, and her refusal to look back through the contaminated rain. But each fragment reveals the rose from a different angle, he remembered, but delta swept over him before he could ask himself what that might mean. (Gibson 1977)

Not only is it remarkable that Gibson uses the hologram as a metaphor for a world steeped by hyperreality and its fragmented subjects, but also remarkable is that he did this in 1977—eleven years before Baudrillard. Hence, we can see that cyberpunk writers such as Gibson not only made similar observations about their current world as theorists such as Baudrillard, but also that the terms, symbols, metaphors, and aesthetics they use are practically superimposable. These writers use these concepts as a framework to illustrate their own understanding of the paradigm shift that took place at the end of the twentieth century. Although the concepts of McLuhan and Baudrillard appear in a mediated way, the future worlds described in *Neuromancer*, *Mindplayers*, or *Schismatrix* show understandable prognoses of futures based on these complex theoretical ideas. This goes to show that cyberpunk is capable of deciphering theoretical media concepts and of shifting them from the realm of theory into a world imagined.

Cyberpunk offers more than a mere fictionalization of theoretical media concepts; rather it opens up new perspectives capable of enhancing and expanding theoretical ideas. The fictional worlds of cyberpunk are as much a speculation

about the world to come as the theories themselves. But while Baudrillard was accused of having lost his focus as he began to draw a rather dystopian image of the technological future—an apocalyptic version of “Western civilization”—cyberpunk can be seen as more dynamic and differentiated. While Baudrillard’s postmodern world seems plain, rational, and without surprises, the worlds of cyberpunk seem alive, mysterious, adventurous, and full of risks but also opportunities. That said, cyberpunk is not naively technophile, but instead manages to show both sides of the age of media technology, the negative and the positive. The acceptance of postmodern environments as exposed in cyberpunk literature is hard to come by in academic circles. Cyberpunk created a platform wherein the potentialities of a society strongly influenced by new technologies can be reflected and thought through. In this sense, writers like Gibson, Sterling, Shirley, and Shiner not only fulfilled McLuhan’s demand for artists to elevate consciousness into life; rather, they went further than the theories as such. This is why cyberpunk should be seen as an important companion to media theories in the context of postmodern thinking—both as an artistic expression and as a method of knowledge production by itself, including its theorization.

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