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## The Ironic Transhumanity of William Gibson's *The Peripheral*

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*Abstract: The article discusses transhuman futures in William Gibson's 2014 novel The Peripheral. Through differing depictions of transhuman characters in two timelines coming into contact, Gibson presents various characters as metaphorical cyborgs. Some appear as ironic figures struggling with a capitalist system seeking to incorporate them, others follow a schizoid ethos, embracing, and sometimes embodying, the kleptocratic logic of Gibson's worlds. Further, the novel examines the possibilities of technology to transform both individual experience and oppressive social structures. This interrogation reveals Gibson's critical attitude toward technology alone as capable of overthrowing dystopian systems. Finally, the article interrogates the idea of mysterium tremendum et fascinans in relation to transformative technologies in the novel, in turn shedding light on Gibson's criticism of singularity narratives. Through such an approach, the dystopian ironies of Gibson's futures become clear: despite miraculous advancements, the dystopia remains the same for the characters inhabiting his worlds.*

*Keywords: William Gibson, The Peripheral, transhumanism, cyborg, embodiment, dystopia, tremendum.*

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William Gibson started his literary career with visions of a near future populated by nonconformist hackers, manipulative AI, and vistas of cyberspace as a “consensual hallucination” (*Neuromancer* 12). Since the turn of the 21st century, his novels have been increasingly about an “actual twenty-first century” that “could be unpacked with the toolkit of science fiction” (Gibson, *Distrust That Particular Flavor* 46). The novels of his Bigend trilogy, *Pattern Recognition*, *Spook Country*, and *Zero History* (2003–2010), are situated a year before their respective publication but nevertheless remain saturated with similar speculative elements that made Gibson's early work stand out from many other cyberpunk authors as well as the stagnation they saw in late 1970s science fiction.<sup>1</sup> Now, over thirty years after *Neuromancer* (1984), his seminal debut, Gibson has returned to science fiction in its straightforward sense of stories of worlds that are not here yet. His latest novel *The*

<sup>1</sup> For an overview on cyberpunk authors' views on the state of science fiction in the early 1980s see, for example, Rob Latham's 2010 essay in *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspectives*.

*Peripheral* (2014) opens up not one but two distinct futures. It is ripe with ideas about how the Anthropocene, the somewhat controversially named age of humans, might turn out.

In this article, I look into transhumanity and its permutations in the two futures of *The Peripheral*. I argue that Gibson offers a profound critique of technological development as incapable of overcoming oppression of human existence, transformed or not, in conditions of inequality. Gibson does so through cyborg characters in whose portrayal the cyborg's dual nature as a technical and metaphorical construct is evident, especially when viewed through ironic and schizoid lenses of Lisa Yaszek and N. Katherine Hayles, respectively. Further, I aim to show that Gibson does not approach the developments of humanity in the novel with what Rudolf Otto (in *The Idea of the Holy* (1923, original *Das Heilige* 1917)) calls the experience of the numinous, an experience that is *tremendum et fascinans*, that is, both terrifying and fascinating. Rather, in *The Peripheral* Gibson imagines various repercussions of a transhuman advent, takes a critical stance to them, and shows that even in such conditions subjects struggle against an oppressive system that seeks to incorporate them.

My approach is linked to Neil Easterbrook's findings on Gibson's Bridge trilogy, *Virtual Light*, *Idoru*, and *All Tomorrow's Parties* (1993–1999), in which Easterbrook locates "a return to human corporeality and agency" (48) and an ethos to "exploit the right technology, not . . . to permit the technology to exploit us" (52) as opposed to the somewhat bleaker vision of Gibson's earlier novels. Tom Moylan continues in the same vein about cyberpunk in general, saying that its "popular affirmations . . . offer *not* idealist intimations of immortality but *rather* utilitarian calculations of the odds of 'making it' through speculative (ad)ventures on a rapidly reorganizing earth" (92, emphasis original) while for Fredric Jameson cyberpunk is "an expression of transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia" (38). All of these drives surface in *The Peripheral*, where radical transformations of corporeality, venture capitalism, and technology still give rise to questions of agency and struggle.

To understand the intricacies of transhuman existence in *The Peripheral*, an important demarcation of terms is needed. In my analysis, I follow Pramod K. Nayar in his definition of transhumanism as the strand of posthumanism that "treats technology as a means of 'adding' to already existing human qualities" and "implies that *there is a distinctive entity identifiable as the 'human'*" (6, emphasis original). For most intents and purposes, the speculative elements of *The Peripheral* appear to stem from processes related to such a view rather than from one seeing "the human as a construct enmeshed with other forms of life" (Nayar 6), the starting point for "critical posthumanism" (Nayar 8). The terminology around trans- and posthumanism is in flux and opinions on it vary, but for the purposes of this article Nayar's fairly straightforward definition appears the most useful. Furthermore, understanding what is meant by cyborg technologies, the cyborg as both a technical as well as metaphorical entity, and viewing the cyborg from ironic and schizoid perspectives work towards a revelatory analysis of Gibson's critical take on capital-driven transhumanity in *The Peripheral*.

The distant future in *The Peripheral* is, seemingly typically for Gibson, filled with advanced computing, "assemblers" (24) capable of manipulating matter at a subatomic level, and cybernetically augmented humans – communication devices are fully integrated into the body and extreme modifications to it are commonplace. Another significant commodity are the "peripheral[s]" (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 30), realistic, remotely operated humanoid avatars, around which the novel's time-travel plot centers. The intricacies of these innovations allow a view into Gibson's vision of transhuman futures. In the novel's near future inklings of these achievements are already visible: 3D-printing and drones have revolutionized production and surveillance, while

immersive virtual realities and telepresence offer both employment and a pastime with the mere flick of a phone.

The multitude of transhuman beings in the novel, from cyborg soldiers to performance artist celebrities who can pass through solid matter, represents different visions of what humanity may become should developments of our present day run their course as Gibson envisions. His two timelines also display how everyday existence and experience are redefined by technology, how the mundane, as seen at a particular moment, is but a step away from being almost alien, made anew by human endeavor. However, to the users of these transformative technologies the reality is as unimpressive as my computer-assisted act of writing this article while being socially connected to online peers and enjoying a high-definition multimedia experience from a cloud-based music database (the systems of which gather data on my activities to refine their algorithms).

At the end of the novel, protagonist Flynne Fisher notes that “having so much money for a project that it just didn’t matter, was a lot like having assemblers” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 478) and thus highlights how transhumanity and its possibilities are connected to the material, financial realities of society. What is more, in worlds where anything can be fabricated or assembled, a sense of authenticity loses its meaning. When the copy is as good as the original, originality loses its value. The fact that the power to fabricate, to create, remains, in both of the novel’s futures, in the hands of kleptocratic elites goes to show that despite an increasingly protean nature, the development of humankind does not escape asymmetrical capital accumulation and the power structures it creates. This marks the overall tone of the novel as dystopian, despite its seemingly straightforward domestic conclusion. In *The Peripheral*, the asymmetry of capital has slowly led, by protagonist Wilf Netherton’s time, into the destruction of four in five humans, coincidentally with remarkable technological innovation. However, as Gibson shows, no matter how magical the innovation, it will not by itself bring down the oppressive, destructive structures of society.<sup>2</sup> The protagonists definitely make it in Moylan’s utilitarian sense, but the dystopia remains the same. While “the klept” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 38) dabble in time-travel, learn to dance with peripheral instructors, and pass through walls, the common people are stuck with cosplay apparati and tapped phones inside their bodies, a predicament not too far removed from our own 21st century.

## The Cyborg with a Thousand Faces

Andy Clark summarizes technical cyborgs as “human-technology symbionts: thinking and reasoning systems whose minds and selves are spread across biological brain and nonbiological circuitry” (3). To him, tools become mind-expanding, cyborg technologies when they are not merely used but start to actively adapt to humans and to how humans use them (Clark 7). This is, in fact, what current emerging technology, like the Internet of Things, consciously aspires to. In so doing, a technology approaches the condition of transparency to follow Clark’s terminology.

*The Peripheral*’s two futures show different stages of technology becoming transparent, that is, “so well fitted to . . . our [biological] capacities . . . as to become . . . almost invisible in use” (Clark, 37). For example, everyone in the later future has an integrated audio-video communication system, operated via a tactile interface between a magnetized tongue and one’s palate. Such a smartphone that really does not require hands to operate is in fact not a long way from the voice-activated Siri and Cortana softwares of 2015 phones. Transparency is also evident in the development of telepresence, as the peripherals too offer a seamless, wholly intuitive interface.

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to professor Bo Pettersson for drawing my attention to the importance of Gibson’s critical stance for my overall argument.

Further, they are not only invisible in use, but can even employ themselves independently to some extent. For example, the phone is always on, feeding into social, positional, and security networks, and the peripheral can pass for a human being even without being explicitly controlled by one.

In addition to such a definition of technical cyborgs, the human-technology symbiont has a long-standing and important status as a metaphorical entity. Paraphrasing Donna Haraway, Hayles finds this “conjunction of technology and discourse” crucial (114). Were the cyborg merely a narrative construct, it might remain in the field of science fiction, while if it were only a technological practice, fields like bionics or virtual reality would be its sole territory. As a conjunctive entity, “it partakes the power of the imagination as well as of the actuality of technology” (Hayles 114–115). Hayles further points to Scott Bukatman’s coinage *terminal identity* for a new subjectivity that emerges in the cybernetic loops of people like gamers and neurosurgeons, who are metaphorical cyborgs (115).

In *The Peripheral*’s early 21st century, Flynnne makes do as a professional gamer, supporting her ailing mother and attempting to gravitate away from the lucrative business of 3D-printed narcotics. Substituting for his older brother, an ex-cyber soldier now in the same gaming business, she witnesses the death of a woman in what she thinks is a visceral computer simulation but actually really happens, just not in her temporal location. Some seventy years later, 80 percent of the world’s population has died as a result of a slow progression of catastrophes, ironically called “jackpot” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 38) by the remaining cadre of immensely wealthy oligarchs. There Wilf Netherton, an alcoholic publicist, learns about the very murder mystery Flynnne witnesses decades before. Netherton’s associates dabble in a new, mysterious pastime of collecting “continua” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 40), past nooks of time they can manipulate, having learned how to send information back in time, as sandboxes for experimenting with military, economic, and political scenarios – one of the continua being Flynnne’s. As this premise suggests, in *The Peripheral*, Gibson goes all-out in his speculation of potential technological development, a fact reflected also in his vision of transhuman existence in the novel.

Transhuman and cyborg beings fall into four general categories in *The Peripheral*. First, there are the augmented humans, by far the broadest category that encompasses everyone from Flynnne with her multipurpose phone to Ainsley Lowbeer with her neural access to a network of forensic AI, showing a continuum of the cyborg’s transformation from metaphorical to technical. In Flynnne’s time, phones remain key elements between people and various information networks, seemingly having replaced desktop computers. In Netherton’s time, on the other hand, *phone* is still the central metaphor for the communication device lodged somewhere in the body. Other examples of augmented cyborg experience include the various drones in both futures, from clumsy telepresence-tablets to copter drones and remotely operated soldiers like Flynnne’s brother, as well as the hyper-real peripherals. Notably, the ubiquitous technologies of communication have erased the distinction between online and offline – neither term appears in the novel – and the pieces of technology remain integral to everyday experience. For example, Flynnne touches “her own wrist and then all four pockets of her jeans before she remembered her phone [was not there]” and upon waking up the next day, instinctively “slid her hand under her pillow for her phone” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 253, 259).

The second category is formed by metamorphosed transhumans, namely the so-called “patchers” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 6) of the novel’s 22nd century who have modified their biological make-up with, for example, decorative cancer growths and extra genitalia. They are mostly described through Netherton’s point of view and their alien nature causes him to dehumanize them in disgust, thinking of them as “[p]osthuman filth” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 6). Significantly,

they represent transhumanism taken to one of its logical conclusions, to rampant modifications of bodies in the service of a new aesthetic culture (vigorously studied by “neoprimitivist curators” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 11)). The choice of the patchers is cast in a dystopian light, however, as it is later revealed that their whole culture and life on an island of recycled polymer has been created in the service of a monetization scheme for the plastic of which their land is made. To relieve the island of its transhuman inhabitants for profit, they have been infected with “endemic health issues . . . of which they aren’t yet aware” as one of the villains explains (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 468).

The patchers are juxtaposed with the third transhuman category, composed of the counter-cultural neoprimitives, who seek to escape their technologically saturated society and remain free from augmentation. As such, they seem to profess an essentialist view on humanity but in order to strive to regain this essence, they need to be de-augmented by removing their incorporated phones and reworking their immune systems to again become susceptible to, say, the common cold. Especially the latter procedure raises questions about the sense of their essentialism, akin to that of anti-vaccination movements of our 21st century.

Fourth, there are nonhuman life forms, most importantly the invisible assemblers capable of reconfiguring matter through subatomic particles, but also the various artificial intelligences and robots. None are biological, carbon-based lifeforms but, related to what Hayles states about Artificial Life research, they can be classified as “computer programs instantiating emergent or evolutionary processes,” and are as such alive from the standpoint of the software front of Artificial Life (225). Importantly, the AI are not anthropomorphic, or even personified, entities with human agendas but rather specialized, highly sophisticated software responsible for running everything from Victorian cosplay zones to crime-prevention (a version of which is already present in Flynne’s timeline). On the other hand, the robot-like Michikoids resemble humans but mainly act as autonomous servant and weapon-systems, extensions into physicality of algorithmic software.

Developing socialist analysis of work in a postindustrial cyborg society, Yaszek builds on Haraway’s idea of the “ironic cyborg” (104) which, along with Hayles’s schizoid androids, offers important insights into metaphorical cyborgs in *The Peripheral*. According to Yaszek, a worker in a cybernetic society, such as ours or Gibson’s, can “never have full control over the dominant economic system’s means of production (and thus may never achieve a fully ‘unalienated’ subjectivity), its links to other cultural and historical states of knowing at least provide it with ways to work against its full interpolation into that same system” (104). In other words, an ironic cyborg enacts a resistance against a dominant system that it cannot hope to fully escape into such an existence that would free her from the alienation a capitalist division of labor engenders. This enactment occurs through “alternative systems of meaning and work,” but the ironic cyborg is not able to “be fully invested in any single specific one” (Yaszek 104).

Such a struggle of the ironic cyborg is evident in *Neuromancer*, as Yaszek makes clear (105), but it is also a recurrent theme in Gibson’s later novels. In *The Peripheral*, its significance is especially marked in relation to Flynne and her position in the warped labor market of her near future. That is, Flynne is faced with limited options of prosperity as her native Clanton’s primary economy is based on printing illegal substances, a practice she wants no part in. However, her gamer skills open up the global information network as a source for employment, but even there she merely adds value to the gamer credibility of rich wannabes too busy to play their games themselves. Rebecca Lemov likens Flynne’s experience to those of Chinese “gold farmers” in games like *World of Warcraft* (Lemov). The cyborg labor practice of gaming thus fails to save Flynne from an oppressive system, merely relocating her struggle as an ironic cyborg into the

virtual network of online gaming. This, too, makes her resemble the actual gold farmers who might escape some of the constraints of Chinese state capitalism, but run into an asymmetric division between their gaming for subsistence and gaming for entertainment that Western players engage in.

Furthermore, Netherton's associates in the 22nd century appropriate Flynn's time in the manner of colonial imperialists. As the mystery of the murder Flynn witnesses comes to revolve around attempts to kill her, two different bands of kleptocrats begin to influence the economy of Flynn's town, country, and, ultimately, her world through venture capitalist schemes and by buying off sheriffs, governors, and government agencies. Rather than gain accumulated capital in their own future, the kleptocrats battle over control of Flynn's world as a sandbox in another time, like Flynn and other gamers do over virtual worlds in theirs. In both cases technology opens up new avenues for exploiting the value added by cyborg subjects.

Analyzing Philip K. Dick's novels from his prolific 1960s, Hayles conjures the image of the "schizoid android" to describe the characters in Dick's work that struggle with the complex interplay of cybernetics and capitalism, gender, delusion, and reality (161). According to Hayles, the schizoid android is most often intelligent, unable to feel empathy, incapable of understanding others to be humans, and gendered female. She "represents the coming together of a person who acts like a machine with a literal interpretation of that person as a machine" (Hayles 161–162).

In *The Peripheral*, this schizoid quality is emphasized in the novel's further future, especially in relation to Daedra, a performance artist super star. As an artist, Daedra constitutes her art as she repeatedly tattoos and skins herself to produce a growing collection of artiste hides. Late in the novel, it is revealed that she has surpassed the need to heed to material constraints altogether and is capable of passing through solid matter along with her male companion, responsible for the exploitation and coming extinction of the patchers. Daedra is most often depicted through Netherton's eyes through which her first appearance clearly marks her as a version of the schizoid android: "Her head was perfectly still, eyes unblinking. He imagined her ego swimming up behind them, to peer at him suspiciously, something eel-like, larval, transparently boned. . . . And then she smiled. Reflexive pleasure of the thing behind her eyes" (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 12). Importantly, Daedra embraces the twisted kleptocratic system of her time, being very much complicit in its evaluation of wealth and social status. As such, she is not only likened to a rational, unemphatic machine, but to the whole oppressive system of her time, a system that is the result of the devastatingly rational survival of the fittest, and most privileged, in the catastrophes of the jackpot. In this way, the kleptocratic system of Gibson's 22nd century enacts a dehumanizing, unemphatic, schizoid ethos.

In sum, transhuman beings in *The Peripheral* are humans augmented by various technologies, metamorphosed transhumans, that is, patchers who seem like non-human others, de-augmented humans, and technological nonhumans like assemblers, AI, and robots. These transhumans interact with the fictional world from a narrative position of metaphorical cyborgs. Some, like Flynn, act like Yaszek's ironic cyborgs, trying to struggle against incorporation to an oppressive system they cannot escape. On the other hand, following Hayles, some are schizoid androids, like Daedra, made into machine-like beings by their enmeshing with the system that has created their transhumanity.

## Without Fixed Form: Embodied Transhumanity

The double-timeline structure of *The Peripheral* shows a process of *seriation* in action. Borrowing the term from archaeological anthropology, Hayles explains that historical change,

including the discipline of cybernetics, does not necessarily follow a strictly Kuhnian paradigm of thesis-antithesis-synthesis nor a Foucauldian one of “sharp epistemic breaks” (14). Rather, the pattern of a given technology, or paradigm, begins to taper off at the advent of a new innovation so that both applications exist side by side for some time. To follow Hayles’s example, the electric bulb came to the fore not by totally overthrowing wicks but rather slowly replaced them as the most convenient light source. The same can be observed in *The Peripheral*, where various technologies and permutations of transhumanity mirror each other between the two futures.

In *The Peripheral*, manufacturing, surveillance, and telecommunication are most clearly portrayed as undergoing seriated development. Whereas Flynn’s time benefits from breakthroughs in 3D-printing, where complex items can be “fabbed,” fabricated, with little effort, Netherton’s future is mainly built on the work of assemblers, a miniature manufacturing force continuously at work to produce and modify the landscapes of his world. Production on both time levels occurs in a way reminiscent of magic for even a 20th century observer and the jargon has evolved accordingly: *making* becomes *fabbing* becomes *assembling*.

These developments have not created a surplus utopia or a fair distribution of wealth in the novel. Rather, they become new means of doing the same old tricks: the 3D-printed narcotics economy of Flynn’s hometown is just another drug empire and the way assembler technology has failed to stop the near-extinction of the human population and is applied to, for instance, terribly gruesome weapon systems show that a revolution of production alone will not dismantle crime or the militarization of technology.

Predictably, surveillance in both futures relies on a global information network of satellites, sophisticated AI, and Big Data algorithms – so much so that by the 22nd century being surveilled is an assumption at the heart of every encounter with security apparati at the background of calls giving “the cold grue” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 126), seemingly signifying a feeling roughly equivalent to that of being followed on the street. In Flynn’s time, GPS is an essential tool for government surveillance, but also an important component of social media, where both location and emotional status are displayed real-time. Even advertising works with a degree of personalized surveillance with Red Bull mirrors addressing patrons by name and collecting data on their behavior. Again, impressive innovation works to emphasize the dystopian elements of both futures: issues like climate change or income equality remain unresolved while breaches of privacy are commonplace in the service of national security and targeted advertising.

With such elements, Gibson shows that seriated development in manufacturing and surveillance in fact results in increased sophistication of technologies, but it does not really challenge the overall dystopian capitalist paradigm of his science fictional worlds. For the individual, on the other hand, the possibilities of transhuman technology open up new forms of experience, but the question remains whether this is enough to dispel the oppressive aspects of the system Gibson’s characters inhabit.

In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Hayles argues at length that posthumanity is more than the separation of mind from the body as it has often been approached. She points out that the limits of understanding the development of cybernetics and posthumanity from a liberal humanist standpoint are indebted to the (supposedly) Cartesian divide between mind and body. For her, experiences of embodiment, that is “contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture,” is “in continual interaction with constructions of the body” (Hayles 196–197). Such constructions are the normative standards relative to historical and societal criteria, that is, abstractions in which “the particularities of embodiment tend to fade from view” (Hayles 199). When focus is turned from the abstract body to

particularities of embodiment, Hayles argues, “a specific material experience emerges . . . [e]mbodiment cannot exist without a material structure that always deviates . . . from its abstract representations” (199).

This kind of embodied posthumanity is linked to the metaphorical ironic cyborg already in the first pages of *The Peripheral*. Burton, Flynn's brother and an ex-marine suffers from glitches, “like phantom limb, ghosts of the tattoos he'd worn in the war, put there to tell him when to run, when to be still, when to do the bad-ass dance, which direction and what range” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 1). Even on disability pension, Burton still embodies the remnants of his role in the military-industrial complex that has gone fully cybernetic. He is the human made into a drone, thus another symbol for the schizoid impulse of an oppressive system where technology, militarism, and capitalism are intertwined. Even if discharged, the actual embodied reality of war and trauma is there to remind him of the impossibility of escape from the system that, in a very concrete sense, made him into what he is.

The peripheral technology further emphasizes the dystopian ironies of embodying transhumanity. The peripherals come in all shapes and sizes in the novel from homunculi that can be used to operate vehicles or heavy machinery to one-to-one replicas of people with or without complexities of digestion. The most sophisticated do everything that humans do and are constituted of the same building blocks. They can act independently or be operated from a distance as telepresence devices but they can also be controlled by cloud programs. They are “[a]t the cellular level, as human as we are. Which is fairly approximate, depending on who you're speaking to” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 124) as Lev, the wealthy owner of Flynn's peripheral, explains. This also reveals that the definition of human depends on one's sensibilities towards transhuman existence in Lev's time. Earlier, he mentions having thought as a child that peripherals were ghosts, a seeming nod to cyborg narratives of ghosts in machines, like those in Gibson's early novels.

Even as artifacts, the peripherals are life forms minus consciousness – the attainment of which in the novel apparently does not depend on matching DNA composition. However, they gain another kind of life when taken over by a human via a neural interface that leaves the original body in a sleep-like stasis while moving cognitive faculties to the peripheral. A mindless body becomes occupied by a mind that is not strictly speaking bodiless, but rather embodied differently. This opens up possibilities for positive augmented experience, as occurs for Conner, another ex-cyber soldier and a multiple amputee from Flynn's time, who finds empowerment in taking over a peripheral in the future. At the end of the novel, he has a series of prostheses built for him, based on future peripheral technology, which becomes the fourth embodied version of Conner, the first three being his pre-disabled, disabled, and peripherally abled versions.

For Flynn, after a short period of confusion, operating her peripheral is a seamless experience, even with its futuristic phone and feed apps and fuller sensory capabilities, and she quickly becomes accustomed to the differently embodied experience. Having returned from a prolonged period of peripherality in Netherton's time, she comes to “feel some emotion there might not be a name for” but cannot be sure if it is just “being back in her body” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 242). The passage hints at a vague connection to the peripheral that becomes even stronger when later she “couldn't imagine using a different peripheral herself” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 480). Incidentally, by this point she has identical copies on different hemispheres to ease the logistics in Netherton's time, so she does, in fact, use different peripherals, they just happen to feel exactly the same.

A pivotal action scene at the end of *The Peripheral* shows a different version of existence without the constraints of the normative body. Finally confronting the people behind the violent



murder at the start of the novel, Flynne and Netherton see how before their very eyes two seemingly ordinary, augmented humans of the 22nd century walk through a wall. The following confused encounter follows: “‘We’re protean.’ He smiled. ‘Protein?’ ‘Without fixed form.’ He waved his hand through the wall, a demonstration.” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 455.) Assembler technology is behind the feat, signaling a turn where the whole of the body becomes a transparent technology, Newtonian physics being a moot constraint to quantum-level transhumanity. Netherton’s confusion of protean/protein is also revealing since the two wall-hacking transhumans are, of course, the next step of transhuman evolution. The ones to take this ultimate step to incorporeal existence are the novel’s schizoid characters. Daedra’s co-conspirator sums up the capitalist rationale behind their murderous schemes as he explains why he has not changed shape to escape recognition: “Branding . . . Investment in persona. I represent the product. I’m known to the investors” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 468). Through sufficiently advanced technology, variations of transhumanity adapt and change considerably faster than through the evolutionary process dictated by protein and DNA. In this sense, the protean “we” seems to refer to the transhuman population in general, juxtaposing its empowering possibilities, like those of the peripherals, to potential schizoid features.

The anthropomorphic peripherals underline the essential nature of embodiment for existence as the opposites of the sentient brain in a jar. They are not minds separated from bodies, a process that usually implies the death and secondary importance of the body, but rather bodies that have capabilities even without the intrusion of consciousness. Netherton’s point of view reveals the power that a peripheral’s functioning body has over its interpretation as human: “Running, he saw its beauty differently, the grace . . . somehow substituting for personality” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 152). Later, sitting in a car with Flynne’s peripheral without Flynne, he muses that it is easy “to anthropomorphize something that looks so entirely human” and fights back his urge to offer it a cup of coffee (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 335–336). While the peripherals appear human even in AI control, as Netherton realizes early on, they gain a different set of characteristics when operated by humans. As he puts it, Flynne in her peripheral alters “the peripheral’s body language . . . its face became not hers but somehow her” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 179), thus underlining the central view of existence where being is not the possession but embodiment of characteristics and cognition.

Rather than try to imagine a high-resolution world of disembodied minds, Gibson embraces the realization that embodiment is a central feature of existence. To dabble with embodiment can result in empowerment and added layers to experience, as Conner’s and Flynne’s feelings toward their peripherals show. On the other hand, it can also be exploited by those with a schizoid ethos, as appears evident in how Daedra and her companion become protean through their merger with assembler technology. Gibson thus continues to work out the intricacies of questions present in his fiction since *Neuromancer*, where, as Tiziana Terranova notes, Molly the cyborg warrior and Case the cyberspace cowboy represent two possible directions for human evolution, “an intensification of bodily performativity or . . . the ultimate flight from the body cage” (271), respectively.

## The Terror and Charm of the Transhuman

In his encounters with transhuman existence, Netherton is faced with *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, to borrow Otto’s description of the experience of the holy (12–13, 31, 35). According to Otto, the holy is a wholly other mystery that terrifies as well as possesses “a potent charm” (31), a description which also characterizes Netherton’s attitude toward the forms of transhumanity in his time. His reactions to the mystery range from erotic fascination and awe toward peripherals to repulsion with patchers. Seeing Flynne in her peripheral for the first time he finds himself

“[u]nwilling to lose sight of her, out of something that felt at least partially like terror” and that her extended transhumanity before him “was all much stranger than he’d anticipated, like some unthinkable birth or advent” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 179).

In her analysis of Cole Perriman’s *Terminal Games*, Hayles evokes *tremendum* as what anchors “the ideology of the human” as mortal (259). For protagonist Nolan, *tremendum* is the “uniquely self-conscious, uniquely human horror and awe at the sight of a corpse . . . the ghastly mortal comprehension of the fact of death” (qtd. in Hayles 259). This may also help to explain why most characters in *The Peripheral* do not react with strong affect to different aspects of the transhuman.

In Netherton’s future, *tremendum* is dampened as materiality has lost its significance in separating the alive and not-alive. The reality of assemblers breaks down the need to obey the laws of Newtonian physics, as the protean forms, like Daedra’s, show. Even the novel’s final confrontation ends in a peculiar anticlimax of violence as an assembler weapon leaves no traces of violence, simply having a villain “blinked to bone entirely,” disintegrated seemingly without effort, as he dies (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 471). According to Hayles (259), without the sight of the corpse to signify mortality, *tremendum* is not manifest. These complications to Otto’s *mysterium* also go on to explain why it is the patchers that elicit most emotions of phobic loathing in Netherton: their transhumanity is rooted in corporeality that he perceives as a corruption of embodiment that lies at the heart of humanity. Such a warped relationship between mortality, corporeality, and terror works to add to the dystopian feeling of Netherton’s transhuman time.

Flynn’s reactions to transhuman technologies do not appear to elicit feelings of *tremendum* in her and are thus juxtaposed with Netherton’s. Flynn’s approach seems more pragmatic, despite the fact that the transhumanity she encounters is literally from a wholly other world. Her time is not exempt from corporeal mortality either, so the reason for her somewhat nonchalant appropriation of transformative technologies must stem from another source. For one, she is the one going through the embodied experience of a miraculous peripheral, whereas Netherton has the opportunity to remain an observer, adding his own layers of meaning onto what he perceives as Flynn’s experience. This suggests another level of juxtaposition, drawing attention to Netherton’s status of a complicit member of a kleptocratic elite, a publicist by trade in control of the smooth execution of PR stunts and more for the high-ups of his time. Further, he is a privileged observer of not only Flynn in her peripheral, but also of the totality of her time that cannot really affect his own. Conversely, Flynn does not have the privilege to merely observe transhuman mysteries around her as she is too busy tackling actual threats to her well-being brought on by the meddling of colonial oligarchs from the future.

Veronica Hollinger notes that Gibson has a tendency to end his narratives in events of “profound change . . . transformation[s] implied by some radical technological event” (461). For example, two AIs attain consciousness in *Neuromancer*, a virtual pop-star becomes corporeal in *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, and the ambiguous villain Bigend learns to predict the future of the shifts in the financial market in *Zero History*. As Gibson leaves out the repercussions of such events in his novels, Hollinger interprets them as impossible to imagine. For her, they mark a “technological singularity”, a chasm across which it is impossible to glimpse, remaining “in thrall to the impossibility of thinking beyond [Gibson’s near-futures]” (Hollinger 462, 465). Such an interpretation seems to place Gibson in a similar position as Netherton, faced with an advent that

awes and terrifies him. It might thus appear that Gibson's work, despite all its innovative speculation and astute observation, remains somewhat impartial as to the consequences of posthuman revolutions.

However, in *The Peripheral*, Gibson approaches his own singularities head on. In a general sense, the climactic events that conclude his other work have all occurred in the world of *The Peripheral*. First of all, algorithmic AI "built up over decades" act independently of their makers and it is doubtful whether "anyone today knows quite how they work, in any given instance" (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 145).<sup>3</sup> In addition, the divide between virtual and corporeal existence is blurred already in the novel's 21st century by the increasingly important role of social networking and gaming. This is showcased by Flynn checking "Badger" (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 29) for her friends' location and emotional status as well as her previous employment playing "Operation Northwind" (*The Peripheral* 21), and her feeling toward the virtual possibilities of games in her time: "She hated that shit. Hated games. Why did they all have to be so fucking ugly?" (*The Peripheral* 52). In the later future, people can become "all feeds [with] continual access to most things" (*The Peripheral* 102), be present wherever in the world through peripherals, or surpass the restrictions of matter altogether through protean technologies.

Finally, the elite of *The Peripheral*'s future can create "subsecond extreme events in the market" (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 271) by sending information back in time in order to manipulate past worlds to their advantage. Jameson's "transnational corporate realities" (38), with which original cyberpunk was concerned, thus become transtemporal, hailing from material revolutions of information technology. This way, the future kleptocrats appear as a logical end-result of Bigend's attainment of financial clairvoyance at the conclusion of *Zero History*, when he gains the ability to see into the future of the markets. Such a conscious use of science fiction tropes Gibson helped popularize, from artificial intelligence and nanotechnology to science fictional venture capitalism, in *The Peripheral* casts doubt on Hollinger's claim that it would be impossible for him to see into worlds beyond such revolutions.

Rather than an inability to think beyond technological singularities, Gibson shows a critical attitude to singularity narratives in general. Where Hollinger interprets Gibson's anti-climactic conclusions as impasses, in fact, they serve to focus attention not on technological *deus ex machinae*, but the fact that the conditions in which particular people continue to live are defined by much more than revolutions of technology. For Gibson's characters, dystopian futures remain despite technological advances or posthuman singularities. For example, at the conclusion of *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Boomzilla witnesses first hand the emergence of Rei Toei from the computer network into the tangible world, but dismisses the miraculous event by noting that it takes more "to get anybody's attention out there, in the middle of this disaster shit" (Gibson, *All Tomorrow's Parties* 326). He casts the destruction of the San Francisco Bay Bridge, a bricolage habitat for thousands in the novel, as the life-changing event that matters for the people of the novel's world. In this manner, Gibson suggests that technologies are not life-changing if they fail to address the quotidian issues people face and they are not reason enough to experience *tremendum*. Gibson thus tackles some of the criticism he and his cyberpunk colleagues received in the 1990s, like Terranova's claim that they failed to address how "technological change can be and is being shaped by economic and political forces" (275). In fact, Gibson's skepticism toward technology seems evident also at the oft-quoted conclusion of *Neuromancer*, where the newly freed AI simply notes

<sup>3</sup> While there are no conscious AI appearing as agents in *The Peripheral*, I believe this has more to do with Gibson's updated approach on the concept of AI rather than a failure to glimpse beyond a singularity of superintelligence. While in *Neuromancer* the AI appear as personified entities, super-computers come to life, *The Peripheral* extrapolates them from the cloud and algorithm technologies of the 2010s.

that “[t]hings aren’t different. Things are things” (316). Similarly, in *The Peripheral*, Flynn’s acquisition of future technology and the use of her peripheral are central to her struggle against the incorporating practices of her society, but they alone cannot overthrow its oppressive structures.

## Conclusion

Despite its protean, radically transformative nature, transhumanity in *The Peripheral* is not a wholly other mystery. Its potential to terrify and charm is mainly manifest in Netherton’s repulsion of the patchers and his fascination with Flynn in her peripheral, both of which are deeply rooted in variations of embodiment. As the culmination of embodied transhuman existence strains toward immateriality, where embodiment is a technology that can be easily manipulated, questioning the body as mortal, *tremendum* is replaced by an anticlimax of immaterial violence that leaves no traces. By drawing attention to the various ways transhuman technologies depend on their relation to embodiment, Gibson strips them from mystery and shows them to possess potential for action rather than being mere immobilizing advents of unknowable transformation as Hollinger’s interpretation would suggest. They are portrayed as instruments of change, not its guarantees, as the advances of transhuman technologies are time and again shown to be capable of reinforcing an exploitative status quo in the novel. Netherton describes a similar discrepancy between action and innovation in telling Flynn about the slow catastrophe of the jackpot: “So everything, however deeply fucked in general, was lit increasingly by the new, by things that made people blink and sit up, but then the rest of it would just go on, deeper into the ditch” (Gibson, *The Peripheral* 321). Again, the dystopian ironies of the novel become evident, as immense profits and advancements coincide with the slow, asymmetrical catastrophe.

Transhumanity is a construct that Gibson’s characters interact with as Yaszek’s ironic cyborgs, searching for unalienated subjectivity in a system trying to incorporate them. The irony is made especially visible by the novel’s time-travel motif as Flynn, the fairly literal working-class cyber-heroine, turns even a miracle like communication with the future into a strategy of survival in the oppressive capitalist system of her time. Notably, she becomes immensely wealthy in so doing, but it is not clear whether she manages to dismantle her status as an ironic cyborg, enmeshed in a struggle against the incorporating practices of the dystopian society around her. Either her struggle continues from a new, more privileged standpoint or she becomes a complicit part of the oligarchs running her world like Netherton remains in his.

Gibson himself was surprised to see that *The Peripheral*’s somewhat domestic ending was perceived as a happy one (Gibson, interview). While it is true that Flynn’s continuum does not directly lead to Netherton’s even more dystopian one, its revolutions brought on by the discovery of information time-travel do not overthrow the basic tenets of a broken society. Netherton’s grappling with *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of the peripherals shows that Gibson is not fazed by the unthinkable advent they represent. Instead, Gibson lays out a many-faceted view of the possibilities and dangers embodied technologies of transhumanity might lead to, bringing attention to the importance of seeing through their promises and perceiving that they themselves do not dismantle oppressive systems.

Even if lives have been changed by emerging technologies, *The Peripheral* returns to a seemingly unrevolutionized position, where Gibson’s characters may have found a modicum of peace midst their respective schizoid systems, but liberation, freedom from oppression, still remains the privilege of the chosen few. In this way, *The Peripheral* accentuates Gibson’s critical attitude toward the potential of transhuman technology in an unequal world. From an author repeatedly

lauded for his prophetic visions, such criticism could warrant a re-examination of our attitudes and relationship with technology and its relation to oppressive social structures.

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