

Gender Stereotypes in Cyberpunk Science Fiction

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Abstract

The research work on gender stereotypes in the cyberpunk science fiction depicts the complexities pointed out by contradictory descriptions of some of the best-known protagonists in cyberpunk's gender and sexual characteristics. The critics of cyberpunk science fiction analyses the gender patriarchal society in the science fiction novels of William Gibson and distinguish the term cyber eroticism. Cyber eroticism, supposedly incorporeal, sterile, and healthy, ultimately involves an incredibly complex mix of human bodies and devices, for it forces its consumers to face the confusion of their boundaries and the complexity of both sexual and gender roles. Virtual tools designed to assist virtual sex to bring the entire sensorium into play, and their lustful conceptions are routinely underlined. This paper examines the stereotypical intercourse based on human and technological interrelationship where the gender discourses and the difference between the masculine and feminine characters in cyberpunk science fiction exhibit the sovereign of the patriarchal society, where even the cyber feminine characters are dominated by the virtual stereotypical constructs.

Key Words: Cyberpunk Science Fiction, Cyber eroticism, Virtual Intercourse, Patriarchal Constructs, Cybersex, Virtual Reality.

The research work on science fiction from a cyberpunk perspective to gender norms is somewhat uncertain, as both perpetuating and subverting traditional depictions of male and female roles. This complexity is pointed out by contradictory descriptions of some of the best-known protagonists in cyberpunk's gender and sexual characteristics. Nicola Nixon analyzes works of the pioneer of science fiction writer William Gibson, whose females are depicted as "depoliticized and sapped of any revolutionary energy" (Nixon, 222). Timothy Leary opposes with the comprehension of Nixon and appreciates all these protagonists as powerful, self-reliant and heroic (21). Moreover, Joan Gordon's depictions of femininity in cyberpunk are always positive:

At first glance it [cyberpunk] seems to be overtly masculinist science fiction – men are men, waving guns and knives, competing like all get out and plugged up to the gills with pollutant technology. But look at the women in mirrorshades – Molly in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Deadpan Allie in Cadigan's *Mindplayers*, for instance – aren't they tougher than the rest? I would suggest that cyberpunk is covert feminist science fiction. On that night foray into the underworld which is the central experience of . . . cyberpunk, men, and women travel as equals (Gordon, 196).

The stereotyping pattern of certain technology-fostered racial polarizations reflects in Gibson's *Virtual Light*. Rydell's analysis of mainframe images described as "a kid in high school", encountered challenges as "things out of nothing, out of that cloud of pixels or polygons or whatever they were", where the narrator perceives: "the girls were always doing these unicorns and rainbows and things, and Rydell liked to do cars, kind of dream-cars like he was some designer in Japan somewhere and he could build anything he wanted" (23).

The ambiguity here resides in the reality that, unlike Rydell's incredible persona, the girls' subtly spectacular designs are after all not that distinct from Rydell's ideations. The courier in control of distributing the virtual glasses comprising designs for San Francisco 's urban transformation is himself addicted to a digital vision that of the woman he meets in a white house via another pair of virtual glasses, with candles and champagne, night after night, for several long and solitary years. He commits disastrous blunders as he comes out of this dream universe to fuck with real sex: with one aspect, as the heroine Chevette is swift to remember, he 's got dick written across him—and his compensation is violent death.

Case, in *Neuromancer*, is probably a reincarnation of the traditional crime fiction at macho crook, but he never conveys an impression of victorious masculinity. He is symbolically emasculated by mycotoxin, a fungal poison created by the Russians as a means of war that inhibits his ability to enter the network, and then infused with endorphin antagonists to make him feel as much agony as possible by his tormentors. Mental atrophy, cognitive dislocation, and physical frailty in Case do very little to elicit feelings of manhood. His packed consciousness is at one point appropriately replicated by his environment, a waiting room ornamented with a truly spooky taste: "A pair of bulbous Disney-styled table lamps perched awkwardly on a low Kandinsky-look coffee table in scarlet-lacquered steel. A Dali clock hung on the wall . . . its distorted face sagging to the bare concrete floor."

There are also ambivalent connotations of Molly's class. Written in the style of the hard hunchback of that middle-street genre traceable back to the crime fiction of Chandler, she may be read as an image of the liberated woman or as a stereotype. It is ultimately up to the individual reader to decide what to do with the kind of toughness displayed in such a passage:

Because you try to fuck around with me, you'll be taking one of the stupidest chances of your whole life.' She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged scalpel blades slid from their housing beneath the burgundy nails. She smiled. The blades slowly withdrew.

Molly, who is a working girl, may mean a street samurai or even a ninja, namely a courageous warrior (a samurai was a protector of feudal lords in Japanese history and a ninja a leader of a similar community of less noble reputation). But the title of Molly often illustrates the reality that she was a prostitute and therefore one of a very different nature. As previously stated, her job was to satisfy the needs of sadists who loved doing something to her while she was moved to a software system and filtered out neutrally. Molly undertakes these unpalatable professions so that he may compensate for the improvement of procedure contributing, most prominently, to the mirroring of hue implants and the application of certain retractable and deadly fingernails. Molly's vulnerability is underlined by the fact that she has suffered more profoundly than other others of the same field because about an incompatibility with the 'cut-out' system implanted into her body to ensure that she appears unaware or uncertain about what her bosses are doing to her and the 'circuitry' built by the 'Chiba clinics' where she undergoes regular surgery. Finally, she recalls that ends up during a particularly morbid sequence, which is sacked and threatened with death. It turns out that Molly's boss intended to have her murdered by a customer as part of a state-of-the-art 'snuff' series, faithful to a sadistic practice that mixes sexual satisfaction with the killing of women and usually with necrophilic impulses. Necrophilia's theme is being associated with a pervasive inclination of combining sexuality and death in Western literature and art, since the nineteenth century. Death as Rudolph Binion states it is 'a piquant aphrodisiac,' inspired by necrophilic illusions in both visible

and implicit ways that have pervaded not just popular art but also different aspects of mainstream culture in the latter part of the twentieth century.

A pervasive emphasis on necrophilic impulses integrating eroticism and death, which was also a way of acquiring strong stigmas of the gender. This principle is comprehensively identified in “Over Her Dead Body,” by Elizabeth Bronfen, alluding to the repetitive aerial imagery of the lifeless female as an entity of extreme sexual longing. ‘The aesthetic representation of death,’ says Bronfen, ‘lets us repress our knowledge of the reality of death.’ Since death is portrayed on the female body, the depiction enables the audience not only to repress the fact of mortality but also the feeling of fear correlated with femininity as the ‘superlative site of alterity’ (13).

The sexual abuse of Molly and her encoding as an artistic depiction of death will seem to empower her with a prototypically aggressive identity. Even though traumatic objective and per the harshest patriarchal demands, Molly however is socially influential and characterized as being more skillful and energetic than her companion, Case, with whom she is in the relationship.

This could be suggested that even an assertive and both physically and socially autonomous woman’s appearance will lead to oppressive assumptions propagating. The explanation why this form of a woman is common with male viewers of action fiction is because she represents the image of a rigid, enclosed and thoroughly technologized female body and is therefore capable of counteracting the sense of danger historically correlated with the women’s fragile, leaky and unbounded natural body. And we do not neglect the influence of Molly. The assertion of its consistency is presented by the way that in Case’s physical possession, she is still instrumental in confronting strong mental memories of her disturbed self: intercourse with Molly revives of Case memories of a missing virtual space

as 'his orgasm flaring blue in a timeless space, a vastness like a matrix'.

Molly's expertise is often implicitly expressed in the novel by numerous vivid descriptions (not necessarily overtly pornographic but none the less erotic) which may instead be viewed as a means of centralizing the stereotypical image of the mutilating protagonist or as claims of her cold-blooded style: through the image of Molly 'dissecting her crab with alarming ease', tracked by an even of frightening presentation of table manners: 'Molly . . . extruded the blade from her index finger, and speared a grayish slab of herring.'

Consider that Molly does not even cry: her tear glands were routed back into her mouth as such she spits rather than she sounds like crying. Molly's outcome demonstrated the fictional protagonists, notably Elektra in the comic book series *Elektra Assassin* by Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz, and Abhor in *Empire of the Senseless* by Kathy Acker. The following novel utilizes cyberpunk metaphors and images to focus on the possibilities of undermining authoritarian patriarchy – the 'father' in both his real and metaphorical incarnations – by a systematic breach of all imaginable backfires taboos. The *Empire of the Senseless* is revolutionary in its definition of an alternate universe, which can be accomplished by stealing data from 'The Man'. The probability of achieving this goal is borne by Abhor's cyborg commitment:

'All I know is we're looking for a certain construct. Somewhere. Nothing else matters.' Yet the world presented by Acker is also a harrowing dystopia in which 'desire and pain're the same', where people are routinely subjected to 'neurological and hormonal damage' leading to syndromes more lethal than AIDS, where cities resemble gaping wounds in which 'poverty was writhing in pink', and where 'imagination was both a dead business and the only business left to the

dead’: ‘In such a world which was non-reality terrorism made a lot of sense’
(Acker, 31-7).

Andrew Ross points out, both Abhor and Elektra are “steely, orphanesque survivors of a history of the victim that includes paternal rape, followed by repeated sexual predation on the part of violent males” (123). Another compelling image of an oppressed person, practically killed by patriarchal repudiation, is the character of Swish in *Wolves of the Plateau* of John Shirley. She is presented quite perturbingly as “a woman with an unsightly growth, errant glands that were like tumors to her” (116). Her disorder is the product of drinking unnecessary doses of an addictive substance and, besides, her addiction is the consequence of craving “to dampen the pain of an infinite self-derision that mimicked her father’s utter rejection of her” (16). Sarah in W.J. Williams’s *Hardwired* is similarly depicted as a survivor of patriarchal neglect, who, like Gibson’s Molly, grows into a deadly killer by clinical development. Ironically, Sarah’s key tool for a woman brutally marginalized by colonialism is a ‘cyber snake’: an aggressively phallic system that bursts out of her mouth to destroy her victims.

Virtual sex problems challenged at risk in discussions about the influence of cyberculture upon the physique— particularly the sexualized one — are also problematized by virtual sex erotic-electronics. Virtual sex should be contactable free and hence absolutely safe. That is certainly good news from a medical perspective. If, based on its sterilized virtues, it is broadly remarkable, if anything can be expected of it is based on physical pleasure? In the end, however, virtual sex is not causally related to an immortal experience. It points not to the inefficiency of physique but rather to the need to reassess the physique as an erotic object. As it is with virtual sex, cyberpunk by Gibson elucidates additional cases of physical intercourse. Find the following passages, as illustrative

examples:

After the third margarita, their hips were touching, and something was spreading through him in slow orgasmic waves. It was sticky where they were touching; an area the size of the heel of his thumb where the cloth had parted. He was two men: the one inside fusing with her in total cellular communion, and the shell who sat casually on a stool at the bar, elbows on either side of his drink, fingers toying with a swizzle stick. Smiling benignly into space. Calm in the cool dimness. And once, but only once, some distant worrisome part of him made Coretti glance down to where soft-ruby tubes pulsed, tendrils tipped with sharp lips worked in the shadows between them. Like the joining tentacles of two strange anemones.

Her nails were lacquered black . . . the lacquer only a shade darker than the carbon-fiber laminate that sheathes my arm. And her hand went down the arm, black nails tracing a weld in the laminate, down to the black anodized elbow joint, out to the wrist, her hand soft-knuckled as a child's, fingers spreading to lock over mine, her palm against the perforated Duralumin.

Gibson's short stories *The Belonging Kind* and *Burning Chrome* refer to new forms of sexual orientation that generate body parts other than genitals into the play: hybrid internal organ reminds of mythological patterns, mostly on another side, and prosthetic supplement, on the other. In both instances, we are confronted with an eroticism in which joy and fear are entangled inextricably, while the abject, the tabooed, and the sacred collide and fuse in reciprocal suffusion. These new interpretations of sexual activity point not to the death of the body but to the imperative of expanding traditional conceptions of lust and enjoyment into areas that have been avoided so far. It is explained by J.G. Ballard:

I believe that organic sex, body against body, skin area against skin area, is becoming no longer possible. What we're getting is a whole new order of sexual fantasies, involving a different order of experiences, like car crashes, like traveling in jet aircraft, the whole overlay of new technologies, architecture, interior design, communications, transport, merchandising. These things are beginning to reach into our lives and change the interior design of our sexual fantasies.

In other words, the collusion of technology and sexuality does not automatically amount to the demise of erotic and bodily experiences. Rather, it demands a reassessment of conventional notions of both desire and fulfillment. As Claudia Springer argues, such a reassessment may only be undertaken in the light of an ironical grasp of technology, as 'a contradictory discursive position, representing both escapes from the body and fulfillment of erotic desire' (129-130).

Gibson blurs the difference between romantic artifacts and financial items by enlisting the same types of modern technologies to achieve personal gratification and economic benefit. For example, in *Virtual Light*, Gibson plays with two pairs of cyber glasses: one pair provides scope for virtual sex, the other delivers a plan to restore San Francisco to enormous financial advantage. And what's the difference?

Cyber eroticism, supposedly incorporeal, sterile, and healthy, ultimately involves an incredibly complex mix of human bodies and devices, for it forces its consumers to face the confusion of their boundaries and the complexity of both sexual and gender roles. By replacing physical contact with virtually replicated intercourse, virtual sex can tend to render the body redundant. It's not happening in a vacuum, however. To communicate with their virtual mates, its users are expected to inhabit other structures or types of embodiment. Therefore, simulated intimacy does not strip away the body, but simply

multiplies the personality interactions of its consumers, to the extent where, as Susie Bright's *Sexual Reality*, "you could look like anything and be any gender or combination of genders you want. There's no particular reason for you even to be a person" (30).

Virtual tools designed to assist virtual sex to bring the entire sensorium into play, and their lustful conceptions are routinely underlined. For starters, consider Howard Rheingold's picture of the virtual 'bodysuit': "something like a body stocking, but with the kind of intimate smugness of a condom" and with "an array of intelligent sensor-effectors" (311), where the internal surface is covered. Karlin Lillington affirms the significance of sensory awareness in cybersex frameworks:

VR erotica art lovers are waiting for the 'teledildonics,' the potential to communicate with a computer-based 3D playmate not just to visual elements but through physical contact. The technology was developed to build a live model's Replica, that could be directly animated. Insert flesh and appearance to the pattern and you will have a virtual clone. A German engineering team has created a prototype full-body sensitive suit for virtual women. The system is mischievous today, but it is expected to improve (Lillington, 1-3).

Pat Cadigan interestingly stresses the physical nature of virtual sex in *Tea from an Empty Cup*, where certain people – quite unromantically called 'sexers' – are known to get so 'heated up' that they end up injuring themselves during the digital stimulation phase. The case of 'this one blowfish' who 'cut himself on the straps, broke some ribs' is particularly amusing. The 'cute part' of the accident turns out to be that his partner has broken the same ribs 'at the same time' (25). Cadigan here brings the notion that cybersex should not inhibit the body to farcical heights, because artificial stimuli will contribute to prominent physical responses.

The nature of cyber eroticism has been endorsed by the presence of digital systems that also focus on an ethic of seduction and violation, but not being explicitly pornographic. One prime example is the introduction of 'cyber hostesses' for entrepreneurs intended to help render their online appearances more seductive and enter the industry incisively. Affection and flirtatiousness are the primary ingredients of the businessman's computerized dialog with his cyber hostess. The virtual hostess is supposed to assist her visitor to transmit his image to the outer world in such a manner that his most private attributes "become coordinated and accessible to devices and services."

The encoding of the robotic assistant as a girl is by no way coincidental. Indeed, it is very plain that the businessman who wants to fashion an enchanting and enticing self-image will have better chances of success if his attempts are assisted by the norms of an amorous boss-secretary partnership. Baker explains the religion of the cyber hostess with a strong relation to the resources offered by 'Personal Data Fairy' (PDF), an Internet and web marketing campaign that invites consumers to simultaneously create their own technical and mythological roles; the refrains used by the 'Cyber Hostess Marketing Proposal' of the PDF are true: 'be your propagandist' and 'perpetuate your own myth' (206). The PDF shows the significance of gender stereotypes in the implementation of new projects, while, in both financial and emotional terms, stressing an ongoing obsession with the sexual body. The woman character developed as a way to direct the optimistic individual through the Internet is first anticipated "engage the client in intimate, personal conversations via e-mail." The hostess should establish her specific plan as a counterpoint to the basic plan 'character traits' and these will 'gradually become unique and personal to each client'. In the end, a genuinely professional hostess cannot be 'reliable' and 'thoughtful' but also 'entertaining', 'unpredictable' and above all 'seductive – will play with you and reveal herself overtime' as a 'sexy, intimate female guide'.

A digital form of self-promoting and sales strategies may scarcely more clearly show sexual connotations. Even though computer hostess obviously may not live as a meat-and-bones body, she and her guest's professional performance is vital to her simulated physicality. Even then, the virtual companion, technically through and beyond, cannot be viewed as a strictly mechanical figure; but can the eroticism it conveys be interpreted as solely robotic.

Similarly, Gibson argues certain intercourse based on human and technological interrelationship is not entirely mechanical, because powerful body impulses are constantly at task/play. According to Sadie Plant, cybersex heralds "a merging which throws the one-time individual into a pulsing network of switches which is neither climactic, clean, nor secure" (Plant, 30). Cyberpunk renders that claim by stressing the eventual connection of the consensual intercourse with the flesh that its characters are expected to long to avoid, and associating intimacy with a sense of mystery:

It was a place he'd known before; not everyone could take him there, and somehow he always managed to forget it. Something he'd found and lost so many times. It belonged, he knew – he remembered – as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read.

The idea that 'only the eye' can interpret the 'web of knowledge' discharged from sexual intercourse demonstrates the flesh's everlasting forces. Besides, a keyword in the above-quoted extract is 'remembered.' Recalling does not necessarily mean reminiscent of results. It also involves introjecting codes that are intended to give us a coherent identity. So long as we can recall how we are supposed to behave, perceive, and experience we

maintain a spiritual and social self. Remembrance is often recalled to this extent: to create a whole body out of the fragmented limbs of Western civilization. Its most inveterate adversary is the dismembering, the mechanisms that break and spread the self. Gibson recognizes the ideology of decapitation: like the creature of Frankenstein, Gibson's organs hold across as the *disjecta membra* of a culture in which dark and prohibiting forces persistently foreground the glow of logical reason. With such connotations, the portmanteau title of Gibson's best-known novel is complete. 'Neuromancer' refers to a love story and at the same time incorporates the notion of passion with enigmatic undertones, the suffix 'new[ro]' indicating in one breath innovative concepts (newromancer), psychological disorder (neurotic romancer), enchantment (neuromancer/necromancer) and tabou (neuromancer/necromancer/necrophiliac).

Neuromancer attacks the behavioral norms that describe individuals as either aggressive or inactive in sexual terms. Case observes events from Molly's body in the simulated encounters between Molly and Case and therefore gets a glance into what it is like to be a woman. He is knowing that 'just how tight those jeans are' that identifies 'passivity of the situation irritating'. At the same moment, aggressiveness is transferred mostly from woman to the male-dominated society, because Molly is capable of creating strong sensory sensations without the likelihood of reciprocating: "she slid a hand into her jacket, a fingertip circling a nipple under warm silk. The sensation made him catch his breath. She laughed. But the link was one-way. He had no way to reply". In comparison, cyberpunk reveals that through navigating cyber room, console cowboys also protract a theory of male supremacy and become impotent by their immersion of a disorienting data collection. As Deborah Lupton says,

For their male users . . . computers are to be possessed, to be penetrated and over-powered This masculinist urge to penetrate the system... represents an attempt to split oneself from the controlling mother.' Yet once the user has jacked into the matrix (which, by the way, means womb), the dominant feeling is not a sense of absolute control but rather one of 'engulfment', induced by the architectural complexity of the matrix as a whole and by the local geography of 'the inside of the computer body' as 'dark, enigmatic, potentially leaky, harboring danger and contamination, vulnerable to invasion' (110-111).

Generally speaking, neither cyberpunk nor cyber society is governed by patriarchal constructs with no issues. There is a threat of cyberspace resources perpetuating patriarchal spatial dominance stereotypes (as demonstrated by video games focused on a genuine fascination with mapping), that is also the case that women have successfully driven the development of Net systems that tackle distinctly feminine concerns and have created their various forms of virtual reality. One especially fascinating case is Osmose, a virtual space created in the early 1990s by Char Davies (Director of Visual Analysis at Softimage, Montreal) and her team. Osmosis is based on a richly textured architecture consisting of twelve interrelated levels: the Grid; the Clearing; the Forest; the Leaf; the Subterranean World; the Code World; the Pond; the Abyss; the Life World; the Cloud; the Text World; The Ending. Normal structures and concepts which are marked by a sense of nonlinearity and flux play a significant role in the general configuration of the method. This emphasis on fluidity could be considered one of the distinctly feminine traits of Osmose itself.

Davies and her staff, though, are far more involved in issues than in the actual functionality of their technological model. In Osmose, the phallic joysticks often used in virtual reality as it implies the spatial control that are replaced by subversively

transcendental techniques. Variations in the perceptions of the immersion rely on her / his breathing techniques and rhythms: deep breathing allows us to bounce upwards and exhale downwards. Physical equilibrium is also important, as adjustments with one's center of focus allow for lateral shifts. Davies aims to establish the feeling of a smoother and plump world free from static maps where the individual is given the highest priority:

I believe that it is only through the body, through body-centered interfaces (rather than devices manipulated at arm's length) that we can truly access this space and explore its potential. Such emphasis on the body's essential role in immersive virtual space may be inherently female. The whole notion of space enveloping a body at its center is probably feminine (345).

To conclude, this paper examines the stereotypical intercourse based on human and technological interrelationship where the gender discourses and the difference between the masculine and feminine characters in cyberpunk science fiction exhibit the sovereign of the patriarchal society, where even the cyber feminine characters are dominated by the virtual stereotypical constructs.

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