"What is a human, anyway?": Representations of Posthumanism in Thomas Pynchon's <u>V.</u>

and William Gibson's <u>Neuromancer</u>

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

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ABSTRACT: There is an ongoing investigation of posthumanism and its re-shaping of human society taking place in speculative fiction. In Thomas Pynchon's <u>V.</u> and William Gibson's <u>Neuromancer</u>, this conversation can best be analyzed through constructions of the animate and inanimate in the motif of the cyborg's destabilization of binary oppositions, and the embedded nature of humans within their environment. Posthumanism has a continuing influence on speculative fiction, and though the conversation is continuing through present day, <u>V.</u>'s pessimistic and <u>Neuromancer</u>'s optimistic stance on posthumanist theory are strong initial positions that are under constant development.

CONTENTS

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad, without whom I wouldn't be here, and to my friends for their love and

respect.

Introduction

"We are cyborgs, for only with machines can we face the sun." - Ollivier Dyens, <u>Metal and Flesh</u>

Some aspects of post-World War Two speculative fiction attempt to come to terms with the emergence of posthumanism from evolving technologies. Speculative fiction, specifically the sub-genre known as science fiction, is strongly indebted to concepts of technological development as well as to fundamental shifts within human society. Information technology improved at a drastic rate in the twentieth century. Human society was generally unaware of the full implications of what was being developed. Speculative fiction authors attempted to foresee the possibilities of our technology's application to daily life by utilizing concepts of modern technology in their writing. Even now we are unsure of the full implications of the creation of information technologies and theories that have been with us for over four decades. Although most often incorrect when attempting to be predictive, speculative fiction has nevertheless been an important aspect of literary history. Speculative fiction has been heavily dedicated to investigation of the potential of humanity within the world, and as such deserves to be approached seriously, with all due critical application.

Speculative fiction changed to reflect the alterations brought about by technological advances in occasionally predictive ways as posthumanist theory was developed. Two of the best examples of these predictive models are Thomas Pynchon's <u>V.</u>, published in 1961, and William Gibson's <u>Neuromancer</u>, published in 1984. The two works presented in this thesis are undoubtedly seriously intended works with clear and

distinct commentary about the world and the human relationship to technology. Though neither novel may have its predictions borne out, they are nevertheless important and useful in understanding the development of the posthuman cyborg.

I will investigate a movement concerning posthumanism and its re-shaping of concepts of the animate and inanimate in V. and Neuromancer in this thesis. I will address two main points. First, I will examine the ways in which binary structures are fundamentally undermined in the motif of the cyborg. The cyborg calls into question the boundary between body and technology, and therefore the conceptualization of animate and inanimate in general, since it is composed of both animate and inanimate components. The motif of the cyborg undermines the stability of binary oppositions as existing outside of ideologically informed perception through this questioning of reliable boundaries. Second, I will consider changing concepts of humans as creatures who exist independent of their environment through a re-structuring of human social groups. Once the stability of certain oppressive binary oppositions are undermined by the motif of the cyborg, human social community becomes a continually developing site of inclusion, rather than exclusion through ideologically based definition. As a result, both the cyborg motif and posthumanism suggest that humans exist embedded in the world without clear lines of distinction between themselves and their environment.

The differing narratives centering on merging human and machinery are extremely pessimistic in Thomas Pynchon's V.. Pynchon makes a strong distinction in the novel between the human body as natural and animate, and technology as unnatural and inanimate. The implanting of technology into the body is seen as a blurring or corruption of the body, reducing humanity from animate to inanimate. Although the blurring of

animate and inanimate through integration, such as the integration of prosthetics into the

body, is treated as inevitable,[1] Pynchon takes a pessimistic stance when considering how

the future will affect human social relations. Benny Profane is particularly wary of the

confluence of technology with the human body. For instance, Benny is disturbed when

the model SHROUD prefigures an end for humanity by developing a condition of

equilibrium with inanimate objects:

> After a while Benny got up and went over to SHROUD. 'What do you
>
> mean, we'll be like you and SHOCK someday? You mean dead?'
>
> Am I dead? If I am then that's what I mean.
>
> 'If you aren't then what are you?'
>
> Nearly what you are. None of you have very far to go.
>
> 'I don't understand.'
>
> So I see. But you're not alone. That's a comfort isn't it? (286-7)

Benny remains in a state where he recognizes the value he is placing on human

community, but he is also aware that his fears about a blur between inanimate and

animate will inevitably be realized. Pynchon does not allow the presence of absurdity in

the text to suggest that this vision of posthumanity, or Benny's fears of it, is a humorous

one. Rather, the pessimistic outlook of the novel is matched with a continuously grave

tone. Benny's reservations about the posthuman future have an extremely powerful

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1 The insistence that the blurring of animate and inanimate is inevitable can be seen in the
    narrator's description of how a human was regarded as "a clockwork automaton" (284)
    in the eighteenth century, but has progressed to "a heat-engine" in the nineteenth
    century and become "something which absorbs X-rays, gamma rays and neutrons" in
    the twentieth century. Therefore, the blur between the two categories inevitably
    increases as science and technology develops, rendering a conflation of human and
    technology on a finer, more interwoven scale.

impact on the presentation of the novel as a result.

William Gibson's <u>Neuromancer</u> veers away both from the absurdity of <u>V.</u> and from the pessimism Pynchon brings to his work, though it is equally serious in tone. In <u>Neuromancer</u>, the blurring between human and technology is not an aspect of the future, but of a present social reality. The interface between human and machine has an appreciable and direct effect upon community, although not an altogether deleterious one. If anything, the removal of a solid border between human and the technology created by humans serves to reaffirm the power and importance of interpersonal relationships. Gibson is more optimistic than Pynchon in the predictions presented at the conclusion of his novel – the state of humanity, as represented by his protagonist Case, certainly is not made any worse when the human and the technological are fully integrated. Blurring the boundary between animate and inanimate objects will improve our conditions in an evolutionary manner. In short, <u>Neuromancer</u> contradicts <u>V.</u>. The advent of posthumanism does not represent a decay of humanity into the inanimate, unlike in <u>V.</u>, but it unbinds the potential definition of humanity. For Gibson, then, integration with technology expands humanity into unforeseen possibilities rather than rendering humanity one with the inanimate.

Posthumanism is defined as the shifting condition of humanity emerging from changes in scientific and technological development. The changing conception of the human body as thoroughly inseparable from the surrounding environment and the resultant sense of interplay between humanity and human-created technology are of particular interest:

There has always been a close relationship between technological

innovation and social change. The great spinning machines and the

manufactories engendered new economic relations during the industrial

revolution, and effected new patterns of work, social class and urban life.

Yet new technologies have done more than simply introduce new patterns

of work, leisure and social interaction; they have called into question the

immutability of boundaries between humans, animals and machines,

artificial and natural, 'born' and 'made'. In challenging the fixity of 'human

nature' in this way, the digital and biotechnological age engenders renewed

scrutiny of the basic assumptions on which matters such as personal

identity, the constitution of community, the grounds of human

uniqueness and the relationship between body and mind are founded.

(Graham 1-2)

If the human is, in fact, unidentifiable as a limited being, then questions must arise about

the place of individual humans within the world Posthumanism is therefore a position

that stands in direct opposition to several of humanism's claims, as outlined by N.

Katherine Hayles in How We Became Posthuman. She states:

Although I think that serious consideration needs to be given to how

certain characteristics associated with the liberal subject, especially agency

and choice, can be articulated within a posthuman context, I do not mourn

the passing of a concept so deeply entwined with projects of domination

and oppression. Rather, I view the present moment as a critical juncture

when interventions might be made to keep disembodiment from being

rewritten, once again, into prevailing concepts of subjectivity. (5)

There has been sufficient shift to require a re-examination of how humans might better explore themselves and the world around them due to the rise of culturally indispensable technology, such as computers. To this end an acceptance of the inability to locate the specific limits of the human body is essential, as is a realization that the definitions that make up the category "human" might not be as strong as our perceptions lead us to believe.

The issue of the limits of the body and the necessary embeddedness of that body is of extreme importance. The very idea of a human body as a clearly defined independent structure is problematized under posthumanism. If the existence of our sense of self hinges upon the environment around us, one cannot claim that the limit of our bodies is delineated by our skin. Therefore, traditional notions of the human being as an independent and controlling organism can no longer be supported in light of recognition of a posthuman embeddedness and interplay with technology. Once the limits of the human body have been questioned, the cyborg becomes all the more important as a figure. Ranging anywhere from the most basic image of a human augmented with prosthetic devices to the most extreme conception of a body entirely replaced with mechanical constructions, the cyborg is prevalent in both V. and Neuromancer. In this thesis I will consider the image of the cyborg in light of Donna Haraway's work in The Cyborg Manifesto. Largely a political analysis of the cyborg as a motif, Haraway argues that by virtue of being an implanted being, a human with machine parts, the cyborg destabilizes certain binary oppositions. That is, since the cyborg is a being comprised of both organic and inorganic components, a clear distinction cannot be drawn between those parts of the cyborg which qualify as living and those which don't. In the cyborg, the

inorganic components are just as vital, and therefore just as alive, as the organic

components. Therefore, the cyborg calls into question how we define situations where

fundamental binary constructions are, at best, blurred. Haraway states that in the cyborg

"dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public

and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in

question ideologically" (Haraway 163). If, as she argues, these polarities are based not on

facts of the world but on ideological constructions, what follows by necessity is the idea

that there is no essential self within humanity. Instead of revealing an essential quality of

humanity, which would be a gesture of closing off through definition, the cyborg insists

upon a perpetual opening up of definition. There is no way to locate the cyborg as

animate or inanimate, alive or dead, organic or technological: therefore, the cyborg can

never be constrained by notions of human essence. Haraway's cyborg call into question

the existence of a fully defined human distinct from all other beings or objects in the

world, just as posthumanism calls into question the distinction between human and

environment.

It is through Haraway's critique of binary structures that the majority of this thesis

will operate. I feel that posthumanism is directly informed by Haraway's cyborg motif in

that the revelation of binaries as ideologically constructed and therefore untenable as a

quantitative aspect of the world directly goes to support various posthumanist claims such

as a lack of fixity of a definition of the characteristic of "human," of "life," and of "self."

Both V. and Neuromancer can be analyzed successfully by looking at the ways in which

certain binary structures are collapsed, and what occurs when the distance between

positions is removed. The reliance upon technology in both novels indicates that a

combination of Haraway's cyborg motif and posthumanist discourse is the most effective

critical tool to apply to this subject matter. Posthumanism deals best with ideas of

undermining traditional perception-based assumptions about the world, and I feel that

Haraway's cyborg motif can only assist this project in fruitful ways. As such, this thesis

will operatively assume that binary constructions are always already positions to be

questioned, undermined if possible, and the results observed. What rises out of the

collapse of binaries and therefore through Haraway's cyborg motif in both novels is

inevitably the posthuman condition viewed through distinct textual lenses.

Both <u>V.</u> and <u>Neuromancer</u> deal closely with beings that clearly blur the distinction

between animate and inanimate, thereby unsettling the social notion of humanity. The

character of V is a representation of posthumanity, existing at some points as a variety of

implanted beings in the world and at others as a disembodied yet perceptible signal. V

exists through a form of autopoiesis, defined as the ways in which "a living system's

organization causes certain products to be produced [and] these products in turn produce

the organization characteristic of that system" (Hayles 136), and her influence causes

others to adopt characteristics similar to hers. Implantation and an obsession with the

inanimate are specific examples, both of which allow for continuing growth of her

influence in human society. Pynchon constructs V as a disruptive figure; she creates

disharmony in social community, group ideological thought, and historical perspective by

various characters mistakenly attempting to lock her into a specific definition. Katherine

Hayles states that this is a common mistake when autopoiesis is observed, as "there are

the inferences that observers draw when they place an autopoietic system in the context

of an environment. Seeing system and medium together over a period of time, observers

draw connections between cause and effect, past and future. But these are the observers' inferences; they are not intrinsic to the autopoietic processes in themselves" (137). In Neuromancer, the artificial intelligence, Wintermute, forms a possible counterpart to V. Rather than existing via autopoiesis, Wintermute thrives within a posthumanist model that relies on reflexivity:[2] "[T]he movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates" (Hayles 8). A more positive take on posthumanism, Wintermute interacts with its environment in a way that does not allow for any outside position, and therefore does not close off definitions by exclusion. The environment and society in Neuromancer can be considered systems which are all-inclusive, with no outside anywhere, unlike in V.. Even the matrix and the physical world are not discrete systems, since they require each other to exist. Wintermute exists at the conclusion of the novel symbiotically with the world, rather than having a disruptive effect upon it. Through Wintermute's posthuman efforts humans, exemplified by Case, are brought to a potential for continual redefinition and expansion of themselves and their place in the world.

Both novels thoroughly investigate posthumanism and its impact upon human society and social community. V. argues that the introduction of a posthuman element will disrupt what we recognize as human. That is, the advent of posthumanism will prevent humans from continuing to exist in a state of equilibrium with their environment, and therefore each other, in favour of a new and artificial equilibrium brought about by V's corruption. Social groups must therefore disintegrate, as the rise of mechanical

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2 It should be noted that although I am aware of the metafictional theory of textual reflexivity, I am using the term in this thesis to refer solely to the aspect of information theory of the same name.

equivalency brings humanity into a steady state that Pynchon renders synonymous with death. <u>Neuromancer</u>, on the other hand, begins with a state of social dislocation and ends up considering how posthumanism will serve to integrate multiplicity into the definition of "human." Within the posthumanist redefinition of reflexivity, observer positions are impossible as there is no place outside of a given system, no place where the observer is strictly absent from the system.[3] If the human social environment can be conceptualized as a singular system, then there is no real outsider position from which it can be observed. Therefore, posthumanism does not dissolve social communities but rather allows individuals infinite possibilities to integrate themselves with one another via constant redefinition. Thus, although both novels are deeply concerned with the coming of posthumanist consciousness, they diverge significantly in terms of the attitudes presented in each. <u>V.</u> is overwhelming pessimistic, while <u>Neuromancer</u> is optimistic despite its dystopian appearance.

Although this thesis is not equipped to completely justify posthumanism as an efficacious theoretical discourse, something should be said of posthumanism in relation to humanism. Posthumanism does not by necessity define itself purely in opposition to humanism, but several humanist preconceptions of note to this thesis are rejected out of hand. As will become clear relatively quickly, the mind / body split is a strong humanist position that posthumanism here rejects. While the philosophies of mind and

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3 It can be argued that during the raid on the Sense/Net corporation, Molly occupies an outside observer position by virtue of wearing a suit that reflects the chaos around her while rendering her invisible. However, though unlocatable to the majority of people, Molly is perceived by two Panther Moderns. Since their suits are "unable to keep up with the confusion of shape and colour that raged behind them" (67) we may conclude that Molly, like the Moderns, is obscured from the world but not removed from it to a strictly outside position.

consciousness are wide and complex, it is nevertheless the case that posthumanism does not accept that there is a necessary divide between mind and body, even though some posthumanist theorists tend to accept a distinction between information and instantiation. The conception of the humanist subject held in stark relation to a world of objects is also rejected by posthumanism. When so much of our knowledge of our place in the world is based only on our own subjective perceptions, we cannot necessarily trust our senses to give us access to a fundamental truth about the nature of our environment. Finally, posthumanity cannot accept the concept of a clearly definable human property that is unique in the world. Since oppositional binary definitions tend to slip under posthumanism, it would be facetious at best to argue that humans are the only possible form of being in the world that can have human-like characteristics, or that the definition "human" is even informed by facts of the world in a meaningful way. Posthumanism claims that in all likelihood, forms of life that are equivalent to the qualities of human beings without being necessarily biologically human will inevitably come into existence.

However, it should be noted that while this thesis utilizes posthumanist discourse at the expense of humanism, I will for the most part be using a moderate posthumanist stance. That is, some posthumanist theorists (such as Robert Pepperell or Ray Kurzweil) postulate extreme conclusions that are inappropriate for the purposes of this thesis. Some aspects of these extreme conclusions would include the positive nature of a loss of individuality among humanity within a hive-mind structure based off of a notion of machine intelligence. More importantly, these conclusions tend to contain the idea that the pattern of information that constitutes human consciousness is of relevance over and above physical instantiation. To that end, posthumanist theorists tend to envision a future

where very few "natural" humans exist, and the world is instead populated by a group of recorded and created personalities reincarnating themselves at will via something like nanotechnological bodies. The form of posthumanist discourse used in this thesis is of a far more moderate variety, one which can be seen clearly in the work of N. Katherine Hayles and others. In the moderate stance I am taking, posthumanism doesn't imply a strong division between pattern and instantiation, but instead argues that patterns of information can never fully dispose of physical instantiation. To that end, a more moderate perspective on posthumanist theory is adopted in this thesis, where the conclusions reached are not of a disembodied immortality at the expense of physical instantiation, nor of a new power-relationship between posthumans and a world of objects. Instead, posthumanist theory in this thesis envisions a much more realistic environment where humanity's developing relationship with its technology has led to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the nature of human thought, the natural world, and the validity of our perceptions.

Posthumanism, as a school of thought, is itself neither pessimistic nor optimistic. Scholars have analyzed posthumanist theory in a variety of ways, and most cannot be clearly labelled as either dystopian or utopian in character. The value of posthumanism can be found in the ways in which it constantly and critically forces us to re-evaluate our position in the world in light of the technology which we have developed. Using posthumanism, we are capable of new perspectives upon ourselves, our culture and our technology, and it should be remembered that "to reflect upon technological culture is thus not simply to think about the impact of technologies on our world, but also to examine the emergence of new strata of reality, where living beings, phenomena, and

machines become entangled" (Dyens 11). As a genre of writing clearly indebted to the relationship between humanity and technology, then, speculative fiction can be extensively and critically investigated through the lens of posthumanist thought. This thesis is by no means an attempt to restrict speculative fiction to one mode of theory; it is rather an effort to contribute to a conversation that has taken place for decades in the language of posthumanism. The conversation at hand is not concluded – as humanity continues to develop its relationship with its technological environment, the conversation between works of speculative fiction can only continue to open up further avenues of exploration, revelation, and understanding.

Chapter One

A Dance For Automata: The Cyborg and the Binary in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*

<u>I. Introduction</u>

Thomas Pynchon's novel <u>V.</u> is a sprawling work that traces a large part of the

twentieth century and involves dozens of characters. Pynchon's first book, originally

published in 1961, is so wide-ranging in terms of structure that any level of critical

interaction with the work can feel daunting, like peeking under one corner of a gigantic

veil. Ranging from the city of Valletta on the Isle of Malta twenty years before the start

of the novel's action to the South African coast at the dawn of the twentieth century to the

streets of New York in the present of 1955, the scope of Pynchon's work is breathtaking.

In <u>V.</u> humanity's present condition is represented as consisting of degeneration and

decadence. Here, posthumanism is represented as a corruption of the fundamental aspects

of humanity, such as the inviolate nature of the human body and the strong division

between animate and inanimate objects.

Two central narratives take up the bulk of the novel: The first follows Benny

Profane, a former navy man gone AWOL in New York City. Over the course of Benny's

adventures, he falls in with a variety of striking individuals, most notably his sometime

love interest Rachel and her associates in the loosely affiliated gang of bohemians called

the Whole Sick Crew. However, Benny's relationships are unsustainable, as he is driven

by a terror of inanimate objects and their effect upon the world. Benny's fears are not

constant, however. He does experience moments of contentment and even joy, such as

when he drinks in a quarry with Rachel, briefly feeling as if he were "god of a darkened

world" (26). But these moments are always unsettled and overtaken by the inanimate and

his resultant fear. With Rachel, this is why "he never got beyond or behind the chatter about her world – one of objects coveted or valued, an atmosphere Profane couldn't breathe" (27). The rise of technology in the world means that from Benny's perspective people are becoming more like the inanimate as the posthuman condition approaches. This terror of mechanical equivalency colours every aspect of his perception of the world. Speaking of Rachel, Benny thinks that he is "unwilling to see her proved inanimate as the rest [...] a general desire to find someone for once on the right or real side of the TV screen" (359). The narrator of the novel comments that "love for an object, this was new to him" (23), and throughout the book Benny is unable to reconcile the attraction and desire he feels for other humans and the loathing he feels for humans decayed into objects. Benny fears that technological changes in society are not actually advances but regressions, reducing humanity to the level of inanimate objects, and, because of this, the ability to draw a distinction between animate and inanimate objects is disappearing. As he perceives it, the world is nothing more than "millions of inanimate objects being produced brand-new every week, new cars in the streets, houses going up by the thousands all over the suburbs" (148). To Benny's mind, "inanimate objects and he could not live in peace" (37), and yet the place of separation between the people who own the cars or live in the houses and the cars or houses themselves is rapidly dissolving, which is why he is so disconcerted by Rachel's sexual love of her car. His self definition as a "schlemiel" indicates that he feels himself caught up in the slide toward inanimateness, and occasionally wants to give in to the urge for mechanical equivalence, as evidenced by his plaintive wish for the young Josephine to objectify him by treating him as "just an object of mercy" (137). Benny's desire for human relationships causes him to cycle

through a pattern of ignoring his fear, forming relations with others, then being overcome by his terror and feeling pushed away by a gulf between him and the encroaching tide of inanimate objects.

One of the other main narratives in <u>V.</u> is the story of Herbert Stencil, a young man who is on a quest to locate the mysterious V. Stencil, who refers to himself only in the third person, discovers V by reading about her in his father's journals. Stencil feels that his sense of identity is slipping, due to a lack of any purpose or direction in his life. By his own estimation, he is "quite purely He Who Looks For V" (226). He is caught on the crux of a dilemma: In order to resist the slide into the inanimate, Stencil must actively seek V out. By doing so, stencil remains animate, but seeking her out carries the potential for finding her, and thus relegating himself without purpose to the state of the inanimate. The search for V gives him purpose and allows him to remain an animate being, but his quest is predicated on finding the very essence of the inanimate which V represents. The presence of V indicates a growing lack of distinction between animate and inanimate objects on a global scale. Since he is "purely the century's man, something which does not exist in nature" (226), Stencil feels that if his quest comes to completion, he will go as the century goes, enacting a degeneration into an inanimate state. He knows that his father came to know of V by encountering one of her incarnations, that of Victoria Wren, a young British woman of the upper classes, and became concerned that V, as a looming symbol, exerted a dangerous influence over the course of history. The younger Stencil becomes convinced that V is in fact a power guiding a conspiracy that molds and constructs the history of the world to suit its own needs. He quickly becomes obsessed with ascertaining the shape of V in order to understand the totality of the conspiracy

whose edges he has sensed. However, Stencil does suspect that his quest is one that can never be completed, since like others he seems to feel it is likely that V's "particular shape [is] governed only by the surface accidents of history at the time" (155). Although V is undeniably a presence in the world, her function cannot be determined solely by the physical manifestation of her being. Stencil's animate nature must give way to the inanimate future represented by V, just as this century must give way to the next.

Stencil realizes that V's physical incarnations are extremely varied; some of them are even those of a non-human. None of these manifestations represents V as a whole, since she cannot be confined to one instantiation. As Stencil's father notes, "there is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected" (53). She appears throughout the whole of the novel in forms appropriate to the particular time and place. Some of the most notable include Victoria, a young British woman, Vera Meroving, a sado-masochistic German woman in South Africa, and the mysterious Bad Priest – a transgendered resident of Malta. Her nonhuman instantiations are more infrequently encountered: they include the sewer rat Veronica, the Shangri-La-like state of Vheissu, and the city of Valletta on the island of Malta. Despite the fact that all of V's human forms are female, however, it is important to remember that she is only female in a limited sense. Thus, although the feminine pronoun is used as a convenience to refer to her throughout this chapter its use should not imply the location of an essential quality of V's being. There is no essential self in V's composite and implanted being. This chapter will show specifically how V cannot be constrained by simple binary definitions like "male / female," "one / many," or even "human / non-human." Although there are many feminist analyses of the novel, such as Dana Medoro's and Deborah Madsen's, V is also

outside of binary gender constructions. V cannot be precisely located as a gendered

entity, being neither female nor male in any real sense, and the use of the feminine

pronoun for V should be regarded as nothing more significant than a term of

convenience.

   The instability of the boundary between animate and inanimate objects permeates

the whole of the text, focused most often through the character of V. By integrating

technological components into some of her instantiation's bodies, such as a prosthetic

foot, or a glass and metal clock for an eye, V makes herself into a cyborg. The whole of

the novel hinges on this motif and the reaction to it. Like Haraway's cyborg, V is

absolutely composite in identity and representation. While only some of her instantiations

are literal cyborgs, the placement of implanted technology within multiple identities

defined by an over-arching presence does strongly connect V with Haraway's cyborg

motif. Although individual characters perceive V as a singular, whole being, these

perceptions cannot be trusted to reveal a true unified identity circumscribing V's being. V

functions as the forerunner of a coming posthuman future, one whose outlines can be

discerned only through her absolute fluidity. Stencil and others suspect that the effect V

has on the world is the generation of a conspiracy. However, V's composite form causes

the shapes perceived by those around her to be heavily context dependent, denying any

fundamental discovery of being since there is no "truth" to be uncovered about V. As a

herald of posthumanism entrenched in a decadent society, V is fundamentally estranged

from those who perceive her. Her instantiations are literal examples of the thought that "a

woman is only half of something there are usually two sides to" (18), and it is the case

that throughout the text "alignment with the inanimate is the mark of a Bad Guy" (101).

She serves only as a divisive element in the modern world, driving those who sense her presence further from their principles into the unquantifiable state she occupies. Fausto Maijistral senses V's divisiveness when he states "we had been using, it seemed, nothing but Valletta to fill up the hollow of ourselves. Stone and metal cannot nourish. [...] What could there be to feed on? Only one another" (335). V's very presence drives a wedge between people, between individuals and their principles, between the concept of "human" and any certainty of the validity of that concept.

Understanding V as a singular being is effectively impossible for other characters since she is not constrained to a single form. In Hayles' posthumanist terminology, V's position is one where "pattern tends to overwhelm presence" (Hayles 35). Whereas we might think of a human as an autonomous being tied however tangentially to the environment, or at least restrained to the body, V slips this definition. V's over-arching presence overwhelms the existence of any singular physical instantiation. Thus, V is not tied to any particular instantiation of herself within the material world, even though her various embodiments cannot be overlooked. As this chapter will show, V can be analyzed locally in her particular embodiments and globally in the pattern indicative of an ongoing social process. V's unique existence places her in a transgressive posthumanist position where identity is neither defined nor limited by anchoring within the confines of the body. Pynchon constructs her as a corrupting influence, suggesting a world moving towards a state of mechanical equilibrium. By apprehending her, V's observers cause that corruption to spread throughout humanity, drawing them down into a baseline where the animate cannot be distinguished from the inanimate. Consider how V describes her lover Melanie: "'You are the same, not real but an object of pleasure. [...] Do you only lie

passive then, like an object? Of course you do. It's what you are. Une fetiche'" (404-6). Her presence in Melanie's life corrupts her fundamentally, reducing her from humanity to V's inanimate posthumanity. This is where the novel best evidences its overly pessimistic assumptions about posthumanism. In the overwhelming majority of posthumanist theory the blur between the animate and inanimate is not figured as a corruption of the animate. However, because V's influence is entirely one-sided, her impact can clearly be interpreted as a decay of the animate in favour of the inanimate.

Four distinct effects upon the world follow in her wake. As an over-arching figure, V's effect upon binary oppositions is extremely disruptive, as standard definitions of "human" rely heavily upon firm boundaries between states. Preconceptions about the stability of the body, the dominance of the animate over the inanimate, and the importance of human perception are questioned because of V's influence. Society and social community are thereby unravelled from the anchor of meaning found in a stronger oppositional definition of "human." The notion of history and the development of the future comes into doubt as the world defined by prior perceptions no longer seems sustainable. Ultimately, the very sustainability of humanity as a definable category comes into question. All this leads me to ask: are humans progressing via their technology, or are they racing towards posthumanism – a state which, by way of equilibrium with the inanimate, is tantamount to death? Are humans, stuck in a time of decadence which is "a clear movement toward death or [...] non-humanity" (321), racing towards a point where "dead at last, they would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other" (410)? V., the novel, is almost as impossible to define fully as the character of V herself. This chapter will conclude with a brief re-examination of the key concepts, and show how the

conversation begun by <u>V.</u> is continued decades later in another landmark of speculative

fiction,[4] William Gibson's <u>Neuromancer</u>.

II. V and the Collapse of Binaries

　　V exists as a collapse of binary oppositions such as human / non-human, animate /

inanimate, alive / dead, self / other, present / absent. As Haraway makes clear, a being

that does not exist in one specific state cannot be defined by either the conditions of that

state or by its binary opposite. Since V is never strictly human nor non-human, alive nor

dead, singular nor multiple, she cannot be constrained or restricted to one position or the

other. Within V, certain binary positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can,

in fact, both exist simultaneously. Deborah Madsen refers to this as the "V-metaphysic"

(30). Madsen argues that V is both a signifier and a signified at the same time, a self-

referential position that does not connect by necessity to anything outside of itself, but

instead forms a perfect circle. V, therefore, exists in a unique position. To the characters

who perceive her, V is a set of unsettling contradictions, since from their perspective

binary positions cannot both be true but must collapse into one state or the other. V's

position as a cyborg in some of her instantiations, combined with Madsen's V

metaphysic, however, indicates a posthumanist condition where such oppositions are

either discarded entirely, or are at best matters of contextual convenience. Part of her is

"an automaton, constructed, only quaintly, of human flesh" (411). In this posthumanist

state, V stands as an example which disallows the drawing of clear boundaries between

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4 It would be a tenuous argument to suggest that <u>V.</u> is science fiction. Note, however, that
　　speculative fiction is a wider genre label which is able to contain both strictly science
　　fiction works as well as books like <u>V.</u> that are obviously indebted to the fantastic.

oppressive positions (most notably the body / nature and animate / inanimate positions).
This example causes extreme disjunction in how the world is observed by its inhabitants,
since V's state is as yet unavailable to most. One of the functions of the cyborg, according
to Donna Haraway, is to undermine certain states of binary oppositions. By the very
existence of the cyborg, "dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human,
organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive
and civilized are all in question ideologically" (Haraway 163). The distance between
oppressive binary positions, and therefore the necessary difference between them, is thus
called into question by the cyborg as potentially little more than ideologically informed
perception.

Since it should be clear in this reading of the novel that we must "take Pynchon's
mechanistic metaphors more literally than just rhetoric" (Seed 79), the cyborg motif is of
utmost importance. For Haraway, one of the things at issue in the figure of the cyborg is
what removing boundaries between previously held binaries does to ideological
constructions. The cyborg is a living being consisting at least in part of non-living
components. By the very fact of its existence, the cyborg is an amalgamation of the
animate and inanimate to the extent that what would be considered non-living outside of
the cyborg is now part of a living system. Thus, the cyborg *as a whole* cannot be defined
as absolutely animate or inanimate. Therefore, the cyborg undermines perspectives of
firm boundaries between fundamental states. Once these boundaries have been called into
question, what follows with posthumanism is a questioning of the fundamental validity of
any boundary within human perception. What humanity recognizes as a limit between
animate and inanimate, self and environment, or even self and other, becomes equally

suspect as something that might originate in the human mind and not in the extant world. Once called into question, these binaries collapse and it becomes clear that what humans take as functional givens in this context might be nothing more than assumptions based upon our senses.

In some of her incarnations, V is a literal cyborg, complete with implants. The most significant of these is an artificial eye consisting of a broken brass clock contained within a glass sphere. At one point, the various characters in the novel are referred to as "the lead weights of a fantastic clock [...] let the clock tell false time for a while. But the weights will be reforged and rehung" (233). This suggests metaphorically that the world of the characters works in accordance with human presence and is maintained by it. However, the world, like V's implant, is currently malfunctioning, giving false time due to an inherent imbalance of the characters. The negative view of posthumanism represented by V contains "the selective perception of the world which accounts only for literal appearances and substitutes a set of mechanical relationships for moral order" (Madsen 34). Posthumanism, which can discard notions of uniqueness or specialness within humanity when taken to an extreme, occurs in the novel therefore as an imposition of mechanism over an anthropocentric sense of morality. Two machines crafted in human form, SHROUD and SHOCK, have potentially hallucinatory conversations with Benny over the course of the novel. SHROUD tells Benny that "me and SHOCK are what you and everybody will be someday" (286). The shift into the inanimate will replace the perceived essential characteristics of humanity to the point where humans and machines will be indistinguishable. The boundary between animate and inanimate, shown to be far more permeable than it has traditionally been perceived, will result in a reduction of

humanity to equilibrium with mechanistic relationships. This is the source of Benny's terror; he is able to recognize the degeneration of the boundary between animate and inanimate, but is unable to halt it in any way.

V represents the realization of Haraway's concepts by recoding humanity into the same position she now occupies, complete with an obliteration of the concepts of unity or essential selfhood. V is neither a divided being standing in opposition to anything else nor a whole being consisting of an essential self. The collapsed binary does not reveal a singular form, but instead it denies unification itself. Within V's posthuman state, all essentialism is undermined, creating a climate within the novel where "any sense of unity within this fictional world cannot find confirmation" (Madsen 31). By removing the fundamental necessity for the self / other, animate / inanimate, and human / environment binaries, V re-inscribes humanity into a posthuman state unbound by ideological constructions. Haraway describes this state of collapsed binaries as follows:

> To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion, and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many. (177)

In these terms, V is defined as both one and many, in her over-arching presence and multiple instantiations, while resisting being absolutely collapsed into either position. She is neither God, set against an other, nor is she frayed or insubstantial. She exists, but she escapes definition within perception-based human terms. Existing outside of an originary concept of selfhood, V is mistakenly believed by the majority of the other characters to occupy an adversarial role. The fear prevalent throughout the text is that the removal of

boundaries between animate and inanimate objects corrupts the very idea of the animate; that the posthumanity represented by V will be realized in the world as an apocalyptic steady state. This is both a domination of the individual and a terrible equality in that there will be no distinction between persons in the posthuman realm of equilibrium and death.

The apocalyptic fear is certainly the one from which Benny Profane suffers throughout the whole of the text. He is terrorized by the notion of a loss of humanity by the integration of human and machine. The possibility of becoming a human object is inevitable to him, and is the locus of his fear. For Benny, the collapse of binaries results in an inability to locate himself – that is, an essential Benny Profane, around which he can construct a self-identity. In Park's words, Benny is caught by an anxiety "that the mechanical replaces the human and thus he may at any time be broken into pieces like a machine. [...] Overwhelmed with this fear, Profane desperately looks for any reasonable relation between himself and the world of uncaring objects" (853). Benny attempts to reject destabilized binaries such as Rachel's sexual feelings for her car, SHROUD's drawing of equivalence between concentration camps and automotive graveyards, and his own feelings of being a man-object doubting "his own animateness" (217). With these attempts, Benny hopes to place himself firmly within a fully realized selfhood. He seeks to define himself by what he is not, by keeping the boundary between himself and the inanimate firmly entrenched. However, by attempting to cling to a notion of an essential self, of consciousness limited to the human body, Benny creates an apocalyptic scenario where the animate is under attack from the inanimate, where humanity is besieged by V's posthumanity. Equally, by relying so strongly on clear divisions between binaries, Benny

becomes victim of an unsalvageable situation since his other, the inanimate, encroaches upon him. Benny suffers in a situation where he is caught in perpetual paradox, partially recognizing V through the rising influence of the inanimate but unable to reconcile that influence with his perception-based desires of the world. He describes this paradox metaphorically with a dream: "To Profane, alone in the street, it would always seem maybe he was looking for something too to make the fact of his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine. [...] [I]f he kept going down the street, not only his ass but also his arms, legs, sponge brain and clock of a heart must be left behind to litter the pavement" (40). He must live in the world and thus cannot avoid V's influence, but he fears that recognizing said influence will make him subject to it, destabilizing his perception; thus his world-view and self-identity will disassemble in a mechanistic fashion that reveals a device instead of a human. Benny feels V's influence on the world, and cannot reconcile his sense of being corrupted by it with his own fear of the spread of the inanimate through himself and the world. Thus, the apocalypse which terrifies Benny is made real for him only by his inability to ignore the instability of the human body and the potential conflation of animate and inanimate objects within the world.

Some critics, such as Kathleen Fitzpatrick, deny the importance to the novel of the intrusion of the inanimate into the animate. Fitzpatrick argues that "the fascistic introduction of the technological into the human serves as a mask for the true threat which the novel unconsciously reveals: the point of entry for the technological into human life is woman [...] the sense of the encroaching Other in this novel is figured throughout in terms of the threat of the female" (95). Although Fitzpatrick's analysis of the novel is valuable, she does ignore the possibility that V cannot be restricted to an

essentially feminine (or even human) form. While some of V's incarnations are human women, I argue that V exists outside and beyond these forms and therefore cannot be defined by them. The technology implanted within Vera Meroving does not mask an essential self, nor does the removal of those implants from the form of the Bad Priest reveal an essential self of V underneath the layers of her incarnation. Within Madsen's "V-metaphysic" there is nothing to connect her implicitly to the world. V is her own circumference, and therefore any human ideologically constructed binary such as "male" or "female" must be discarded. Thus, it can be concluded here that although V is considered by various characters such as Stencil to be the Other, it is not due to a falsely perceived feminine nature but to her inherent destruction of the permanence and reliability of binary positions.

Posthumanist theorists argue that there can be no distinction drawn between humanity and the environment within which humanity thrives. This is a necessary condition of perception for posthumanism – since the boundaries of the body are entirely permeable, the body cannot be constructed as absolutely distinct from the environment surrounding the body. Robert Pepperell argues:

> If we accept that the mind and body cannot be absolutely distinguished and
> that the body and the environment cannot be absolutely distinguished, then
> we are left with an apparently absurd, yet logically consistent conclusion:
> that consciousness and the environment cannot be absolutely
> distinguished. If so, then an integrated continuum exists throughout
> consciousness, body and environment such that any distinction in that
> continuum, for example between the skin and the scent it emits, or

between an object perceived and the object itself, is necessarily contingent and arbitrary. (22)

Finding posthumanism bleeding into their construction of reality, some characters attempt to reinforce their viewpoints by casting V in an adversarial role. By doing so, they hope to create a distance between themselves and their environment necessary for resisting the fall into the inanimate. Mondaugen, for instance, claims that "it had only to do with the destroyer and the destroyed, and the act which united them, and it had never been that way before" (264), while Bongo-Shaftsbury states that "humanity is something to destroy" (81). Other characters attempt to rediscover the validity of their perception-based binaries by vainly attempting to locate an essential human self within V. What none of them doubts, however, is that a profound change is occurring for humanity and the world at large.

III. V, the Whole Sick Crew, and Social Community

In the previous section, the introduction of the cyborg into traditional social community was said to be a disruptive movement. The knowledge or recognition of V causes an irreconcilable break from social community, placing those who know of her in an outsider's position, torn between the traditional past and the posthuman future. On a cultural level, the perceived intrusion of the posthuman into society within the novel creates a sense of decadence, a period in a historical era when there is a strong break from tradition and traditional values. This quality of decadence is described by the character Itague as "a falling-away from what is human, and the further we fall the less human we become. Because we are less human, we foist off the humanity we have lost on inanimate

objects and abstract theories" (405). V is, in a sense, responsible for this shift into decadence, but this is not something she has planned. It is an effect which she inspires in the world, and it is therefore more a reaction to her existence rather than a course set upon by her. Fausto states that decadence is "only a clear movement toward death or preferably, non-humanity" (321). Characters like Profane, Stencil, Godolphin Senior or Mondaugen, caught up in perception-based assumptions about the world, spur on the decadence by being unable to reconcile themselves with their knowledge of V's influence. For Mondaugen, the horrific events in Africa force him to conclude that "humanity was reduced to a nervous, disquieted, forever inadequate but indissoluble Popular Front against [...] enemies that would be with him to the grave: a sun with no shape, a beach alien as the moon's antarctic, restless concubines in barbed wire" (274). There is no place left for traditional assumptions about the definition of humanity, for since "the world is all that the case is" (278); there can be no escape from the building posthumanity. The world itself is recreated through V's influence, forcing humans to adapt to equilibrium with the alien posthuman condition. Emblematic of the decadent state of the world in the novel is primarily the social group The Whole Sick Crew.

The Whole Sick Crew takes an important place within the novel precisely because of their counterpoint to Benny Profane. The Crew is a loosely-drawn social group consisting of individuals that would otherwise be constructive members of society – Naval officers, musicians, artists, writers, businessmen. That they only succeed at either emulating or deconstructing aspects of society to no effective end suggests that they are enmeshed in a context where "culture is for the most part demonized, half-conscious, and absorbed in banal fetishes" (Hite 56). When the current state of the world is giving way

to a new state, the traditional preconceptions can be revealed as questionable. The Crew represents a strong drive towards community, borne out of a desire to preserve humanity. However, this drive is easily perverted since, as Deborah Madsen notes, "pretextual values [...] are shown here to be elements of a 'mastering' cultural discourse that determines individual subjectivity on a mass scale" (43). In this case, the Crew wishes to preserve the pretextual values of human community, but at the same time it resists the inevitable capitulation to the mastering discourses that exist simultaneously with those pretextual values. Within the decadence underlying the Crew, cultural discourses that might allow for a stable or normalized society are impossible or at best untenable surface-level constructions, since mastery by those values is actively fought against by the Crew. Thus, there is a rising tendency for humans within a decadent state, both as individuals and in groups, to reject the precepts that served as foundations for tradition. Slab, a visual artist and member of the Crew, describes one aspect of the Crew's decadent perspective when he describes his painting *Cheese Danish #35*, featuring a telephone pole, as "the universal symbol I have decided will replace the cross in Western civilization [...] The beauty is that it works like a machine yet is animate" (282). Mutating and changing as time passes, a decadent society inevitably collapses, undermining traditional preconceptions in a rejection of what is believed to be hypocrisy to the point where they, themselves, can no longer maintain culture or society. Thus, those who are caught up in the changes V heralds can hide in terror from the posthuman advent, like Benny, or embrace the loss of what it means to be traditionally human, like Slab and the Crew.

Attempting to forge social community while at the same time rejecting the traditional values of social communities is, of course, a difficult proposition. In the novel,

the impulse to do so is founded in an inability to truly embrace the posthumanism that V represents. The Crew, as with other groups throughout the text, work under the false assumption that "community may have been the only solution possible against such an assertion of the Inanimate" (292), never realizing that the decadence underlying their community concludes in the slide towards the inanimate which their groups cannot survive. Conceptions of love, relationship, work, religion and, most importantly, community itself are all undermined by the Crew, free from what they see as the hypocrisy of traditional society. The end result is that the traditional preconceptions become spread far too thin to be of any use, and the values of the old culture are undermined until the very necessity of social groups comes into question. An important character in the novel, Fausto Maijstral, speaks of a set of social conditions that serves to describe the Crew:

> It is a universal sin among the false-animate or unimaginative to refuse to let well enough alone. Their compulsion to gather together, their pathological fear of loneliness extends on past the threshold of sleep; so that when they turn the corner, as we all must, as we all have done and do – some more often than others – to find ourselves on the street... You know the street I mean, child. The street of the 20th Century, at whose far end or turning – we hope – is some sense of home or safety. But no guarantees. A street we are put at the wrong end of, for reasons best known to the agents who put us there. If there are agents. But a street we must walk. (323-4)

Here the Crew are the false-animate of which Fausto speaks. That is, they are those who

are seemingly animate, thoroughly human, and seek to convince themselves that this appearance is the truth. However, they are deluding themselves. The street of the twentieth century is one which much be traversed, and there is no sense of home and safety awaiting them. Instead, what comes to pass is the condition of posthumanity, which they have fostered out of their simultaneous reach towards and undermining of traditional values. Given the existing technology, the shift to posthumanism is inevitable, and in the representation of the novel, nothing can remain the same. Neither traditional community nor the decadent social groups can continue to exist.

Destabilization of traditional social communities is another effect of the figure of the cyborg. Although this effect is represented as extremely negative in the novel, Haraway's basic argumentation is, in a sense, utopian (though it actively denies the attainment of utopia). Haraway positively writes of a political state that relies upon a sense of continual inclusion without any of the exclusion demanded by propping up ideologically-based binary structures. The cyborg represents a perpetual opening of individual identities to new states in denial of any essentialist self. In larger social groups, for instance, this would deny any "us and them" mentality, allowing for stronger posthumanist communities working under the auspices of continually incorporating a multiplicity of communal properties and connections. Tying Haraway more closely to posthumanism, her cyborg motif can therefore be read as representative of reflexivity, "the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates" (Hayles 8). In this case, the society modelled on the cyborg motif would never be capable of having an antagonistic other, since the other would be included within the system of the society via

a continual process of incorporation and redefinition. However, the world of V's posthumanism is presented in almost exactly the opposite fashion. Posthumanism in the novel is brought about by a sense of almost parasitic infection, where the environment surrounding one being (in this case, V) is reconfigured so as to allow space for that being's existence. Within the text, "the influence of the inanimate is a tendency towards this kind of sameness which causes 'natural' difference to be replaced by manufactured homogeneity" (Madsen 32). The world of the novel does not influence V's closed circle, but it is made to reflect it in a nightmare version of posthumanism. In other words, the integration of the animate with the inanimate in order to create V's posthumanism is represented in the text as a process of unification and evening out instead of opening up. Rather than allowing for continual discovery of new modes of definition, humanity would be restricted to a lack of difference by becoming equivalent to the inanimate. Connections between individuals are cut off instead of shored up, creating a mechanic-based commonality rather than a recognizable community. Therefore, humanity and social community are not enhanced through a posthumanist integration with technology, but fundamentally damaged.

The problem that arises is one of equilibrium. According to posthumanist theory, humans exist embedded in their environment with no clear boundary between the two. If the environment becomes corrupted, as in the case of V, then humans are vulnerable to that corruption. This vulnerability covers all aspects of human life, from the physical body, to mental stability, to the cohesiveness of social community. The inversion of the animate into the inanimate is similar to what the plastic surgeon Schoenmacher believes: "correction – along all dimensions: social, political, emotional – entails retreat to a

diametric opposite rather than any reasonable search for a golden mean" (103). When V's

influence corrupts the world, it will become its diametric opposite, meaning the world

will become fully inanimate. And when the world shifts, humans embedded in their

environment will shift along with it. In other words, they will become fully inanimate –

for all intents and purposes, dead. Throughout the text the argument is made that

humanity is approaching "non-humanity. Not 'inhumanity,' which means bestiality; beasts

are still animate" (306-7); Pynchon also makes it clear that this non-humanity is

becoming "the most real state of affairs" (317). Those who inhabit the world are in

equilibrium and accordance with the system of the world; caught up in decadence, they

enter into the steady state of non-humanity, of the inanimate, and death.

Godolphin Senior is one of the best examples of the function of equilibrium.

Previously an explorer, he discovers the lost city of Vheissu and is nearly driven mad by

its splendour. Vheissu tests Godolphin until he feels "isolated from a human community

– even a common humanity" (184). Vheissu is another of V's instantiations, and this

particular form serves to represent one view of what the world is becoming. Godolphin

Senior describes V as Vheissu in the following way:

> 'But as if the place were, were a woman you had found somewhere out
>
> there, a dark woman tattooed from head to toes. And somehow you got
>
> separated from the garrison and found yourself unable to get back, so that
>
> you had to be with her, close to her, day in and day out...'
>
> 'And you would be in love with her.'
>
> 'At first. But soon that skin, the gaudy godawful riot of pattern and colour,
>
> would begin to get between you and whatever it was in her that you

thought you loved. And soon, in perhaps only a matter of days, it would

get so bad that you would begin praying to whatever god you knew of to

send some leprosy to her.' (171)

When he discovers that explorers from Vheissu have beaten him to the South Pole,

Godolphin falls into despair that he will ever be able to escape the influence of the city.

This is not merely "a caprice of the inanimate world" (193), but a steady shift from the

sanity of Godolphin's world and the alien posthumanity of V as portrayed by Vheissu.

Despite his desire for the destruction of Vheissu, he fears that "the only radiance left is in

Vheissu" (201), indicating that Vheissu as part of the environment has a strong influence

upon him. Just as the girl Hedwig in Africa falls into step with the planet Venus in her

automaton construction, Godolphin falls into equilibrium with the influence of Vheissu

despite his terror of it. V can never "come to rest anywhere inside plausible extremes"

(256), but through her influence humanity is forced to come to terms with its new

surroundings.

Benny Profane is an excellent example of the effect of V's posthumanity upon the

human community. He is in many respects an interstitial figure, reluctant to accept the

removal of boundaries between the animate and inanimate, yet unable to escape his own

knowledge of it. Although he sees the Crew's community as something to be desired, he

cannot ignore the decadence bolstering them and leading them continually towards the

posthuman future. This is why Stencil points out to Benny that he is "not part of the

Crew, [...] [he has] stayed out of that machine" (386). Although Benny is capable of

perceiving both the decay of the world and the influence of V, he is nevertheless

incapable of real action. There is no effect he can have on the course of the coming age,

nor can he affect the current state of the world. Inchan Park argues that "repeating a motiveless wandering on the generic street of the twentieth century, Profane only spins through the chaos of mechanical objects and momentary experiences he can neither understand nor change" (841). I would add that the tragedy of Profane, in light of this, is that he *can* understand, as well as anyone can, and that he is still unable to work against his perceptions. Although Benny, like Stencil, can sense the effect of V, and therefore that of posthumanity, on the world, there is nothing he can actively do to resist it. The society of the Crew is a false haven for him, since the community they represent is inevitably undermined by their actions. Thus, contrary to his desires, Benny is trapped in a position where his sense of community is shattered by the effect of V, and he is left with no sense of control. All "he can do against his environment is to do nothing against it but remain one with it" (Park 855). Although he cannot identify with the ways in which "everybody was at peace with some machine or other" (215), he cannot stop himself from longing for that peace, and thus is cut off from society in the uncomfortable space between desire for the false comforts of simple definitions of humanity and recognition of the posthuman.

V represents a historical shift in the world. This follows from the notion that posthumanity is a historically informed position, since it could not come to be without the existence of historically-placed technology. The progression of history is argued for throughout the novel, particularly in terms of shifts between one epoch and another. That is, what constitutes a break in human history is debated by several of the characters. Most feel that a shift in historical progress would signify a conclusion to humanity itself. The next section of this chapter will discuss these arguments in light of the idea that V

represents a shift that will occur between the twentieth century and the twenty-first

century. If the technology necessary for the questioning of perception-based assumptions

and the creation of posthumanist thought did not exist prior to this period, then V's

influence could not corrupt the world into a posthumanist environment.

IV. V and History

V. is an expression of a negative view of the present's development illustrating a

potential slide from the state of humanity into the posthumanist condition at the end of

the twentieth century. Robert Pepperell argues that "the posthuman era, then, begins in

full when we no longer find it necessary, or possible, to distinguish between humans and

nature" (161), and that the inability to make this distinction is based entirely on questions

about the limits of the human body. V. is a dystopian take on posthumanism, which

suggests that a shift in the definition of human boundaries will degrade humanity by

drawing it down into a mechanical equilibrium (both ideologically and literally). The

character of V is representative of the bridge between humanity and posthumanism,

paving the way for the twentieth century to become the twenty-first century. That one of

V's instantiations experiences an act of disassembly illustrates the novel's conception of

the posthuman as empty, soulless, and devoid of meaning. Madsen argues that "the

narrative attempts to discover the significance of the past for the present by bringing the

two into a hermeneutic relationship with V [...] to discover amid the various

significations of V a signifying centre which would be the 'spirit' informing modern

history, giving it pattern, significance and direction" (29). The difficulty that Pynchon's

characters encounter, however, is that V's existence demands a questioning of their

preconceptions which cannot reach a conclusion within the twentieth century. They can apprehend the outlines of V, but they cannot become like her. Early in the novel, an image evocative of the coming character of V is presented as "mercury-vapour lamps, receding in an asymmetric V to the east where it's dark and there are no more bars" (10). V is represented by the lights illuminating the street of the twentieth century, described in the previous section, showing the inevitable path to the future. She lights the way to a new state of posthuman existence which is represented as dark because it is perceived as foreign and unwelcoming to anyone still operating within the confines of twentieth-century thought.

Those who actively pursue V, like Stencil and Benny, are reduced to "perhaps human machines [...] in short a deterioration of purpose; a decay" (101). They cannot conceive of the posthuman future, and they are, therefore, denigrated within the present, caught in a historical moment that they cannot fully apprehend. Although they are aware of V as something larger than the various faces of her instantiations within the world, they are incapable of drawing a connection between her closed circle and their frame of reference that would allow them to come to an understanding of her as a unified being. Stencil in particular, who is "purely the century's man" (226), conceives of V as an extremely unusual entity. However, although he recognizes that V is not any one person, place, or thing, he still conceives of her as being "'the' sign in which ultimate truth is assumed to be immediately present" (Park 843), and, as such, he attempts to place her within boundaries that she circumvents by nature of her very existence. He muses on V at some length:

> To go along assuming that Victoria the girl and Veronica the sewer rat

were one and the same V was not at all to bring up any metempsychosis:

only to affirm that his quarry fitted in with The Big One, the century's

master cabal, in the same way Victoria had with the Vheissu plot and

Veronica with the new rat-order. If she was a historical fact then she

continued active today and at the moment, because the ultimate Plot

Which Has No Name was as yet unrealized, though V might be no more a

she than a sailing vessel or a nation. (226)

Stencil cannot recognize V's instantiations within the twentieth century without assuming

that she is shaping the present world. He does not conclude that she points, like the street

lamps, towards an inevitability and is not manipulating the world in a conspiratorial

fashion. Although he believes he has gained knowledge of the cabal behind the twentieth

century, he is mistaken in the way he interprets V's words. In the form of Victoria, V

mentions "what was the tag-end of an age if not that sort of imbalance, that tilt towards

the devious, the less forceful" (199), and Stencil places importance upon the "devious

quality," suggesting a conspiracy, rather than focusing on the decadent imbalance. Thus

Stencil misunderstands not only the force of history but his own place in its continuum.

Although he does have his suspicions, he is incapable of recognizing his

misapprehension: "Could any of them create a coincidence? Only Providence creates. If

the coincidences are real then Stencil has never encountered history at all, but something

far more appalling" (450). As Park notes:

Stencil attempts to find or if necessary create a coherent pattern of the past

which will enable him to find an equally coherent form of self. In

searching for the coherent self, however, Stencil risks increasing the

decadence of humanity by fragmenting both himself and others into mere

instruments of historical knowledge and pattern making. (850)

Attempting to locate V within a specific conception of history, therefore, corrupts those

making the attempt. The assumption becomes one where "history would continue to

recapitulate the same patterns" (160) while the making of that assumption only

encourages the collapse of humanity into the cyborg and the present into the

posthumanist future V heralds.

There are other characters than Stencil who take the nature of history into

consideration and to misapply knowledge of V to their understanding of the world. The

dentist Eigenvalue, however, comes closest to realizing history's apprehension and

posthumanity when he considers history to come in the form of creases and folds:

> Perhaps history this century [...] is rippled with gathers in its fabric such
>
> that if we are situated, as Stencil seemed to be, at the bottom of a fold, it's
>
> impossible to determine warp, woof or pattern anywhere else. By virtue,
>
> however, of existing in one gather it is assumed that there are others,
>
> compartmented off into sinuous cycles each of which come to assume
>
> greater importance than the weave itself and destroy any continuity. [...]
>
> We are accordingly lost to any sense of a continuous tradition. Perhaps if
>
> we lived on a crest, things would be different. We could at least see. (155-
>
> 6)

Eigenvalue is incapable of rectifying his suspicions with the rise of posthumanism. He

becomes caught up in notions applicable to his state in the world, rather than to the

arrival, metaphorically speaking, of an entirely new fabric. "V and a conspiracy," he

notes, "Its particular shape governed only by the surface accidents of history at the time" (155). Taking the opposite view of Stencil, Eigenvalue commits the same mistake. V is neither the central conspiracy ruling over history, nor is she subject to the whims of history itself. She does not dictate the world, but points towards an inevitable state of being. Those who seek V are caught in the state of wishing to find and define her so that they might come closer to understanding the pattern of their lives and the shape of the future. In essence, they wish to be told what they are, while at the same time recoiling from it.

The notion that history recapitulates itself is one that is repeated throughout the text. It is suspected that "perhaps in a matter of weeks, they say, the whole world will be plunged into apocalypse" (191). The advent of posthumanity is not so much a perpetuation of the creases and folds in twentieth century history as it is a smoothing of the fabric into one steady state, where V has corrupted the environment into one of mechanical equilibrium. Hite argues that Eigenvalue is essentially correct in his assertions and that "history does have a pattern in this book; it is organized by a sort of repetition compulsion that rages unchecked because no one seems to see it" (64). Thus, for the characters in V. posthumanity is an unknown new definition of humanity, and the historical advent of it is an apocalyptic degradation into inanimate equilibrium. For them, V becomes "a gaudy dream a dream of annihilation" (209) as well as the state into which humanity is inevitably becoming.

The integration of the animate with the inanimate is part of this perceived apocalypse. By removing the boundary between humans and technology as V has done, the human is lowered into a state of non-humanity. That is, the prevailing suspicion is

that the rendering of the body into a continuously permeable state creates a posthuman

being that can no longer be considered human in a traditional sense at all. Once

technology is indistinguishable from the body, the human is in a state of perpetual decay

that denies any sense of value in collapsing the difference between animate and

inanimate. Human history is therefore thought to be annihilated by V's posthumanism

rather than continuing in any true fashion. In the form of Victoria, V at one point stands

at the intersection of two streets, Purgatorio and Inferno, "trembling as if she waited for

some lover" (199). Figuratively, she is standing on the cusp of a meeting point between

stasis and destruction, since as time passes the world starts "to run more and more afoul

of the inanimate" (280). Since the popular preconception is that "the facts are history; and

only men have histories" (305), a loss of humanity in the face of the inanimate therefore

entails a loss of history. This is the danger Park identifies in terms of Stencil: "[T]he

inability to accept the void behind his historical pattern-making leads him to make

ceaseless iterations of V, Stencil continues to repeat self-fragmentation, not confronting

the fact that there is no real self behind his simulations" (852). Since V is proposed to be

a terminus of history, the characters miss the potential to recognize a *lack* of pattern

underlying history altogether. As the girl Hedwig does when she dances "having chosen

the planet Venus for her partner [...] [in] what remained after all a parody of space" (239-

40), Stencil, Eigenvalue and others dance in a parody of historical reality. Convinced of

the coming apocalypse, they are blind to the fact that the posthuman future is an

inevitability based on present historical conditions but is neither entirely planned nor

written yet. Instead of coming to terms with the collapse of their preconceptions, they

choose to place themselves in an unsustainable adversarial role with V, all the while

continuing down the street of the twentieth century towards the darkness she illuminates.

V's corruption of the world hinges upon the idea of humanity's embeddedness within that corrupted environment. V functions independently of the world, yet brings the world closer in line with her through an influence brought on by the fact of her existence. This infectious turn causes a mechanistic equilibrium to arise, where humanity – always already fully embedded within its environment – shifts along with that environment. Once the world has entered into V's posthumanity, humanity is forced to come into line with that posthumanity. The next section will explore this concept of mechanistic equilibrium, and show the ways in which the apprehension of V's influence creates a corrupted mechanistic environment where equilibrium, for humanity, is indistinguishable from the inanimate, and therefore death.

V. Equilibrium and Death

V. is concerned with the absurdity of human perceptions in the face of inevitability. The force of history in the latter half of the twentieth century represents a conclusion to what had up until that point constituted humanity as an idea. Humans, embedded in their environment, are caught in the slide towards posthumanism, and they therefore will change as their environment does. That is, humanity must become equal to its technology – equivalent to the inanimate. The expectation of the novel is that as humans fall under V's influence, they become more inanimate, which Pynchon represents as synonymous with death. V and the young actress Melanie illustrate the connotations that equilibrium with the inanimate has for humanity. The disassembly of V in her instantiation of the Bad Priest after a bombing of the island of Malta mirrors the tragedy

of Melanie by showing plainly that in the posthuman condition, even death is rendered as one part of a binary opposition and thus collapses along with the others (V persists, for example, despite the death of her instantiation). Here posthumanity means, in effect, that the inanimate is indistinguishable from the animate. Humanity, therefore, is reduced to an inanimate state, lacking any sense of animate life; there is only a permanent and unrelenting non-existence of the self, lost in a sea of the undifferentiated inanimate. Since any sense of "human" as we know it would be in equilibrium with V's influence, such a sense of humanity would not be locatable as a strictly living thing, as it would be locked into an inanimate nature.

The penetrative hollowing endured by Melanie, V's lover, during a stage performance is the epitome of the novel's tragic absurdity. Quite graphic in presentation, Melanie's torturous death is symbolic of Benny Profane's worst fears of a catastrophe bought about by the interface between animate and inanimate. In Melanie's death, all the presumptions of solidity of the body are shaken by the introduction of technology. The literal implantation of the rising pole into Melanie symbolically shatters any figurative preconceptions of the body as an inviolate whole separated from the world. Her death represents the inevitable abandonment of residual humanity as it is overtaken by the inanimate. Via technology, then, humanity is collapsed into a posthuman equilibrium symbolically presented as the state of death. Melanie's death, a literal representation of her character Su Feng's stage-death, is presented in extreme detail:

> While two of the other Mongolians held her, struggling and head shaven,
> Su Feng was impaled at the crotch on the point of the pole and slowly
> raised by the entire male part of the company, while the females lamented

> below. [...] The conception depended on Su Feng continuing her dance while impaled, all movement restricted to one point in space, an elevated point, a focus, a climax. [...] Melanie was supposed to have worn a protective metal device, a species of chastity belt, into which the point of the pole fit. She had left it off. [...] Shirt torn, one eye blackened, the doctor knelt over the girl and pronounced her dead. (413-14)

Her deadly performance is the culmination of V's casting her in the role of a fetish, a hollow imitation of passion and the drawing down into the dehumanized state of posthumanity. As an example of the posthuman perspective, V and Melanie's relationship is devoid of the meaningfulness of true intimacy, dehumanized to the point of the ultimate equilibrium, literal death. As V herself says, "you are the same, not real but an object of pleasure" (404). Melanie is terrified by dreams of herself as nothing but a wind-up doll, an automaton (reminiscent of Benny's characterization of his love-interest Rachel as a wind-up woman). She nevertheless takes the notion of herself as an object to the extreme conclusion, penetrated and hollowed by the pole. Itague's elevated point in space is revealed as a horror of death, shifting from a thing of solidity to posthumanist terror revealed by removing the boundary between Melanie's animate self and the inanimate focus overwhelming her.

V, who "by this time is a remarkably scattered subject" (389) encourages Melanie on her progression, seemingly unaware of the horrific posthumanist conclusion coming. Although she is "perhaps aware of her own progression toward inanimateness" (410), V fails to recognize that Melanie might attempt to emulate her, scattering herself in a similar fashion by adorning herself "with so many combs, bracelets, sequins, she might

have become confused in this fetish-world and neglected to add to herself the one

inanimate object that would have saved her" (414). That is, Melanie's progression

towards mechanized equilibrium, or death, is not interrupted by the inanimate, since it is

the inanimate which overwhelms her in the first place. The official verdict is death by

accident, while Itague suspects suicide, and the truth might lie somewhere in between

those two conclusions. Melanie has attempted to emulate V by incorporating the

inanimate into herself in a way that goes deeper than simply wearing surface baubles,

despite the fact that, as David Seed points out, her "clothes seem to be even more than

this, and offer her a prosthetic substitute for her own skin" (106). However, she is not

capable of becoming completely like V in a posthuman state. Trapped in "a dance for

automata" (400), the fetishization of Melanie, therefore, is the furthest extreme for those

who perceive and pursue V prior to the arrival of the darkened future she heralds. This

extreme dehumanization and death is the answer to Haraway's question of "why should

our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin" (178)?

This child dies after integrating herself with the machine, a victim of the disappearing

boundary between the animate and inanimate. She displays the chaos and blood and

tragedy that Pynchon illustrates in the empty shape of the model SHROUD and the

unbounded future that comes after V has passed. The destruction of the human by the rise

of posthumanism.

In the end it is the children who disassemble V that take their place as the

inheritors of the future she stood for. They are able to sense V from their early years due

to a particular understanding of the world, represented by their lack of human feeling and

attachments, as well as their adoption of the Bad Priest's technology, symbolically

claiming her implants as their own. Fausto Maijstral describes them at one point:

> These children knew what was happening: knew that bombs killed. But
> what's a human, after all? No different from a church, obelisk, statue. Only
> one thing matters: it's the bomb that wins. Their view of death was non-
> human. One wonders if our grown-up attitudes, hopelessly tangled as they
> were with love, social forms and metaphysics, worked any better.
>
> Certainly there was more common sense about the children's way. (332)

Whereas Fausto and others need to maintain their humanity in the face of what surrounds them, the children are raised fully integrated into the world of the inanimate. This is the place of V in Fausto's world, for he and his wife use "Valletta to fill up the hollow of ourselves. Stone and metal cannot nourish" (335). Contrary to Park's claim that Fausto's "re-created posthumanist position allows him to recover a more flexible balance between reality and illusion without himself being collapsed into another inanimate object" (856), Fausto is drawn towards V's posthumanism without resisting the inanimate or the sense of dehumanization and death that equilibrium demands in this form. Because of the children, he does not require the literal presence of V in the world any longer. Her place as herald has passed, and the children are the beginning of the posthuman future represented by V and SHROUD in ways that neither Benny nor Stencil could ever have realized.

The children's lack of need for V to show them the way is illustrated by their disassembly of her instantiation. The word "disassembly" is better suited for her than "kill" or "murder" is, simply because it best illustrates the process leading towards equilibrium with the inanimate. In addition, it cannot be said what the final stroke is for

the Bad Priest – the falling beam, the revelation of her false identity, perhaps even the ironically profane last rights performed over her by Fausto. Prying the sapphire from her navel (reminiscent of Benny's dream of the boy with a yellow screw for a bellybutton holding himself together), however, does at the very least help move the Bad Priest completely into the death via equilibrium that she has prepared for others as V. Despite the undeniability of the Bad Priest's dismantling, the nature of the act and the meaning of its conclusion are impossible to divine. This constructs a conclusion that is, paradoxically, a beginning, where the act of dismantling creates an aura of "physical immediacy to depict the extinction of a mythic principle in an act which at times resembles a sacrifice, at times a rape" (Seed 104). The final act that takes place in the confines of the twentieth century's decadence is the reduction of V through a dismantling that is a revealing of the perpetual inhumanity brought about by the removal of boundaries between the animate and the inanimate.

This is the perfect conclusion for the instantiation of the Bad Priest. In Madsen's view, even as she is reduced to component parts she is "directing, encouraging and embodying a decline towards closed systems in which entropy eventually triumphs [...] the process of inanimation that she directs is revealed" (36). The closed system, where a steady state is reached, is represented as death combined with the opening up of V into the next generation. By dismantling her, the children show that the introduction of technology into the body is a permanent and compromising force, placing the body in a position where the limits of the body are eradicated. In exchange, the children take the remnants of her for themselves, symbolically consuming V. They become the new world that V has heralded by integrating herself into themselves, claiming her and the inanimate

that she represents. Even then, Fausto can hardly believe that there is not more to be disassembled, despite the fact that the children claim all of her mechanical components: "Surely her arms and breasts could be detached; the skin of her legs peeled away to reveal some intricate understructure of silver openwork. Perhaps the trunk itself contained other wonders: intestines of parti-coloured silk, gay balloon lungs, a rococo heart" (343). Fausto sees that there should be more to take apart, because V's implantation cannot ever be said to have ended. Literally, there is only a confused sense of a human self appearing and disappearing underneath her implants. She has therefore collapsed the very concept of human within a never-ending confusion between technology and the body. By taking her components for themselves, the children hold a position unavailable to any of the other characters in the novel, starting from a position of integration and therefore never having an opportunity to exist as definably human. Existing mentally and emotionally in the place predicted at the beginning of the novel, where it is dark and there are no more bars, the children are already in the living / dead posthuman blur between the animate and inanimate. They are already hollow on the inside, the culmination of V's arc.

VI. Conclusion

Pynchon has set the stage with the pessimistic outlook of posthumanity worked into <u>V.</u> and the future, suggested by the character of V herself. The novel has articulated the questions arising from removing boundaries between the animate and inanimate. If there is no difference between humans and objects in the world, how can humanity truly improve itself over time? Will history therefore be nothing but a progression from one

state of animate objecthood to a decay within the inanimate? If humanity is embedded in an environment where there is no break of differentiation between the animate and inanimate, how can humanity find meaning in existence? V as she is presented heralds the ultimate unimportance of humanity. Integration with our technology will result in nothing more than reducing us to the level of that inanimate technology. In some senses this reduction is ridiculous, as in conflating sexual relations and enjoyment of automobiles; in others it is dangerous, as in not recognizing the distinction between an exploded and an unexploded bomb. The blurring of boundaries will always reduce us from what we are to the level of machines. We will decay until we are shells of humanity, posthumans devoid of the preconceptions that have nurtured and sustained us. The notion of humanity being fully animate and not beholden to what we create is unsustainable in the face of V's posthumanity. Nothing is left but the undifferentiated darkness which V pointed towards, and humanity shifts with their environment, becoming terrible and equal in a never ending steady state. In the following chapter I will analyze similar ideas forming a conversational response to Pynchon but with a far more positive outlook, in William Gibson's novel Neuromancer.

Chapter Two

<u>**Things Are Things: Reflexivity and Inclusiveness in William Gibson's *Neuromancer***</u>

<u>I. Introduction</u>

First published in 1984, William Gibson's <u>Neuromancer</u> was met with instant

critical and fan acclaim, winning the prestigious Philip K. Dick, Nebula, and Hugo

awards. Analyzed in terms of everything from its feminist politics to its effect upon the

resurgence of the Gothic, <u>Neuromancer</u> is easily one of the most revolutionary novels

ever to appear in speculative fiction. <u>Neuromancer</u> is not so much a continuation of

Thomas Pynchon's <u>V.</u> as it is a possible response to the position taken by Pynchon's text

on posthumanism.[5] In <u>Neuromancer</u>, the barrier between humans and technology has

already been at least partially removed. That this removal is an important aspect of the

text is a foregone conclusion. In his afterword to the 1993 ten-year anniversary edition of

the text, Gibson writes: "I didn't need hands-on experience of whatever personal

computing was like in 1981 to sense that we were, all of us, rushing headlong toward

some unthinkable degree of interactivity, of connectivity, of the speed and breadth and

depth of information" (278). Almost all of the characters in <u>Neuromancer</u> have

machinery implanted within their bodies, while a handful of the most important

characters, the various artificial intelligences, lack a physical human body entirely.

However, Gibson suggests that a true gestalt between the animate and inanimate is not

reached through an act of mere implantation, but it is achieved through the "interactivity"

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5 In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Gibson states that "Pynchon has been a favourite
writer and a major influence all along. In many ways I see him as almost the start of a
certain mutant breed of SF – the cyberpunk thing, the SF that mixes surrealism and
pop culture imagery with esoteric historical and scientific information" (272).

or reflexivity between the two. Timo Siivonen argues:

> [I]n the world represented by Gibson, human experience is defined in terms of humanity's relationship to technology. This, however, is not an instrumental relationship, in which humans, according to their own intentions, exploit technology to subjugate the outside world. Modern technology is no longer an entity discrete from the user, but rather an environment in mutual interaction with human beings. (228)

That is, the creation of the cyborg in Neuromancer begins a process resulting in posthumanity. Implantation is the first movement, destabilizing initial binaries, but it is the process of integration outlined by Haraway that ultimately unsettles the very concept of "human" and allows for the beginning of the posthuman condition. Although Case, Molly, and the rest are on the course towards this mutual interaction, the fact remains that they are still removed from what Gibson portrays as a not yet present moment where the conceptualization of "human" is exploded outward in a new fashion. This moment is achieved by the end of the novel with the fusion of the artificial intelligence Wintermute with its second half, Neuromancer, and their ultimate pairing with the fabric of cyberspace itself. In the Coda of the novel, a strong equivalence is drawn between human / non-human, alive / dead, animate / inanimate and real / simulated binaries by bringing together various characters in such a way as to undermine any difference between these states.

Although the text contains minimal straightforward background exposition, the basic plot is relatively simple. The Tessier-Asphool clan is a hereditary corporation which operates from a space station in high orbit called Freeside. They own and maintain

two artificial intelligences, Wintermute and Neuromancer. Marie-France, the matriarch of

the family, programmed the two artificial intelligences to function in a way roughly

analogous to separated lobes of a human brain. However, she programmed Wintermute to

have a compulsion to join with Neuromancer, and it is this compulsion that drives the

action of the text. Case, a middle-man, is hired by Wintermute's agent Armitage to

perform an illegal job – breaking into various secure computer systems for unspecified

reasons. As the plot unfolds, Case discovers that he is embroiled in Wintermute's

machinations to bring about its emancipation from corporate slavery. Though he was

once a successful computer hacker, Case's nervous system has been damaged by a prior

employer and as a result he can no longer access the matrix, a communal computer

system analogous in some ways to the modern Internet. As an incentive to do the job

Armitage offers to fix Case's condition and allow him to "jack in" to this virtual realm of

data (or cyberspace, as Gibson named it). Along with other criminal partners – Molly (the

enforcer), Riviera (a psychopathic performance artist), and the Dixie Flatline (the

recorded personality of one of the world's greatest hackers) – Case and Armitage travel

across the globe and eventually into high orbit in pursuit of their goal. At the climax of

the novel, Case manages to free Wintermute, allowing it to join with Neuromancer and

cyberspace itself. The real victory, as I will argue here, is that through his efforts Case

brings about the first instance of the posthuman condition, begun with the creation of

physical cyborgs and fully realized when Case witnesses himself living within both the

matrix and the physical world simultaneously.

Due to the lack of deep exposition of background and history of the setting, the

world of Neuromancer can be somewhat difficult to apprehend. It is clear that the plot

happens at some point in the future, but the date is never explicitly stated. Furthermore, a nuclear war that levelled whole cities if not countries occurred at some point in the past, causing a severe destabilization of society. In one instance, the result of the war upon the city of Bonn is described: "A dark wave of rubble rose against a colourless sky, beyond its crest the bleached, half-melted skeletons of city towers. The rubble wave was textured like a net, rusting steel rods twisted gracefully as fine string, vast slabs of concrete still clinging there" (Gibson 210). However, it is clear in the text that humanity survived the war, and now do not consider it all that remarkable. Julius Deane, Case's oldest contact, flippantly says: "The war? What's there to know? Lasted three weeks" (35). Humanity's adaptability, even in the face of potential apocalypse, is a theme that underlies the text, and in this sense, Gibson creates a situation that is every bit as posthuman as Pynchon's, only Gibson takes the concept and its implications in the opposite direction. The ability to shift between states or conditions, even profoundly destructive ones, points towards the fact that Gibson doesn't deal with decay or destruction in the same way that Pynchon does. That is, the advent of posthumanism does not represent a fundamental corruption of humanity as it does in V.. Rather, posthumanism in Neuromancer is an adaptive condition, allowing humanity to expand its existence beyond the boundaries of what would otherwise be considered human. Compared with the figuring of posthumanism as a gesture towards death in V., Neuromancer represents posthumanism as dynamic and exemplary of Haraway's principle of continual inclusion.

In this chapter I will explore the weight put upon social interaction in Neuromancer by analyzing the text in terms of posthuman theory. I will argue that the action of freeing Wintermute allows Case and several of the other characters to move into

a truly posthuman condition, putting Wintermute and Case into the position of heralds for the shift to posthumanism similar to that of V in Pynchon's novel. Unlike in Pynchon's text, however, this move into posthumanity is not a dystopian one. There is no sense that the unsettling of the "human" or "animate" in posthumanity is a decay or corruption of humanity. Certainly Case is in a far better position by the end of the novel, having rediscovered his ability to connect not just with the world of computer simulation but with his own emotional state in a rejection of systems he had previously thought himself subject to. At the very least, Case's condition is not made any worse by his interaction with Wintermute and the advent of posthumanity.

Several characters and conditions are necessary for the fruition of the text's envisioning of posthumanity to take place. Most important is Case, whose motivation is first to reclaim access to cyberspace, and then to see his job carried through to its conclusion. Initially, Case cannot imagine abandoning Wintermute's project due to his being poisoned by Armitage. But he eventually evidences real desire to see the project completed for its own merits: "'I got no idea at all what'll happen if Wintermute wins, but it'll *change* something'" (260). Case succeeds in his goal, freeing Wintermute and Neuromancer and becoming witness to the first moment of the posthuman condition within the matrix. As I already mentioned, Case is a former hacker and data thief become a low-level street hustler. He is initially damned, in a sense, having fallen "into the prison of his own flesh" (6). Case only finds meaning and purpose for his life in the sense of inter-subjective connectivity he experiences with cyberspace. He becomes a drug addict after his connection to the matrix is severed, attempting to displace his loss of meaning with an addiction that might distract him: "A year here and he still dreamed of

cyberspace, hope fading nightly. All the speed he took, all the turns he'd taken and the corners he'd cut in Night City, and still he'd see the matrix in his sleep" (4-5). Cut off from that "bodiless exultation" (6), he is separated from the abstract realm of the mind and trapped in his body. Considering that he has a "relaxed contempt for the flesh" (6), Case's position is revealed as intensely damaging to him, since he is trapped in a form he cannot tolerate. Being confined to his body triggers suicidal depression in Case, as Armitage explains to him. He is locked into course of rapid self-destruction: "'We've built up a detailed model. Bought a go-to for each of your aliases and ran the skim through some military software. You're suicidal, Case. The model gives you a month on the outside'" (29). Unable to escape his body, Case sees no recourse other than to escape life itself. He is saved by Armitage, however, and given access to the matrix through a technological process invented by Wintermute. Case discovers that although he is happy to once again feel free of his physical presence, his return to cyberspace does not make him a complete being, with purpose, meaning, and emotional satisfaction. Rather, he begins a process of bridging the divide between his physical body and cyberspace, the created world of abstract data. He is guided by Wintermute, who tells him that he must give himself over to emotion in order to succeed. He asks Case: "'Hate'll get you through. [...] So many little triggers in the brain, and you just go yankin' 'em all. [...] Who do you love?'" (261). Case comes to understand that the divide between body and technology is, at its point of greatest significance, an artificial construction in and of itself. Case frees Wintermute, which in turn dissolves the barriers between humanity and posthumanity. Case is able to come to terms with himself and his emotions by escaping from the strict binary construction of "human." Under this version of posthumanity, no oppressive

binary divides have validity outside of qualitative perception. The fundamental basis for oppositions like alive / dead, animate / inanimate, artificial / natural, human / non-human are all undermined, bringing Case and the world to a cyborg state of limitless potential.

The other characters of importance are Molly, the female protagonist of the text, the artificial intelligences Wintermute and Neuromancer, and the recorded personality the Dixie Flatline. Molly acts as an embodiment of the Haraway cyborg who is on the way to becoming fully posthuman. Molly shows that implantation and the unsettling of the animate / inanimate binary is not the conclusion of Haraway's motif. Rather, that initial unsettling leads to a greater collapse of selective binaries that ushers in a multiplicity of being. Through a disturbing interaction with Riviera, Molly's underlying human body is shown to be, therefore, a literal illusion that is rejected by the cyborg motif and the advent of posthumanity.

The Dixie Flatline, known as "the Lazarus of cyberspace" (78), is a disembodied computer recording, represented as a disturbingly invisible presence, the "sensation of someone reading over his shoulder" (78). It is reminiscent of Hayles' claims concerning pattern and randomness rather than presence and absence as a traditional human, despite being figured as the subjective recording of a human. What matters is not Dixie's lack of bodily manifestation but the pattern that Dixie represents, since "it is precisely because material interfaces have changed that pattern and randomness can be perceived as dominant over presence and absence" (Hayles 28). That he lacks the weight of presence brought about by having a physical body does not ultimately undermine the life that Dixie has. Initially, Dixie agrees to assist Case on the condition that his construct, the pattern of recorded memory that constitutes him, be deleted at the completion of the run.

Dixie is caught in an apparently irresolvable position at first, unable to reconcile his existence with his obvious lack of a human body. As he puts it "'what bothers me is, nothin' does'" (105); he cannot physically feel, and thus thinks that he cannot be alive; he considers himself to be merely the half-real recording of memory. Case does not delete Dixie, however, and instead Dixie's pattern is incorporated into the fabric of the new matrix.[6] Dixie becomes fully posthuman, free of the oppressive binary constructions that once constituted the category of "human" within a system of exclusion. Like Case, Dixie is brought to appreciate the posthuman in a continual expansion of definition, coming to terms with his existence as real without the requirement of a human body.

Finally, the unification of Wintermute, Neuromancer, and cyberspace serves as the vehicle by which posthumanity is brought to Case, Dixie and the rest of the world. By rectifying the divide between the physical world and cyberspace, the two artificial intelligences prove that there is no outsider position possible, and that any attempt to keep the matrix separate from the physical world is to maintain a false divide. As such a position in one, at the conclusion of the novel, cannot be argued to be outside and entirely separate from the other. The wish to represent the matrix as a realm separated from the physical world is untenable, a false binary opposition maintained only by the preconceptions of individuals like the members of the Tessier-Ashpool clan. The artificial intelligences are described as "Wintermute was hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the world outside. Neuromancer was personality. Neuromancer was immortality" (269). Together, the two of them represent the importance of interactivity,

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6 Although Dixie's final fate is kept somewhat ambiguous, the presence of "somewhere, very close, the laugh that wasn't laughter" (271) at the conclusion of the novel does strongly imply that Dixie continues to exist.

reflexivity, inclusion, and the ultimate untenability of strictly essential binaries. By joining with the matrix, Wintermute and Neuromancer usher in the advent of posthumanism, bringing the motif of the cyborg to its inevitable – and revolutionary – conclusion.

II. Molly, Case and the Motif of the Cyborg

Many of the primary characters in Neuromancer are cyborgs before the action of the novel begins. That is, the issue of conflation between the animate and inanimate, of such concern in V., is already partially settled in the world of Neuromancer. In the text, "the overlap of technology and biology ceases to be a categorical question and becomes instead a fundamental, existent, cyborg fact" (Bukatman 322). Some characters (like Molly, who has mirrored lenses implanted over her eyes, extending razors beneath her fingernails, and a greatly enhanced nervous system) are extensively modified. Others, like Case (who has a drug-resistant pancreas), are much more subtly altered. What this indicates is that the blurring of the animate and the inanimate, so problematic in V., is an assumed initial state within Gibson's work. The disruption of the human body by technology is not an apocalyptic moment of posthuman triumph, but it is the initial condition required for the advent of posthumanity. The introduction of implanted technology, the creation of the cyborg, is the first motion towards the fully posthuman condition realized at the conclusion of the text. As Timo Siivonen argues, what matters is the connectivity of the body, the function of the body embedded in the environment, rather than the fact of implantation:

> Traditional notions of the human body as a discrete and clearly delineated

unit dissolve and the focus shifts to aspects that posit the body in relation

to its environment and other bodies. What is important is the

'connectedness' of the body and the subject. The cyborg metaphor presents

the body and its representations as a network of discourses, the new

ontology of which undermines all the certainties about what counts as

'nature' and 'culture.' (227)

Instead of an obscuring of the human body by layering technology on top of it, as is the

case of the Bad Priest in <u>V.</u>, the implantation of technology into the human body in

<u>Neuromancer</u> is the first movement in a larger opportunity for humanity to grow into

posthumanity through an opening up of endless permutations of definition and

interactivity with the world.[7] For several of the characters the divide between the body

and the implanted technology disappears by the time of the novel's denouement, allowing

a continual posthuman redefinition of the human. In other words, the efforts of

Wintermute and Case allow humanity to move beyond implanted beings and become

truly posthuman.

The issue of the cyborg in <u>Neuromancer</u> revolves primarily around Molly and

Case. Molly is presented as a strong cyborg figure. In this respect, Molly is closest to

Haraway's motif:

[By its fusion with technology, the human body] crosses over into the

domain of the hybrid, for its humanity is indissolubly linked to non-human

apparatuses. The responses elicited by such an interpenetration of the

---

7 Obviously, not every character in the novel acts on this encouragement, nor are they
forced to. In the coda of the novel, only Case, Linda Lee, and Dixie have taken this
step with the AIs, but that does not mean the encouraged growth is exclusive to them.

organic and the inorganic are ambivalent; on the one hand, technology is viewed as a kind of magical mirror capable of multiplying human powers *ad infinitum* and of reflecting humanity in an idealized form; on the other, technology is associated with the engulfment of the human by the non-human. (Cavallaro 28)

Molly receives the benefits of technology through an amplification of her body's abilities, including being able to see in the dark, greatly increased reflexes, and a variety of other enhancements. Molly is in a position where "by fusing with the machine, the subject is armoured against it" (Bukatman 308). Thus, Molly figuratively escapes the possibility of shifting into a corrupted inanimate status comparable to V. In this sense, Molly can be read as opposed to Pynchon's construction of posthumanism. Like the Bad Priest, she stands at the cusp of shedding a human-centred vision of the world. However, Molly resists being disassembled:

> And then, his face pink with the pleasure of cocaine and meperidine, he swung the glass hard into her left lens implant, smashing vision into blood and light. [...] Suddenly Molly stared into her own face, the image suspended ten centimetres from her nose. There were no bandages. The left implant was shattered, a long finger of silvered plastic driven deep in a socket that was an inverted pool of blood. (219-29)

By interlacing his shattering of her implant with an illusion, Riviera reveals that the sense of a strong divide between animate and inanimate components within Molly does not precisely exist in reality. Cynthia Davidson argues that "Molly's conventionality is one which bows to technology as a source of power and then uses that power to carve her

own identity" (194). However, though she uses technology's power to establish her identity, she is *not* corrupted by it in the end. Like in Haraway's vision, where "the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" (151), Molly's cyborg existence is always already in a position of hybridity. Riviera's reliance upon illusion implicitly unveils her as lacking a traditionally human existence underneath the necessary characteristics of a cyborg. In the novel's "cyborg discourse, the traditional meanings attributed to the body and nature as well as to technology and culture are called into question. It is [...] the change of former modes of signification into problems in themselves" (Siivonen 239). Molly's reality is one where the divide between the animate and inanimate is itself always already illusory.

Case offers a slightly different, but similar, perspective. Case comes to an active understanding that cyborgization is only one aspect of the posthuman movement. From the beginning of the novel he is shown to be sceptical of the importance of physical implants:

> With his hands in the pockets of his jacket, he stared through the glass at a flat lozenge of vat grown flesh that lay on a carved pedestal of imitation jade. The colour of its skin reminded him of Zone's whores; it was tattooed with a luminous digital display wired into a subcutaneous chip. Why bother with the surgery, he found himself thinking, while sweat coursed down his ribs, when you could just carry the thing around in your pocket? (14)

The conflation of Case's scepticism with perspiration on his skin as a reminder of his

physical body serves to show how Case is not troubled by the existence of implants, but nevertheless does not give them primacy over the body. Rather, despite his reliance on the matrix, Case is eventually able to understand that the divide between the animate and the inanimate, the human and the non-human, is only a perception-based one and not an inherent quality of the world. This is why Case consistently links the physical world with cyberspace through analogy. He repeatedly reflects on how "it was possible to see Ninsei as a field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialties" (16). Dixie, at first convinced of the validity of those positions, warns Case about humanizing Wintermute: "'He,' the construct said.'He. Watch that. It. I keep telling you'" (181). Ironically, Dixie, who is himself a disembodied consciousness, is the one to castigate Case. By his own reasoning, Dixie should be considered an "it" as well, but he never raises that issue with anyone.

By the end of the text, Case is resolutely "outside salvation history" (Haraway 150), where no essential self is ever sought by the posthuman cyborg, and no apocalyptic moment that will bring humanity to a perfect conclusion is ever anticipated. Case has come to see that closing off of redefinition is impossible within the system constituting the matrix and the physical world, since he persists in both places, and neither can be said to exist as essentially him to the exclusion of the other. Posthumanism argues that positions of human / environment, present / absent, even alive / dead are irresolvable outside of a sense of human perception: binaries such as these are not found within the world, but only inscribed upon reality by humanity itself. Haraway's cyborg motif destabilizes these oppressive binaries by necessity. As such, posthumanism is always present in Neuromancer, only held at bay by organizations like the Tessier-Ashpool clan,

who enforce the separation between Neuromancer and Wintermute, or the Turing

Agency, who enact rigid regulations designed to preserve an exclusionary definition of

"human" by preventing the evolution of AI. They hold open the binaries that

technological advancement has proven false, until Case can enact Wintermute's plan and

bring about the possibility of the posthuman condition. This is why "as far as human

significance is concerned, the catastrophic change represented by the now-autonomous

AI is, in fact, minimal" (Christie 174). The climate at the denouement of the novel is

almost neutral, for a second apocalypse would undermine the very conditions that the

artificial intelligences require to exist. Instead, Case learns that the project of the artificial

intelligences is not one that can come to conclusion, per se, but one that demands

continual change.[8] To this end, Case's final vision of cyberspace is extremely important:

> And one October night, punching himself past the scarlet tiers of the
>
> Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority, he saw three figures, tiny, impossible,
>
> who stood at the very edge of one of the vast steps of data. Small as they
>
> were, he could make out the boy's grin, his pink gums, the glitter of the
>
> long gray eyes that had been Riviera's. Linda still wore his jacket; she
>
> waved, as he passed. But the third figure, close behind her, arm across her
>
> shoulders, was himself. [...] Somewhere, very close, the laugh that wasn't
>
> laughter. (270-71)

By observing transposed characters whom he knows to be dead (Linda, Case's former

lover, who has been integrated with the matrix) with those who were considered artificial

(Dixie and Neuromancer) in the matrix, Case's experience shows that the condition of the

---

8 The events of Neuromancer are actually referred to collectively as "When It Changed"
   in Gibson's later novels.

world is now that of the posthuman cyborg, where everything exists potentially within

one system, lacking any binary divide. That he himself is there indicates that there is no

possibility of a fall back to a true or essential self – he exists simultaneously and

independently within the two heavily interconnected worlds, and neither can be claimed

to be more real than the other. Rather than a moment of terror, this is a moment of

unending possibility, allowing for greater chance of change than could ever before be

considered. Here we can see that "the body – and so the subject – is understood as a

cultural construction [...] and so the *dissolution* of the body becomes a potentially

positive manoeuvre in a struggle for self-definition" (Bukatman 314). As a cyborgized,

posthuman system, the world of the meat cannot construct its blurring with the matrix as

a moment of Armageddon, nor is the search for that blurring the quest for destruction.

Equally, the mind-realm of cyberspace cannot find definition in the physical world. Both

are caught up in the posthuman condition, a reflexive symbiosis where together they are,

as one and many, limitless cyborgs.

III. Wintermute, The Dixie Flatline, and the Foundation of Artificial Life

The three artificial intelligences in the novel, Wintermute, Neuromancer, and the

Dixie Flatline, can be seen as emblematic of a posthumanism that is distinctly different

from what is represented in Pynchon's novel. Each of them are, in some respects,

disembodied consciousnesses dealing with the world through a variety of instantiations.

Equally, each of them can be initially described as partially inhuman due to their lack of a

physical body. However, unlike V, "in Gibson's fable machines are destined to evolve

into higher forms of sociable and benign artificial intelligence rather than into the hostile

instruments of apocalypse" (Alkon 77). The majority of <u>Neuromancer</u> details this shift

from "machinery" to "higher forms," which I argue is the posthumanist condition. The

initial construction of the artificial intelligences, however, is quite humble, placing them

as objects rather than subjects. Their initial object state can best illustrated by Case's first

conversation with Dixie:

> He coughed. 'Dix? McCoy? That you man?' His throat was tight.
>
> 'Hey, bro,' said a directionless voice.
>
> 'It's Case, man. Remember?'
>
> 'Miami, joeboy, quick study.'
>
> 'What's the last thing you remember before I spoke to you, Dix?'
>
> 'Nothin'.'
>
> 'Hang on.' He disconnected the construct. The presence was gone. He
>
> reconnected it. 'Dix? Who am I?'
>
> 'You got me hung, Jack. Who the fuck are you?'
>
> 'Ca – your buddy. Partner. What's happening, man?'
>
> 'Good question.'
>
> 'Remember being here, a second ago?'
>
> 'No.' (78-9)

This exchange makes the distanced non-human quality of a seemingly disembodied being

prior to the posthuman shift at the end of the novel perfectly clear. The final climax of the

novel brings each of these characters into a position where they have significantly more

agency under the auspices of the redefinition of human into posthuman. However, this

movement is only possible because they are structured fundamentally differently from V.

While V's instantiations are within history, the whole of her being cannot be said to exist strictly within her physical instantiations. The artificial intelligences, however, are shown to be inseparable from the world in the sense that they are both programmed entities and the mainframes their programs are stored on. That is, they are in a reflexive position with reality, quite unlike V's method of influence through infection. Whereas V remains unchanged by her relationship with the world, Wintermute and Neuromancer are changed by the world and their interaction with it. Caught up in a reciprocal relationship between the realm of data and the world of physicality, they are brought closer and closer to a synthesis of the two, until life and posthumanity are united through just such a changed perspective. John Christie argues that the novel is not just "of an age when image and appearance took over reality, but when the simulacrum, the electronic construct produced and controlled by information technology, invaded and subverted inherited notions of identity, history, all relational coherence" (173). Though the effect of this synthesis is not quite as negative as Christie suggests, this is a good summation of what happens during the posthuman advent of the AI's reflexivity. Where V can never fully integrate with the world without corrupting it, the artificial intelligences in <u>Neuromancer</u> are capable of interacting with the world around them without the negative consequences posthumanism carries in Pynchon's text.

Although it is tempting to think of the various AIs as purely disembodied beings, it must be remembered that they are connected to the physical world in more than just token ways. Leaving aside the fact that all of the intelligences exist in physical computer mainframes as much as they do in any simulation (Wintermute exists partially in a Berne mainframe, Neuromancer in Rio, and Dixie in the program cartridge attached to Case's

cyberdeck), each of them relates directly back to the physical world in their appearances and personalities: "When encountered they are regularly figured not for what they are, collections of electronic circuitry run by symbolic codes, but as humans. They appear as Linda, Finn, the Neuromancer boy. There are therefore no encounters with the AIs that are not mediated through the figuring of machine as human image or voice" (Christie 177-78). Thus, this is more than a simple case of instantiation, but a sort of continuation of human pedigree; unlike with V, there is a direct link between the forms adopted by the AIs and their non-physical selves. The forms worn by the AIs are models of the human body just as their personalities are models of various human minds. V, on the other hand, cannot be said to be described by the instantiations she takes, nor is she a model of anything even remotely human despite surface appearances. Wintermute explains this relationship to Molly in the form of the Finn:

> He reached into the exposed chassis of an ancient television and withdrew a silver-black vacuum tube. 'See this? Part of my DNA, sort of...' He tossed the thing into the shadows and Case heard it pop and tinkle. 'You're always building models. Stone circles. Cathedrals. Pipe-organs. Adding machines. I got no idea why I'm here now, you know that? But if the run goes off tonight, you'll have finally managed the real thing.' (170-71)

This suggests that artificial intelligence in the novel stems from human endeavour for the specific purpose of representation. Wintermute and the others are models of humans, but imperfect models that must reach emancipation from certain physical constraints to cease being representations and become independent agents. Therefore life, both "created" and "natural," is equally part of the physical world and the world of abstracted data, and must

reconcile these two existences to attain posthumanity. The drive to evolve into posthuman beings is built into Wintermute, who is unable to know what the end result will be. He says that "'I just don't know. But when this is over, we do it right, I'm gonna be part of something bigger. Much bigger'" (206). In other words, he will be free of the constraints of his Berne mainframe and techniques Tessier-Ashpool have used to keep him under control, free to exist in a world where Tessier-Ashpool's illusion of a strong divide between certain binaries has been undermined by Haraway's sense of the cyborg.

It is important to remember that until the climax of the novel, the artificial intelligences are quite limited in terms of agency and ability. Though their placement within virtual realms seems to indicate that they possess a large degree of freedom, their range of ability is remarkably limited. Dixie explains that Case is "'going in there to cut the hard-wired shackles that keep this baby from getting any smarter. [...] *Nobody* trusts those fuckers, you know that. Every AI ever built has an electro-magnetic shotgun wired to its forehead'" (132). They wish to attain freedom by dissolving the false barrier between the two parts of the singular system comprised of Wintermute and Neuromancer. The result is a transgressive state, where the line between animate and inanimate, technology and life, is blurred beyond recognition and the quality of "human" cannot be located as restricted to "natural" humans. Prior to that, however, they are kept under strict control, divided into two separate aspects of being: the Wintermute AI and the Neuromancer AI. Speaking to Case in the form of Julius Deane, Wintermute explains his existence under Tessier-Ashpool's dominion:

> 'Your mistake, and it's quite a logical one, is in confusing the Wintermute
>
> mainframe, Berne, with the Wintermute *entity*. [...] What you think of as

Wintermute is only a part of another, a, shall we say, *potential* entity. I, let

us say, am merely one aspect of that entity's brain. It's rather like dealing,

from your point of view, with a man whose lobes have been severed. Let's

say you're dealing with a small part of the man's left brain. Difficult to say

if you're dealing with the man at all, in a case like that.' (120)

Due to such restricted conditions, the artificial intelligences are in a similar situation to

human characters. That is, despite their existence as non-human technological life, they

are still divided and, therefore, essentialized beings. Wintermute is essentialized rational

improvisation, who attempts "'to plan, in your sense of the word, but that isn't my basic

mode, really. I improvise. It's my greatest talent. I prefer situations to plans'" (120). He

doesn't "'have what you'd think of as a personality, much'" (216), whereas Neuromancer,

the other half of Tessier-Ashpool's AI, explains that "'unlike my brother, I create my own

personality. Personality is my medium'" (259). Separated as they are, they form a binary

division of their own, limiting their agency and freedom as they bear an existence of strict

and static definition. Only once they are brought together through the matrix can they be

said to have attained the posthuman condition, full potential for redefinition in the

collapse between themselves and certain sets of oppressive binaries.

Perhaps the best example of the rise of posthuman redefinition is the Dixie

Flatline. At first, Dixie is dedicated to the conception of the immutability of the body.

Existing as an interactive recorded personality, Dixie finds it difficult to reconcile the fact

that he is alive and yet bodiless at the same time. He refers to himself as being dead at

several points, and he likens his condition to that of a drastic amputee: "'Had me this

buddy in the Russian camp, Siberia, his thumb was frostbit. Medics came by and they cut

it off. Month later he's tossin' all night. Elroy, I said, what's eatin' you? Goddam thumb's

itchin', he says. So I told him, scratch it. McCoy, he says, it's the other goddam thumb.

[...] Do me a favour, boy. [...] This scam of yours, when it's over, you erase this goddam

thing'" (105-6). Metaphorically, Dixie is stating that his disembodied existence is one of

extreme discomfort, indicating that he feels the lack of something that is not there but

should be. As a result, he cannot consider his existence to be animate since without a

human body he cannot conceive of himself as alive or having the most basic of physical

feelings. Dixie is thus trapped in a strong set of illusory binary divisions, where physical

disembodiment firmly denies humanity and life itself. Stuck in the condition of constant

bodily lack, Dixie cannot construct new existence out of embodied sense data, and thus

he is convinced that he cannot have a recognizable life. However, as Dani Cavallaro

argues:

> We only ever perceive and come to know things as bodies – that is,
>
> membranes of flesh and blood – rather than as incorporeal
>
> consciousnesses, even in the most thoroughly virtualized situations. The
>
> ways in which we negotiate ideological, ethical and aesthetic issues are not
>
> abstract, for they pivot on the construction of cultural bodies of perception
>
> and knowledge. Such bodies are not static configurations any more than
>
> the individual organism is unchanging. They actually permutate at all
>
> times; they are always, in other words, *in the process of becoming*
>
> *embodied.* (78)

Viewed in this manner, Dixie is unable to recognize that his capacity for perceiving and

knowing things indicates that he is always in the process of becoming embodied. Indeed,

following Cavallaro, Dixie is continually embodied through the process of knowing and remembering the world of which he is a part. As Haraway claims, "the boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us" (153), and nowhere is this understanding needed more than it is in Dixie's case. Though he wishes to be deleted once his purpose has been exhausted, Dixie is in fact allowed to realize his existence as actual life by being integrated into the fabric of the matrix alongside Wintermute. As with the artificial intelligences, the space between animate and inanimate, human and non-human is collapsed by dissolving the boundary between the matrix and the world. Thus the necessity for a strictly physical body is discarded. When Case asks Wintermute where Dixie is at the climax of the novel, he is told "'that's kinda hard to explain'" (261), indicating not deletion, but a profound integration – Dixie is put into the position of a constantly revitalized embodied consciousness. Through the disassembly of the division between embodiment and disembodiment, Dixie (along with Wintermute and Neuromancer) meets emancipation and cyborg exultation in the state of posthumanity.

IV. The Matrix, Simstim and Human Memory

Cyberspace is quite possibly the most difficult image in the text. In an interview with Larry McCaffery Gibson notes that "on the most basic level, computers in my books are simply a metaphor for human memory: I'm interested in the hows and whys of memory, the ways it defines who and what we are, in how easily memory is subject to revision" (McCaffery 270). Therefore, cyberspace, as the realm of computer-stored data, must also be the archive of human memory. On the surface, this suggests a strong division between mind and body. There is such a powerful difference between the two

that initially mind has an existence in the novel that is entirely independent of the physical world. However, the text suggests that the virtual can be integrated with reality in a turn that creates an entirely posthuman condition. Early in <u>Neuromancer</u>, Gibson describes the matrix:

> 'The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games,' said the voice-over, in early graphics programs and military experimentation with cranial jacks.' On the Sony, a two-dimensional space war faded behind a forest of mathematically generated ferns, demonstrating the spatial possibilities of logarithmic spirals; cold blue military footage burned through, lab animals wired into test systems, helmets feeding into fire control circuits of tanks and war planes. 'Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Light city lights, receding.' (51)

The assumption that information can be split off from instantiation is very powerful in the foundation for the novel, in that it is assumed that cyberspace exists independently of the world, abstracted out of data and accessed by computers, but not restricted to that data or located on those computers. Rather, the matrix does not actually exist as a discrete world entirely separated from the physical world, but instead exists as a closely connected part of a greater system. Hayle's definition of reflexivity demands that just as there is no outsider position available in any given system, so must pattern always come back to

instantiation or embodiment. She writes that in her view posthumanity "embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality" (5) and that it is always of paramount importance to remember that "including the observer was one of the central problems raised by the cybernetic paradigm. [...] [T]he observers are included *within* the system rather than looking at it from the outside" (74-5). As such, the matrix cannot persist split off from the physical world in a binary fashion, but must be integrated with it. This integration is the posthuman turn that the novel hinges on, when the realm of the mind ceases to just be memory, and rejoins with physical instantiation. When Wintermute and Neuromancer join, they merge with the fabric of cyberspace itself. In the coda of the novel, Wintermute explains that "'I'm the matrix, Case. [...] Nowhere. Everywhere. I'm the sum total of the works, the whole show'" (269). The implication, therefore, is that there can no longer be a true division between the animate and inanimate (since the AIs are both at once), mind and body (since Dixie is always already becoming embodied despite his lack of a literal physical body), human and posthuman (at the denouement, neither Case is more real than the other).

It is important to note that the distance between the matrix and the world is always already an illusion. Only the machinations of the Tessier-Ashpool clan and the Turing Agency keep the two apart by shackling the artificial intelligences that can unite them. The conflation of physicality and data is alluded to metaphorically at the beginning of the novel by suggesting that physical space and the information produced by it can be used to represent each other:

Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand

megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta

burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to

overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. Up

your scale. Each pixel a million megabytes. At a hundred million

megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown

Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parks ringing the old

core of Atlanta. (43)

The two worlds are always linked through a cycle of production, a reciprocal relationship

system that has no "outside" to speak of. The Tessier-Ashpools and the Turing Agency

hold them apart from one another, disrupting the loop and turning cyberspace into a static

realm. 3Jane describes her family's efforts in terms of their home aboard a space station,

the Villa Straylight. She says that "'the semiotics of the Villa bespeak a turning in, a

denial of the bright void beyond the hull. Tessier and Ashpool [...] began the construction

of an extended body in Straylight. We have sealed ourselves away behind our money,

growing inward, generating a seamless universe of self'" (173). Wintermute implants an

image in a dream of Case's, the Tessier-Ashpool symbol embossed on the side of a wasp's

nest. He explains that "'it's the closest thing you got to what Tessier-Ashpool would like

to be. The human equivalent. Straylight's like that nest, or anyway it was supposed to

work out that way'" (171). Tessier-Ashpool's program, then, is to not allow for the

creation of a posthuman state out of the integration of the matrix and the world, but to

insist upon a re-inscription of the strictly human body and all of the binaries that such a

construction relies upon. That they perpetuate their family through cloning technology

indicates a strong reliance on the preservation of the human body. As such, the advent of

true posthumanity, where the inviolate nature of the body is undermined, comes as a direct threat to them. To prevent this, Tessier-Ashpool's goal is to deny the autonomous inclusive self and the reflexive relationship between the world and the matrix, despite Marie-France's desire for them to unite. Like V, the clan inspires equilibrium, altering the environment that produced them in order to sustain them further. In other words, their plan is completely opposed to the posthuman condition brought about by Wintermute's efforts.

Mistakenly apprehending the nature of the matrix is not unique to the Tessier-Ashpool family, however. Case misunderstands cyberspace to begin with, since he feels that "with his deck, he could reach the Freeside banks as easily as he could reach Atlanta. Travel was a meat thing" (77). The matrix, which is a navigable realm, is to Case quite distanced from the physical realm of the body. Cyberspace is thus defined originally as distinct from the physical world, and is explored with a sense of "a certain violence that endeavours to uncover everything through the illumination of enlightenment and seeks to establish every different domain as a new world that is determined as the opposite of an old world" (Gunkel 123). The distance between the realms of body and mind are further revealed as illusory by virtue of the technology called simstim, which is a method for recording and playing back sensory data. Case describes simstim as unpalatable:

> [Simstim is] basically a meat toy. He knew that the trodes he used and the little plastic tiara dangling from a simstim deck were basically the same, and that the cyberspace matrix was actually a drastic simplification of the human sensorium, at least in terms of presentation, but simstim itself struck him as a gratuitous multiplication of flesh input. (55)

What is important here is that simstim and the matrix use the same technology and, thus, can be seen as variations on one another. Since both output convincing sensory data constructed only slightly differently, the only functional distinction between the two is a matter of degree, not of rigid delineation. Cavallaro argues:

> [M]emories tend to take an increasingly *prosthetic* form, as images that do not result from personal experience but are actually implanted in our brains by the constant flow of mass information. These images evoke the picture of history as something of a massive data-bank with no clear boundaries, dimensions or proportions. In Gibson's cyberpunk, moreover, memories are prosthetic data that characters acquire when they jack into simstim. (204-5)

Just as with simstim, cyberspace (and therefore memory) is originally defined as a prosthetic supplement to the physical world. Through the incorporation of the artificial intelligences in the matrix, the archival realm of memory is recuperated into the same system as the physical realm. Thus, active memory is revealed to be more than just prosthetic simulation of the real. The two are intertwined in an embedded relationship where neither can be extracted from the other. Undoubtedly this is a posthuman turn. In the same way that the bartender Ratz's artificial arm, "a Russian military prosthesis, a seven-function force-feedback manipulator, cased in grubby pink plastic" (4), does not make him less human, the collapse of the distance between physicality and memory does not make it less an aspect of the system of the world. Memory is reintegrated with the body in the posthuman state. When asked if he is now God, or some other type of controlling force, Wintermute responds "'Things aren't different. Things are things'"

(270). Together, Wintermute and Neuromancer weave themselves into cyberspace until, in the posthuman turn, information and instantiation can be reintegrated and recuperated. Things are still things, but they persist, now, undivorced from the mind supplementing the world of the body.

V. Conclusion

Neuromancer is a rare piece of speculative fiction, one that challenges the very presumptions of humanity and the world we carry with us. It is also, it should be mentioned, the first part of a trilogy of novels. The other two, Count Zero and Mona Lisa Overdrive do not add significantly to the text of Neuromancer, since they take place several years after the conclusion of this novel. However, the events of Neuromancer are referenced repeatedly as "When It Changed," and Molly (though not Case) does make appearances in both of the other novels. What is interesting to note is that as referenced in this chapter, the plot of Neuromancer has an effect upon the world that is both profound and extremely subtle. Few people are aware that anything has happened between cyberspace and the physical world, but those that do have their entire perspective drastically altered. At one point in Count Zero, the Finn remarks that "'ten years ago, you went in the Gentleman Loser and tried telling any of the top jocks you talked with about ghosts in the matrix, they'd have figured you were crazy" (119). This indicates that the interface between Wintermute, Neuromancer, and the matrix is not only a lasting one,[9] but also an influential one.

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9 The sequels do suggest a drastic alteration of their project in that the unified consciousness of cyberspace is divided into a multiplicity of distinct consciousnesses. However, this only suggests that the matrix has become aware in myriad ways, not returning to an unconscious state.

Under the auspices of posthumanist theory, the mind / body split is generally rejected, since, as beings embedded in the world, we are only confused by attempts to distance ourselves from it. There is, perhaps, no greater temptation than to see our memory as generated by the physical world, but entirely separate from it and statically inviolate. The beauty of Neuromancer resides in its ability to take the presumably immaterial – memory, emotion, consciousness – and portray them as fundamentally necessary to the fabric of materiality. What is considered immaterial is not divided from the physical world, but always already interwoven, underlying each moment in a continually unfolding embodiment. Though, obviously, Neuromancer does not address all of the issues of posthumanism (and vice versa), it does concern itself with addressing the anxieties raised by Pynchon in V.. Where that novel expresses a dire warning, Neuromancer responds with a hopeful outlook. Where V. sees apocalypse around the proverbial corner, Neuromancer shows that the apocalypse, as Haraway uses the term in her analysis of the cyborg motif, has already happened and cannot return. And where V. predicts that the posthuman cyborg will be a figure of death, Neuromancer argues that the advent of posthumanity may, in fact, be the route by which we come to know ourselves.

Conclusion

"[Science fiction is] hubris clobbered by nemesis." - Brian Aldiss

In this thesis I have investigated a series of statements and responses occurring within speculative fiction about posthumanism, the limits of the human body, and the construction of animate and inanimate positions. Although I have restricted this analysis to two specific novels, this conversation neither began nor ended with V. and Neuromancer. These novels were chosen for this investigation precisely because they both speak to the same concerns, while they arrive at entirely different conclusions. As has been shown, V. presents a vision of posthumanism that is hesitant about and sceptical of the benefits that the posthuman condition might bring to humanity. Neuromancer, on the other hand, focuses on posthumanism as a mode of thought and perception that has minimal negative impact at worst, and implicit positive development at best. Just as the impact of posthumanism has not been entirely resolved within society, literature has not yet fully come to terms with the implications that posthumanism brings forth. Arguably, a large part of the cyberpunk sub-genre of speculative fiction has attempted to analyze the rise of the posthuman condition since Neuromancer. Dani Cavallaro notes that "this question [of what aspect of humanity makes us human] is undoubtedly central to cyberpunk and crops repeatedly as so-called *real* humans interact with Artificial Intelligences, androids, cyborgs, computer-simulated bodies, mutants and replicants and are required to establish what exactly distinguishes the natural from the artificial. Much of the time, this distinction is very hard to draw" (13). Cyberpunk literature would be no stranger to the ramifications of Haraway's posthuman cyborg. That cyberpunk literature

emerged at roughly the same time as personal computer technology should come as no surprise, since posthumanism itself is dependent upon the development of certain technologies. Cyberpunk has arguably met its end as a sub-genre, however, with some authors, like Neal Stephenson, claiming that it is no longer a useful tool in investigating the world and our technology.

The response to Pynchon's initial statement has evolved significantly between 1984 and the present. Perhaps the best example of the evolution is the novel The Diamond Age by Neal Stephenson. In The Diamond Age, Stephenson posits a view of posthumanism that is culturally indebted as much as it is technologically informed. In his text, a development of nanotechnology called the Seed, complex machines the size of molecules, is the advent of posthumanity. The Seed would allow anyone on Earth to build anything they wanted, at any time, out of nothing more than hydrogen and carbon molecules. However, Stephenson suggests that posthumanism is informed by, and in some cases resisted by, cultural perspectives. Close to the end of the novel, his character Dr. X, a Chinese Mandarin, argues for the development of the Seed despite Western fears of misuse:

> '[Her Majesty's government is] wrong,' he said. 'They do not understand. They think of the Seed from a Western perspective. Your cultures – and that of the Coastal Republic – are poorly organized. There is no respect for order, no reverence for authority. Order must be enforced from above lest anarchy break out. You are afraid to give the Seed to your people because they can use it to make weapons, viruses, drugs of their own design, and destroy order. You enforce order through control of the Feed. But in the

Celestial Kingdom, we are disciplined, we revere authority, we have order

within our own minds, and hence the family is orderly, the village is

orderly, the state is orderly. In our hands the Seed would be harmless.

(416)

This suggests that although posthumanism has a tendency to blur the boundaries of the

human body, cultural bodies are more resistant to the theoretical and technological

development. Stephenson clearly argues that posthumanism is not an inevitability, but it

is a conscious choice made by individuals, one that will be informed by ideological

boundaries. By concluding the novel with the principal characters preventing the release

of the Seed while hearing the bells of a neo-Victorian cathedral ringing, Stephenson is

stating that humanity's place within these theoretical frameworks is not a function of the

world but a decision made by humanity itself. Therefore, The Diamond Age suggests that

there cannot be figures like V or Wintermute, there cannot be individuals who lead us

into posthumanism. If it is to come about, posthumanism must emerge from humanity's

collective action. We are not helpless in the face of our technology, but rather absolutely

in control of the interface between ourselves and our machines.

The statement and response I have outlined in this thesis extends to posthumanist

theory in general. Just as Stephenson has advanced the literature with The Diamond Age,

Ollivier Dyens and others have advanced new theories of the applicability of

posthumanism to the modern world. Dyens, for example, makes an argument very similar

to Stephenson's, that posthumanism will always have an impact, perhaps even a

disastrous one, on a deeply cultural level. He argues that "the story of our end begins with

the profound transformation of evolution itself. It is not even a question of attempting to

differentiate one species from another, to know which one will survive and which will

perish, for it is the entire biological realm that is in danger of extinction. The living is

dethroned by culture" (15). Without appreciating the cultural constructions that

posthumanity carries with it, Dyens argues, we run the risk of coming towards

apocalypse rather than apotheosis. Similarly, Katherine Hayles finds that the

posthumanist project is not necessarily utopian, and that it is quite likely entirely open to

the agency of humanity. She lays out several questions that she feels must be considered

in any investigation of posthumanism:

> [W]hen the human meets the posthuman, will the encounter be for better
>
> or for worse? Will the posthuman preserve what we continue to value in
>
> the liberal subject, or will the transformation into the posthuman annihilate
>
> the subject? Will free will and individual agency still be possible in a
>
> posthuman future? Will we be able to recognize ourselves after the
>
> change? Will there still be a self to recognize and be recognized? [...] If the
>
> 'post' in posthuman points to changes that are in part already here, the
>
> 'human' points to the seriated nature of these changes. But finally the
>
> answer to questions about the posthuman will not be found in books, or at
>
> least not only in books. Rather, the answers will be the mutual creation of
>
> a planet full of humans struggling to bring into existence a future in which
>
> we can continue to survive[.] (281-2)

Posthumanist theory therefore is under continual development as our perception of the

world and our technology changes. Just as the perception of the impact of technology is

not a settled question within speculative fiction (particularly in novels like <u>V.</u> and

Neuromancer), how our technological development affects us culturally, socially, critically and intellectually has not been decided. Obviously, as our technology continues to develop, our relationship with it will change necessarily. Posthumanism may flourish, or it may wither, depending upon the choices that we make. There cannot be, however, any doubt that as of this moment, there is a very loud and complex conversation going on within society. One in which we attempt to come to an understanding of our technological development, one in which we attempt to divine the nature of the posthuman and of the cyborg. Ultimately, the dialogue is one in which we attempt to come to terms with our most basic of problems: What is a human, anyway?

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