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(Dis)embodied Labour?:
Assessing the Body under Capitalism in
William Gibson's *Neuromancer*

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Abstract

Science fiction writer William Gibson is widely recognised for revolutionising the field as he is often considered to be the father of the sub-genre called cyberpunk. He had a significant cultural impact and his seminal novel *Neuromancer* has been lauded for the use of 'cyberspace.' The concept of 'cyberspace' posits the notion of disembodiment, which postulates the probable dissolution of the duality between the mind and the body and the subsequent transgression of this binary. It promises a space beyond the mortal flesh, but it also reinstates the power relations that we get to experience in the real world. The novel offers an insight into transgressions of the limitations of the flesh; however, in Gibson's narrative there seems to be no overcoming the relentless assault of capitalism onto the bodies. In other words, the power relations of the real world are also implicated in the virtual space of *Neuromancer's* characters. This article will look into disembodied labour and how the body of the worker becomes the site that the capitalists manipulate and control for their own profit, and almost always at the expense of the well-being of the worker.

Keywords: cyberpunk, body, capitalism, consumerism, labour, AI, cyberspace, William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

In a world despoiled by overdevelopment, overpopulation, and time-release environmental poisons, it is comforting to think that physical forms can recover their pristine purity by being reconstituted as informational patterns in a multidimensional computer space. A cyberspace body, like a cyberspace landscape, is immune to blight and corruption. (N. Katherine Hayles, *Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers* 81)

Kevin Robins identifies cyberspace as “a utopian vision for postmodern times” (135), thereby characterising cyberspace as both a nowhere and a somewhere. If we take Robins’s claim of cyberspace being a utopian vision, it presents itself with the temptation of transcending and transgressing the here and now of the real world. Transgressing the real world also implies exceeding the constraints put in place in the real world, which could include not only space, body and time constraints but also monetary ones. It provides its users with the unending freedom of being able to do anything imaginable or even be someone else entirely. Robins argues that “the technological domain readily becomes a world of its own, dissociated from the complexity and gravity of the real world” (144). Be that as it may, the technological domain is deeply rooted in the complex sociological system prevalent in the real world, nonetheless. The obvious question that arises here is that the utopian vision that virtual space, or, in this case, cyberspace promises, cannot be devoid of the various forms of inequality and struggles that people face in the real world. Put differently, the few who own the means of production or control other people by various oppressive measures can extend their control into the virtual space; alternatively, the oppressive measures can also control the very access to the virtual space. In other words, since one system gives rise to the other, one cannot exist by completely negating the attributes of the other, or in this case, the real world. In the literary sphere, William Gibson is one of the authors who deal with and complicate the idea of cyberspace, and uses that space to represent the extent to which the realm of virtual space can be used in the future.

Gibson is considered to have pioneered the subgenre called cyberpunk. Published in 1984, Gibson’s seminal novel *Neuromancer*

ushered in a new genre. He coined the term “cyberspace,” which essentially refers to a computer-generated space where the action unfolds. Science fiction writers of that time, sometimes referred to as cyberpunk writers, started to play with the concept of cyberspace in their novels. The relevance of cyberspace is more pertinent now than ever, especially with the advent of the invention and modifications in the arena of Virtual Reality and of various social media sites, where people inhabit the virtual space to interact with others. The near future world that the novel imagines gives its readers an indication of a utopian future where humans are capable of performing any task that was previously done through the mediation of the corporeal body by means of the computer network. The radical computer engineers of the 1960s believed that technology could change the world and that personal computers would eventually lead to the democratization of technology. Gibson believed that humans and machines were no longer dichotomous, and recent posthuman critics would agree that we all are, in fact, cyborgs. Some may argue that the democratization of technology has been achieved, albeit partially. However, the commodification of humans, and by extension, of their labour, has further solidified. This article aims to show that the characters of *Neuromancer* exemplify the ways in which the top decile of the capital accumulator is in control of how and under what conditions the proletariat labours.

Blurred Corporeal Boundaries

For the past half-century, academics and pop culture enthusiasts alike have pondered on the integration between humans and machines and the subsequent ontological questions it raises. Some concerns surrounding the control over the corporeal body by disembodied technological tools have been discussed in Tamara Ketabgian’s *The Lives of Machines* (2011). With the aim to “question traditional readings that stress the alienating and depleting effects of machine culture” (11) and to offer “a more inclusive history of technoculture” (3), Ketabgian argues that the Victorians asked similar questions and their nuanced understanding of and response to such ontological instability can be read as a prelude to the recent debates over the theory of affect and posthumanism. Ketabgian’s

arguments propose that humans became part of the machinery, turning the human body into “organic machines” (51) rather than being its extension. In a similar vein, N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, writes about the corporeal body and its ever-transforming relation to the machine. She argues that with technological advancement, information, be it quantifiable or otherwise, “lost its body” (2); in other words, information which was thought of as embedded in the materiality of the body, lost its connection and came to be viewed as an entity stripped of that very materiality. Hayles’s argument can be illustrated by looking at the quotidian transactions made by people using the internet or even opting for cashless transactions. The information needed to complete any transaction, be it communicative or financial, is stored and conveyed electronically, either through emails when it comes to communication or through credit/debit cards or mobile phones for financial transactions. However, Hayles’s argument is contested by the fact that information, when conveyed through communication, depends, to a larger extent, on the materiality of the body and, thereby, on its embodiment-through gestures, feelings and other means. To challenge Hayles’s argument is beyond the scope of this article; however, what is important for this study is that Hayles’s argument has made the notion of embodiment and information relevant now more than ever. If information can exist without the constraining materiality of the body, it may give us access to a vast amount of information as and when needed. The negation of the body or the erasure of the body may also point to the overflow of information, which has now become our ‘reality.’

The term ‘reality’ can be contested in various ways, but here we define reality by what it is not rather than by what it is; thus, *reality* can be defined as the absence of virtual space, which is characterized by the notion of disembodiment. The disruption of the ontological stability of reality and the plethora of simulacrum of media images, characteristic of the postmodern condition, allow for a continual return to the past. Jean Baudrillard argued that this return is essentially the root of the slow disappearance of history: “We are so used to playing back every film – the fictional ones and the films of our lives – so contaminated by the technology of retrospection, that we are quite capable, in our present dizzy

spin, of running history over again like a film played backwards” (*The Illusion of the End* 11). Fredrick Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, argues that the claims of postmodernism are essentially ahistoric as it leads to the belief that postmodernist age is somehow post-capitalist. Thus, charges of ahistoricism are often levelled against postmodernism. Moreover, the forgetting of the heterogeneity of history has often been linked to the simulacrum of media images and the advent of consumer culture in late capitalism. Mike Featherstone in “Perspectives on Consumer Culture” defined *consumer culture* as opulence and mass consumption’s impact on the quotidian. Members of the Frankfurt School talked about how the mass media is engaged in debasing the culture by producing cultural commodities, which turn people into passive consumers. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse highlighted the same argument: “The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi-set, split-level home, kitchen equipment” (9). Stanley Aronowitz argues that “mass audience culture” (468) has penetrated the available social spaces to such an extent that nothing exists beyond the “media-bloated surface of things” (McLaren 54). This erasure leads to the dissolution of concepts such as capitalism and history. The current posthuman condition has also forced the body to become separate from discourse, and as Klaus Scherpe argues, the subject is now characterized as something that is unable to feel pain. Thereby, the body, too, in the contemporary discourse, has been forcefully turned into an aestheticised representation. As McLaren puts it, “[t]he body is now just another idea for commodity logic to terrorize. In the postmodern world of easy reproducibility and limitless circulation of signs, we are served up life as a continuous series of jump cuts to different representations with the same meaning” (57). Needless to say, the body of the subject becomes an important site where both the cultural logic of postmodernism and the symptoms of late capitalism manifest themselves.

Literature Review

Brian McHale, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., Veronica Hollinger, Scott Bukatman, and John Christie have all argued, in some way, that Gibson's notion of cyberspace represents identity as postmodern. Cynthia Davidson in "Riviera's Golem, Haraway's Cyborg: Reading 'Neuromancer' as Baudrillard's Simulation of Crisis" reads the characters of *Neuromancer* as the contrasting creators of Baudrillard's seminal book *Simulacra and Simulation* where she characterizes Case and Riviera as magicians who practice arresting and generative magic. Davidson relates the novel's various characters to the four stages of simulacrum. In her view, Case and Linda roughly relate to stage one, which represents the reflection of a basic reality; Molly and Riviera to stage two, which perverts a basic reality; Armitage/ Corto to stage three, which masks the absence of a basic reality; and finally, Wintermute and Riviera to stage four in which the image bears no relation to any reality whatsoever. She also categorizes Molly as Donna Haraway's cyborg who "masters the master's tools" but does not pursue the conflict further as she gets paid. Although Molly is aware that she is being exploited, Davidson argues, she keeps the job as she feels that she is paid fairly. However, the same cannot be said of Case, and this is where Davidson's otherwise well-thought-out argument falls short. Even though Case is on the same team as Molly, he represents a different perspective, delineating a starkly contrasting viewpoint. For Case, the leverage that both Molly and Case's employer holds threatens Case's very existence. The employer introduces poison to Case's organs without his knowledge or consent when he undergoes the experimental surgery offered by Armitage and forces Case to do his bidding. If Case fails to finish the job successfully, his employer will withhold the antidote to the poison. In other words, refusing the employer's wish will result in death. Benjamin Fair in "Stepping Razor in Orbit" imagines a political alternative in the Zion cluster, and he goes so far to argue that Case's relationship with the Rastas, who have forsaken 'Babylon,' reinforces the idea that Case's impulsion to relinquish the body and embodiment is rooted in self-loathing, which is perpetrated by the alienating system of the Matrix. In Fair's view, the Zion cluster stands in opposition to the

alienating capitalist system of the Matrix. However, Fair's analysis of the alternative political resistance is concerned with the Zion and the Rastafarians only, and he does not look into the complex structure of the exploitation that takes place within 'Babylon.' Fair suggests that the novel is more concerned with the desire of transcendence of the body that resists the demands of capital. However, he mentions this concept only briefly, providing no additional elucidation. Carl Gutierrez-Jones in "Stealing Kinship: Neuromancer and Artificial Intelligence" argues that the notion of embodiment might provide "new forms of critical apprehension" (75) and that it might otherwise work towards the denigration of the body. He imagines a shared kinship between Artificial Intelligence and the human in a very positive light. However, in this arena of technological advancement, Jones's analysis takes into consideration only the human aspect and the AI one. Although he rightly argues that technological enhancement will redefine our understanding of identity, communication, embodiment and consciousness, we cannot redefine these frameworks without being acutely aware of the power dynamics shared among the disparate elements. Any paradigm that is concerned with identity has to be replete with tripartite (at the very least) power dynamics whereby the element of control exists, and subsequently, those who control persist. Amy Novak argues that Gibson's novel is replete with a proliferation of "semiotic ghosts" that creates "an alternative present within the cyberspace matrix" (75) that penetrates and haunts reality, and it essentially asks us to "renegotiate the process of historical representation" (75). In "The Narrative Construction of Cyberspace: Reading Neuromancer, Reading Cyberspace Debates," Daniel Punday suggests that "Gibson offers us a way to negotiate the conventional discursive elements used within online communication" (196). All these critics have contributed to *Neuromancer* scholarship and have asked relevant questions concerning the postmodern text and the power structure embedded in the various characters' relation to each other. Gibson's Sprawl, which is a nickname for the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis spread across most of the east coast of the United States, is replete with the control exerted by the multinational corporations that acquire their power by exploiting the workers and monopolizing the capital. Thereby,

there exists a lacuna concerning the question of how the depraved characters are controlled, literally and figuratively, through their bodies by the powerful capitalist family, the Tessier-Ashpools, for their personal gains at the expense of the lives of the gig workers. This article aims to explore this gap. Its argument is divided into four sections. "Actualised/ Fictionalised Labour" describes how various multinational corporations govern and facilitate capital to control the division of labour and how Case represents the victims of the labouring body under late capitalism. "The Body-Commodity" deals with Karl Marx's conception of the body as a historical task and how the corporeal embodiment transformed into the commodity-body by aligning the labouring body with productivity. "Power, Control and 'the Body of the Condemned'" deals with Michel Foucault's conception of how the body itself is involved in the political field to argue how the labour force is coerced into subjugation. Finally, "Labour and Dis-embodiment" shows how the elite class literally controls the body of Case and seeks to link it with the contemporary labour market and the outright violation of labour rights.

Actualised/ Fictionalised Labour

Jameson links the emergence of late capitalism with various social crises and argues that late capitalism includes "the new international division of labour" (xix). Jameson rightly makes the argument that in late capitalism, multinational corporations govern and facilitate capital and use the said capital to regulate the socioeconomic models to maintain the status quo. What the 'status quo' entails in this article refers not only to the monopoly over capital but also primarily to the fact that capital is accrued at the expense of cheap labour. "Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button" (7), Gibson writes in *Neuromancer*. Without going into the nuanced understanding of what social Darwinism may mean in different contexts (e.g., in terms of imperialism or even used as an excuse for defending capitalism), our definition of the concept sides with R.J. Halliday's in "Social Darwinism: A Definition." Following Halliday, we essentially understand the concept

of social Darwinism as an ideology that seeks to defend free-market economics, thereby situating itself as opposed to state socialism, where the government is in charge of regulating the market. As Halliday argues,

Conventionally defined, the term is reserved for that peculiar variety of individualism which was concerned less to assert the dependence of social evolution upon the operation of natural selection than to claim the cessation or virtual cessation of natural selection due to the growth of party and government bureaucracies committed to the introduction and administration of welfare services. (391)

Thus, a practitioner of social Darwinism, by definition, becomes someone who stands in favour of the free-market economy where capitalism thrives as opposed to the regulated market. The economic philosophy of the Sprawl narrative requires too much of an individual:

Stop hustling and you sank without a trace, but move a little too swiftly and you'd break the fragile surface tension of the black market; either way, you were gone, with nothing left of you but some vague memory in the mind of a fixture like Ratz, though hearts or lungs or kidneys might survive in the service of some stranger with New Yen for the clinic tanks. (Gibson 7)

The economy working in Gibson's narrative does not allow for a moment's relaxation; rather, the people have to find work ceaselessly for just a meagre income. Although these lines carry a criminal undertone where perhaps involuntary organ harvesting is involved, the persistence and normalisation of such crimes indicate the dire poverty that the people of Sprawl have to face. In other words, the jobs that the inhabitants of Sprawl have never paid them enough to survive, and this calls for an endless loop of hustling.

Gibson's *Neuromancer* imagines a future not too far away, weaving the narrative and the assumptions of the endurance of the workings of capitalism together. "Stop hustling and you sank without a trace" is valid even today, in this age ruled by technocrats. Take the online retailer Amazon, for example; it promises one-day delivery to users who have opted for a special paid subscription. The consumer culture of late capitalism and its associated notion of instant gratification only drove up

the revenues for this company, as pointed out by Annie Palmer in “Amazon Soars after Huge Earnings Beat.”

While it could be argued that consumption is as old as human civilization itself, recent developments in our social economy point to the political centrality of consumption. Trevor Norris argues that “[c]onsumerism has often been portrayed as a process by which the energies for political resistance are drained and diverted into individual material gratification, and oppressive class structures and endemic alienation thereby obscured” (460). Norris’s argument seems to suggest that individual material gratification works towards alienating people from the larger community. Community and, by extension, social spaces are the locus where the connection among individuals proceeds from being focused on the microcosmic individual level to the macrocosmic level, extending beyond the personal. This process might usher in change, benefitting the larger part of society. Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, categorises labour as inherently linked to being human. Labour, for Arendt, becomes a necessity for not only self-preservation but also species-preservation. In consequence, labour becomes associated with production and consumption. However, she also argues that labour is futile in the sense that both production and consumption are engaged with each other in a never-ending cyclical manner. In other words, there is neither an end to consumption nor to production. Arendt further makes the point that this cyclical process creates a new community called the exchange market, where people see themselves not as human beings but merely as producers of commodities. The hedonistic desire to endlessly consume products comes largely from advertisement and marketing strategies. In an age driven by images, certain products are marketed as being the bearers of certain social and economic identities, which will help consumers distinguish themselves from others or help them belong to a certain group of people with the same social and economic identity.

Thus, consuming certain products becomes the framework that people use to distinguish themselves from others. Humans look for the ultimate totality, but the desire to consume products never goes away. There can never be an end to “physical satiation” (Baudrillard, *System of Objects* 28). Vili Lehdonvirta and Mirko Ernkqvist tallied that millions of

people around the globe spend billions of euros per year on products online. In other words, with the advent of shopping being just a mouse click away, consumers acquire products at the fastest rate. That, coupled with the fact that most websites provide free shipping, only makes the process of purchasing goods online even more inviting. Shopping online has severed the connection between the buyer and the seller within a community setting. Since there is an absence of the human factor at the other end of the process of online shopping, it completely shrouds the existence of the wage workers who are almost always overworked and underpaid to meet the demand of the one-day, free shipping scenario. For the consumers of online shopping, this whole process becomes dehumanised.

Gibson's narrative is testament to the fact that, although science has taken the human race to its ultimate height, where humans can get anything they wish for, the majority of the inhabitants of that world are bound to become slaves to multinational corporations like the Tessier-Ashpool company and the AI called Wintermute. Christopher Palmer has rightly pointed out that most of the characters in Gibson's world are "waifs, young, and vulnerable, deprived or bereft" (227). Indeed, most of the characters in Gibson's novel work as contract workers. There is never a stable source of income for the characters that represent the majority of the fictional population of *Sprawl*. To meet the demands of their surroundings, they must keep hopping from one job to another. Two of the novel's main characters, Case and Molly, are contracted workers. Case is a cyberspace cowboy who is hired to do a job but is easily discardable as the supply of wage workers willing to do the same job (perhaps even for a cheaper price) never wanes. Gibson describes Case as someone who has "worked for other, wealthier thieves, employers who provided the exotic software required to penetrate the bright walls of corporate systems, opening windows into rich fields of data" (5). Case was compelled to take up the job Armitage offered to keep himself floating. Ironically, however, the job transforms itself into a matter of literal life and death. Armitage offers to lift the ban on Case's inability to access cyberspace by supplying him with new organs in exchange for hacking into the Tessier-Ashpool system's core. Notably, Case's ban from cyberspace was a deliberate act

of punishment by his previous employer, and it left him on the verge of death. The punishment serves to teach Case a lesson and, by extension, other workers like him. The death-like punishment seems to profess that going against his employer's interests always carries with it repercussions, which may even be fatal to the very survival of the labouring body. The same scenario repeats itself when Case is hired by Wintermute, disguised as Armitage: if Case fails to carry out the task as wanted by his current employer or takes a different path from what he has been assigned, it will only lead to his death. Armitage warns Case, "You need us as badly as you did when we scraped you up from the gutter" (46). His employer's wishes have inevitably bound Case, and any deviant actions which do not satisfy the employer's demands are a fatal threat to Case's very existence. Complete control over Case's organs, thereby, his body, strips him of any autonomy he might have possessed. He has to do his employer's bidding to survive: whatever he says and however he says it. There is bound to be some sort of imbalance between the people in power and the people being controlled, between the employer and the employee, due to the obvious prevalent power position. However, controlling Case's actions through having complete control over his existence is an extreme form of power inequality. This microcosmic ultimate control over the labouring body can lead to the accumulation of control over the larger body politic, which can spread to the monopolisation of global economy at the hands of multinational corporations. In late capitalism, corporations control the capital, which governs the division of labour and ensures the accumulation of capital only by the few. Therefore, capital and the division of labour are intricately related in a cyclical process. The relation between capital and the division of labour lays claim to the fact that the deprived, which includes the characters of the novel, are controlled by those who control the capital, and the meagre price of labour barely sustains the existence of the have-nots. The subsequent question that this control over labour through a control of capital raises concerns about the various factors that ensure the durability of this cyclical process.

The Body-Commodity

One such factor that contributes to the durability of this process is the complete control over the body. One way multinational corporations exert their power over individuals is through complete control over the body. Metaphysics takes into account the “mind” and the “body” as two separate entities where the body is a mere subordinate to the superior mind. David Levin argues that the industrial economy has gained everything from this split. He further argues that “But this splitting does great violence. When our bodily being is split off from ‘mind’, it falls into objectification” (263). Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* addresses the concept of embodiment and how it possesses one of the central parts of the question: what it means to be human. As Erich Fromm explains, for Marx, both the body and the body politic are always engaged in a perpetual dialectical process, and thereby, he understood the body as a problematic site where the ideas of the revolutionary political praxis could materialise. Levin, commenting on Marx’s formulation of the dialectical relationship between the body and the body politic, argues that Marx formulates the question of the body “as an historical task” (Fromm 4). Marx’s later writings such as *The German Ideology* also give an insight into the body by critiquing the technological economy that emerged alongside what we now term modern capitalism. Modern capitalism and its mode of production literally leave its mark on the body by emphasizing the outcome or the result of productivity. The mode of production reaches this unattainable (in most cases) high by dividing and routinising the labour. This active process turns the corporeal embodiment of humans into the fragments of the commodity-body, which later translates directly into a mere commodity by aligning the labouring body with productivity.

Marx discusses the body politic which is at its optimal level not only when it comes to producing the said commodity or to labour, but also when that labouring body is at leisure, that is outside the realm of the working arena. Recent maxims of motivational speakers or gurus, such as Nigel Marsh, Sadhguru and Ashley Whillans, to name a few, frequently talk about the work-life balance, which indicates that work or labour is not part of life, or perhaps it indicates that life is something personal which

falls outside the professional working realm. However, one cannot exist without the other because they are bound with each other in the dialectical drama as outlined by Arendt. Work becomes a prerequisite for sustaining the very core of life, although, for the speakers, especially for Marsh and Whillans, 'life' here equates with leisure time, which falls outside the domain of work. No matter how much people try to differentiate "work" from "life," optimal efficiency, which is one of the most important characteristics of the work-life, transcends itself to bleed into the proverbial, idealistic life as well. The said life outside of work can be enjoyed only at its optimal level. This directly brings into question the well-being of the individual human labouring body. Marx does not go into the details which would enable him to critique the political body.

The labouring bodies in the postmodern narrative of Gibson's *Neuromancer* bear the brunt of uneven distributions not only of physical labour but, more importantly, of information; moreover, at the heart of the labour and the information lies a vast amount of capital controlled and manipulated by a single corporation which is the brainchild of the Tessier-Ashpool family. This reinstates the idea that the corporeal embodiment is transformed into a commodity-producing body under capitalism. In other words, the body is equated with the value of the commodity it produces. If the body itself is implicated in the production of the commodity, it becomes fairly easy to control the body politic by controlling the means of production itself. Sociologist Manuel Castells calls this control of labour and capital a "network society." In *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (2009), Castells defines the network society as one

where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks. So, it's not just about networks or social networks, because social networks have been very old forms of social organization, it's about social networks which process and manage information and are using micro-electronic based technologies.
(34)

This is precisely the case in Gibson's narrative, as discussed earlier in this article. The rogue AI, Wintermute, is able to force Case to do its bidding because the AI possesses electronically processed information about Case.

The information available to Wintermute includes the history of the changes made in Case's body, his needs and wants. Therefore, it is easier for the AI to seduce Case into joining its team. How the AI manages to force Case to finish doing his job through complete control over his body will be discussed in the upcoming sections of the article after engaging with the theorisation of the connection between the labouring body and power.

Power, Control and "the Body of the Condemned"

It is impossible to discuss the labouring body and its connection to power without Foucault's theory on the concept. Foucault, in "The Body of the Condemned," looks into the "concrete systems of punishment" and goes on to elaborate on Rusche and Kirchheimer's ideation of how the different systems of punishment are not only bound up with various systems of production but also, perhaps more importantly, aligned with the production itself. Putting a system of punishment in place normalizes the very act of punishing an individual. It creates a designated point of transgression. Any act within this invisible boundary adheres to the social code and becomes normalised or acceptable, and anything beyond this boundary becomes an act of crime. The act of punishment, or rather its consequences, builds deterrence to stop the bodies from going beyond that point of transgression. Additionally, it actively puts up imaginary blocks to contain the body politic within that boundary, thwarting transgression. The rise of feudalism, Foucault argues, brought with it a sudden increase in punishments, and the body became the only property accessible to the feudal lords to mete out the acts of punishment. Foucault here essentially refers to how the body was forcefully transformed into "forced labor" (172). In the history of the penitentiary, the mercantile economy gave rise to the prison factory; on the other hand, the industrial system was entirely based on the idea of a free market, which, by its nature, is unregulated. However, Foucault goes on to say that in the nineteenth century, forced labour as a form of punishment decreased and "corrective" detention took its revered place. The idea of "correction" in place of physically punishing the bodies of the delinquents is somewhat associated with rewiring the behaviour of the body so that it learns to act within the set boundaries, and

it will serve as an example for the body politic to follow diligently. Although the “corrective” measures may leave their mark upon the psyche of the collective, the body bears the brunt of its weight, nonetheless:

in our societies, the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain “political economy” of the body; even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use “lenient” methods involving confinement or corrections, it is always the body that is at issue- the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission. (Foucault 172)

What Foucault argues here is that the body is directly involved in the political fields, and by its virtue of being implicated in the political field, power relations must control and force the body to carry out specific tasks. However, it is in the field of production, he argues, that the body is bound up with both power and domination. In other words, the body which will constitute the labour force, be it forcefully or otherwise, can only exist if the labour force coerces itself into subjugation. In Foucault’s words,

the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. This subjugation is not only obtained by the instruments of violence and ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence; it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order. That is to say, there may be a ‘knowledge’ of the body (173)

According to Foucault, the body that constitutes the labour force can only be useful if it is productive and caught up in a system of subjugation. The existence of a system of subjugation indicates that this technology of power is all pervasive and affects all the domains of existence: religious, social, cultural etc. Power always has an active function that transforms an otherwise docile body into a productive one, and this power functions through the production of knowledge. Thus, the subjugation of the body exerted by power need not always be violent and physical. This is also indicative of the transition from sovereign power, which relied solely on the use of force, to disciplinary power, which is a form of domination exerted through the constant monitoring and disciplining of the population.

Labour and Disembodiment

In *Neuromancer*, Case exemplifies this classification of the labour force, which is implicated with the body. Case's employer already possesses a long body of information and, thereby, knowledge about Case's both personal and professional history, which only made it easier for the rogue AI to manipulate him into working for it. The knowledge here includes information about Case's previous employment and why Case was cast out by the employer who ensures that he can never jack into cyberspace again while, at the same time, his organs start to disintegrate, leaving him on the verge of death. Case already felt a raging contempt against the flesh; however, it is from this position of vulnerability, or rather, necessity, that he got into the risky job in the first place. The new employer, at first taking on the role of a benevolent boss and a saviour, offers to ensure his death-like ban from cyberspace is lifted, while at the same time making him undergo surgery so that he gets a new set of working organs to lengthen his life. However, the terms and conditions for Case's case also read like fine print: it is only later that Case finds out that his new employer has introduced sacks of poison inside his body, which slowly bleed into his system and will cause his ultimate demise. The only way out of this predicament is if he finishes the job he was employed to do as time becomes the thing of utmost importance for his very survival. Only after finishing his job will Case get the antidote to the poison introduced in his system. The employer's thorough knowledge regarding the vulnerability point of the labouring body is what ensures that the labouring body functions at its utmost efficiency, which results in optimal productivity. The changes in Case's body are perhaps an extreme form of surveillance and control, as they are a form of leverage for his employer.

Seen from a different perspective, the fact that Case's employer is willing to let Case die if he fails to finish the job directly points to the fact that Case is not only easily disposable to his employer but also easily replaceable through cheap labour. This extreme form of leverage over the body may appear to be estranging, but the cognitive aspect will only impel one to pan one's vision to the recent development within the economic

arena and the labour market forces. Outside the fictional realm of the novel, in 2020, when the coronavirus ravaged the whole world and the daily wage earners lost their source of income, numerous online retail companies reached stratospheric sales; one such multinational company, Amazon, was able to book the “equivalent of the previous three years’ profit rolled into one,” as pointed out by Alexander Villegas and Susan C. Beachy in the *NYT* article titled “Inside Amazon’s Employment Machine.” The speed and the agility through which Amazon achieved this humongous success was due to “mass-managing people through technology, relying on a maze of systems that minimized human contact to grow unconstrained” (Villegas and Beachy). There are numerous instances when the workers are seen to be controlled with or without the whip of technology; thereby, the estranging element in Gibson’s novel is not very estranging after all. The control of the multinationals over the bodies of the workers is cognitively related to our current condition as well.

Despite the various technological advancements taking place in the future of Gibson’s fictionalised world, the hegemonic power of the upper classes, which is triggered by the unending endurance of capitalism, still thrives. Technological advancement serves not only as a form of advanced surveillance but also helps multinational corporations accrue more capital and thereby exert control and power over the workforce in particular, and the world in general. The Tessier-Ashpool family are the “eccentric first-generation high-orbit family” (73) who have made their fortune by monopolizing the technological market through their development of the two AIs, Wintermute and Neuromancer. Completely unconcerned with the state of the world around them, they spend their time in cryonic preservation inside Villa Straylight, which, as 3 JaneMarie-France, a younger member of the Tessier-Ashpool family and the person responsible for keeping the intelligence level of the company’s AI in check, explains,

is a body grown upon itself, a Gothic folly. Each space in Straylight is in some way secret, this endless series of chambers linked by passages, by stairwells vaulted like intestines, where the eye is trapped in narrow curves, carried past ornate screens, empty alcoves . . . In Straylight, the hull’s

inner surface is overgrown with a desperate proliferation of structures, forms flowing, interlocking, rising towards a solid core of microcircuitry, our clan's corporate heart, a cylinder of silicon wormholed with narrow maintenance tunnels, some no wider than a man's hand. (167)

Andrew Strombeck has rightly pointed out that the Tessier-Ashpool family "bear a close resemblance to the wealthy elite to be found throughout twentieth-century literature: careless, insular, corrupt, focused on generational legacy. If they are functionally clones, these characters do not act like simulacra; they act like empowered aristocrats" (288). The labyrinthine extravagance of the home of the Tessier-Ashpool family is contrasted with the kind of space shared by the ordinary people of *Sprawl* with its cheap bars and motels. Case sleeps in a coffin that is hardly big enough to accommodate his body.

Although technological advancement has made progress beyond imagination where disembodiment becomes ubiquitous and promises a future where people can truly achieve immortality, the fate of the lower strata of society remains the same: this story has been told several times over, yet the outcome is always the same. Strombeck comments that "Neuromancer reinforces the global petit bourgeoisie that continues to operate through the changes of globalization and network technology; the nostalgia at the novel's core might serve as a warning about being too enchanted with technological change, reasserting the continued relevance of Benjamin's backward-facing Angel of History" (291). However, there seems to be an iota of resistance inside the story, especially concerning the Rastafarians who have successfully managed to break free from the chokehold that late capitalism had on its citizens and have literally escaped the world towards freedom. One might interpret Case's revolt against Neuromancer's offer to live inside cyberspace forever with Linda Lee as some form of resistance. When Wintermute kills Armitage, the responsibility for finishing the job falls on Case, as he becomes the person who manages the rest of the team members. At the end of the novel, Case, too, emerges as a petit-bourgeois. Neil Easterbrook makes a similar point when he argues, "Gibson's conceit is to make Case a synecdoche for T-A (the Tessier-Ashpool conglomerate) and T-A a synecdoche for the culture: all are manipulated by exterior *pulsions* beyond their control" (381). What

Easterbrook seems to be suggesting here is that the TA family controls the cultural capital by controlling capital, and by means of association, they also control the power relations that others will have among themselves. Although he himself was, at first, one of the faceless gig workers, Case takes on the role of manager, and consequently, the power flows through him towards the other team members.

Conclusion

The concept of cyberspace, which offers the opportunity of disembodiment, promises a utopian future whereby the binary oppositions between the mind and the body, which have been in place since time immemorial, would cease to exist. However, it does not propose a negation of either; instead, it will help us transgress those binaries and the boundaries in place. In the contemporary post-industrial economy, technology and information play one of the most significant roles in the labour market. The information age has permanently altered the nature of labour markets. Nowadays, a considerable portion of labour, which was previously performed only through the corporeal body, is done through disembodiment with the help of information technology. In the contemporary information-based economy, the changed nature of the labour markets comes with its own challenges. Not only does the work bleed into the proverbial life, but concerns regarding alienation, disparity and privacy issues are evident in this changed labour market. Although the idea of disembodied labour may feel utopian as it proffers the promise of flexibility, it simultaneously raises questions about labour rights and work-life balance. It goes without saying that computers and software have increased both efficiency and productivity; however, disembodied labour ensures the 'hyper-availability' of the employees who are expected to entertain the whims of their employers as and when required. The plight of the Amazon warehouse workers is one of the examples of an extreme form of control with the use of technology. Very recently, the 'work from home' option was given to the employees out of necessity. Although it comes with its own set of benefits, for many, it ultimately leads to burnout due to being overworked. On many levels, the same

technologies are misused to violate labour rights, and gig workers must bear the brunt of this violation. In Foucault's theorization of power, transgression may translate as speaking truth to power, which may lead to resistance against power relations. However, challenging a system of power through another system of power will ultimately mean substituting one form of exploitation with another similar form of exploitation.

Richard Coyne contends that cyberspace is built on "the primacy of [non-corporeal] information" (160), which essentially negates the physical realm and which, by virtue of its being already a disembodied existence, offers an "escape from the mortal plane" (Novak 241). The idea of cyberspace promises some sort of "beyond": beyond the constraints of the mortal flesh and beyond, as we have discussed, the power relations which render a particular set of bodies subjugated to power. Although some scholars have argued that cyberspace reinstates the notion of a postmodern subject whose identity is "unstable, multiple, and diffuse" (Poster) and which becomes inconclusive at the end (Tanzi), it nonetheless reinstates and reinforces the power relations that we perceive in the late capitalist world. In other words, cyberspace also becomes an extension of the late capitalist world where multinational corporations control the livelihood of the working class, which makes upward social mobility difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, the surveillance put in place with the help of technology only furthers the subjugation of the labouring masses. Thus, Case can be characterised as another suffering labouring body under capitalism, whose line of work puts his very safety under imminent threat if he refuses to do his employer's bidding. Gibson gives us a glimpse of a utopian society where the inhabitants can leave their mortal flesh behind and transcend into a world of virtual existence. However, through the characters and the dystopian narrative, he also comments on the woes of capitalism and what the labouring bodies continue to endure. Case, who could perhaps have formed a resistance cell against the capitalist forces either by teaming up with the Rastafarians or by other means, gets involved in the process only to reproduce the same systematic oppression.

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