

The Female, the Intertextual, and the Transhuman in William Gibson's Molly Millions



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Abstract: Considered the great guru of cyberpunk, William Gibson is also the creator of one of the most representative female icons of the genre, Molly Millions. An aggressive co-star in one of Gibson's early narratives, "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981) and in his first novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), Molly finds herself at an intertextual, postfeminist, and post/transhuman crossroads. She emerges as a dangerous and empowered cyborg; without her, the rather weak Johnny, the male lead in the first story in which Molly appears, would have died. However, her condition makes her much more than a bodyguard. Through her role, Gibson also shows the hyperreal predictions of a dystopian world whose strongly naturalist context does not seem to offer this prototypical cyberpunk woman any outlet but a transhumanity for which she needs to update constantly her physical enhancements, inexorably related to her necessarily violent survival.

Keywords: William Gibson, Molly Millions, "Johnny Mnemonic", *Neuromancer*, posthumanity, transhumanity

1. William Gibson's Molly Millions, the hyperreal, and female power

In the early stages of creating his cyberpunk universe, William Gibson portrayed the character of his first empowered female protagonist, Molly Millions, around three fundamental features that shaped her literary personality significantly while also affecting posterior cultural manifestations: the (post)feminist, the

intertextual, and the transhuman. This contribution analyzes the role these three factors have in the construction of Molly Millions's character within Gibson's early predictions of a dystopic future.

In her article "Back to the Future", Mojca Krevel puts the emphasis on the alleged fact that, especially in his earlier and better-known fiction, cyberpunk guru William Gibson constructed hyperreal models that anticipated and even brought some actual advancements in the fields of technology and biotechnology. In other words, his early cyberpunk fiction turned out to be a precise cultural example of Baudrillard's third order of simulacra (1983: 83-159): Gibson's literary world became the postmodern sci-fi

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representation of a reality that did not exist yet, but that eventually, preceded by the simulacrum created by the cyberpunk author, would come into existence. From Baudrillard's critical perspective, Gibson's hyperreal fiction had helped to change the postmodern factual world thanks to imagined technological advancements based on his observation and capacity to predict the future, something that happened despite the writer's apparent inexperience in the use of cutting-edge technology at the moment of creating his fiction (Krevel, 2014: 34-35). We might wonder if in the depiction of such hyperreal world, which precludes and defines the wide world web (*Neuromancer*, 37), Gibson also worked on a new model of woman that could endorse the fight for the advancement of gender equality, thus anticipating the wave of "feminist cyberpunk" initiated by the end of the 1980s.

Overall, the issue of feminism and gender relations at the early stages of the cyberpunk movement becomes rather problematic, as some critics have accused this science-fiction subgenre of being traditionally patriarchal. However, even if one considers as suspicious the fact that the alleged five leaders who consciously decided to create the new sf movement at the beginning of the 1980s are all male (William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Rudy Rucker, and Lewis Shiner), critics have addressed gender issues in cyberpunk from highly contrastive angles. Thus, in his analysis of the reception in recent times of Gibson's early fiction, Pawel Stature argues that the cyberpunk writer's "representation of female characters has been described as stereotypical, unfair, or even dangerous to women" (2018: 336). Stature argues that, since Gibson's portraits of female

characters are linked to the myth of the American frontier—"a place of unmitigated exploitation"—he has also been criticized for being a neo-colonial author (343). Stacy Gillis's views on the issue are even harsher and more categorical on the alleged patriarchal and male-suffocating roots of cyberpunk fiction. By resorting to a simplistic binary, Gillis perceives "an understanding of the gender politics of cyberpunk in which reason and activity are located within the masculine body, as opposed to the dangerous female body" (2007: 13). Nicola Nixon, in her article "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?" also contends that cyberpunk conceals "a complicity with '80s [gender] conservatism" (1992: 231).

However, in her article "Razor Girls: Genre and Gender in Cyberpunk Fiction" (1997), Lauraine Leblanc defends a different interpretation, which firmly takes into account the role technology has in the creation of new types of (post)human beings in the subgenre. In line with the well-known views provided by Donna Haraway in her influential "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), Leblanc contends that "gender dichotomies are overcome through the prevalence and use of technology; as 'post-human' subjects, cyborgs create new social and cultural contexts, redefining gender along with the most basic of human attributes" (1997: 72). This critic sees in Gibson's *Molly* the first "steppin' razor" example of cyberpunk "female-gendered cyborgs undertaking a role-reversal into masculinity" (72). As argued in the following pages, and in line with Leblanc's views, textual analysis shows that one-dimensional criticism of the type developed by some critics who consider



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Gibson's fiction to be fully rooted in patriarchy is not sufficiently grounded when it comes to reflect on his representations of gender issues in his early fiction.

Regarded, together with Bruce Sterling, as the leader of the cyberpunk movement, at the beginning of the 1980s Gibson published two pieces of fiction considered to be among his most influential work: one of his first short stories, "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981), and his first novel, *Neuromancer* (1984). Both of them reveal that Gibson drew the portrait of female protagonist Molly Millions as an extremely active woman who openly qualifies as an empowered individual, both physically and mentally. As discussed in this work, she is not simply a cyborgian version of film-noir *femme fatale* who has been transported to the spaces of the future, as Gillis claims (2007: 13-16), nor is her sexuality merely "the marker of female identity" (Gillis: 16). On the contrary, I contend that Gibson's first well-known female protagonist is ideologically (and physically) a rather malleable but dynamic figure. Thanks to the powerful role she enjoys in the two narratives above mentioned, she helps to link Gibson's fiction both to the beginning of the cyberpunk agenda as a new type of postmodern sf subgenre and to some interesting notions centered on the philosophy of transhumanism.

As pertains to her female condition, Molly is not represented as a mere object sexualized by the male gaze. In fact, male stares on the female sometimes experience an important contextual difference in Gibson's universe, where (cyborgian) heterosexual men may passively stare *through* the female, as the case is in *Neuromancer*, a procedure

evaluated later on in this work. Moreover, Gibson depicts Molly, above all, as a bodyguard and lethal warrior who, as such, aspires to have a well-trained body ready for combat with the help of expensive technological implants. In other words, she does not come to fill the role of the *femme fatale* in the grounds of science fiction, but to occupy the place of the traditional (male) fighting hero in the new cyborgian version brought about by the posthuman paradigm. In such role, she helps and ultimately saves the life of a physically weak and incapable-to-fight new model of *unmanly* male protagonist; the inversion of gender roles, however, is not a simple one and Gibson's male protagonists do not respond easily to the masculinity crisis of the 1980s.

In line with the materialization of postmodern ideology characteristic of the first wave of cyberpunk (McHale, 1992), Molly's transhuman search for physical perfection via body enhancements is also a response to Gibson's representation of a dystopic future. In it, what is left of humanity becomes categorized again in binaries but, although they are old binaries, the author has reframed them. The newly framed ideological pairs represent the new beings who are gradually resulting of the progression from the human into the (dystopic) posthuman. Furthermore, Gibson's literary universe portrays a large collection of what might be better referred to as infrahuman beings, losers in the dystopic future who try to make a living at the increasingly large bottom of society. Meanwhile, very rich families—many of whose members, in a new parodic version of vampirism, are periodically cryogenized—live in artificial heavens above the planet (*Neuromancer*, 50-51). Right in the middle, between the masses



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of the inhuman dispossessed and the very rich, others like the cyborgian mercenary Molly Millions help cowardly hackers or “console cowboys”, such as Case, the male protagonist in *Neuromancer*, in their illegal efforts to get money from the privileged rich, and thus remain above the inhuman rubble. Anticipating the impact of the internet in our present lives, in his cyberpunk universe Gibson's hackers move between two ontologically distinct realities, the physical and the virtual, but the writer describes both as very dangerous places. The physically feeble male version of the old tough cowboy has to leave his ‘meat’ or physical body behind, as Case makes clear once and again, while pursuing technological buccaneer adventures that take place in Gibson's premonitory cyberspace (*Neuromancer*, 8, 10, 29, 39, 51, etc.).

While being on-line, the male hacker may have to evade dangerous electronic “black ice” and virtual walls programmed to keep hacking thieves away. However, in physical reality cyberspace cowboys still put their ‘meat’ at risk. Here, they have to face gangsters who work for the big corporations that control an extremely dehumanized hyper-capitalist system. Following the logic of popular romance fiction, be it American frontier or pirate story, when entering Gibson's cyberspace the console cowboy sometimes requires someone to watch his physical body during the time in which he is submerged in his illegal activities as a hacker. Alternatively, the physically frail hacker may need somebody brave to carry out material deeds for him, while he comfortably observes and guides her watching everything through her eyes by means of a transhuman technological implement. Virtual space cowboys may

also be helped in their freebooting endeavors by different urban tribes who prefer or are forced to live outside the system, such as is the case of the Lo Tek who help Johnny Mnemonic, or the Rastafarian Zionites of *Neuromancer*.

Not surprisingly, the writer's gloomy predictions for our near future may help readers to understand why, instead of portraying a female protagonist who might have shown clearer connections with a feminist and gender-equalitarian agenda, he depicts Molly as a ninja-type assassin, as deadly as apparently immoral. The logic of the fictional but dystopic universe that Gibson describes leaves no room for traditional morality because the main aim of his protagonists, men and women alike, is sheer survival.

Both in the short story and in the novel, Molly shows that in physical reality she can be better and more active than many men can be. In this sense, she qualifies as an early representative of postfeminism, a notion that critics have also approached from contrastive angles. Thus, Stacy Gillis summarizes the first commonly accepted definition of the concept as follows: “Postfeminism, as used in scholarly debate, is concerned with how certain ‘playful’ re-renderings of femininity and sexuality could be understood as a powerful example of female agency” (2007: 9). However, she later reframes the notion, using brackets to retake her allegedly feminist agenda. “Rather, (post)feminist refers to the ways in which figures of women with emotional, physical, social or financial *agency* have been variously represented as lacking something—a relationship, a child, a more attractive body, a stable parent figure and/or domestic skills—since the early 1980s” (9, my emphasis). Among the existing number of fictional



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(post)feminist characters, Gillis explicitly includes the “ass-kicking techno-babes of cyberpunk film and fiction” (9). In effect, Gibson clearly portrays Molly Millions as an empowered *active* female character in both “Johnny Mnemonic” and *Neuromancer*. Aesthetically, she also qualifies as an “ass-kicking techno-babe”—although I would substitute *woman* for *babe*. Moreover, Molly seems to be always lacking something, as Gillis contends, because she frequently needs even more money to further her cybernetic enhancements and, at times, she clearly misses a true soulmate with whom to live a happier life. However, Gillis seems to miss the fact that the sense of lacking also exists and is applicable to Gibson's male protagonists; lack is not gender-biased in his dystopic fiction. In it, most characters from every gender are exposed to a dangerous and brutal life that reverberates with the notion that Dominick LaCapra defined as “structural trauma”² and which results in unavoidable existential anguish. Besides, such anguish is not only the result of what Lacan understands to be a lack of plenitude in his analysis of the evolution of being (1966: 220-22)—and which applies to both woman and man—but especially of the dreadful living conditions that Gibson depicts for the protagonists of the bleak future he predicted in his early fiction. Indeed, if we focus our attention on the figure of Molly from the perspective of folk and popular culture,

we easily conclude that Gibson has bestowed upon her, as an essential feature of her empowerment, the traditional role of the stereotypical male warrior who has to fight as a way of living. In his futuristic but extremely naturalist pages, the author's dystopic presentation of our future requires a huge deal of old human violence to survive.

Nevertheless, Gibson's predictions and the role he allots his female protagonist in such a future are more complex than the mere use of violence to stay alive. Molly is not just a woman warrior; she is a highly skillful fighter who can challenge and defeat fearsome martial arts experts, which means that she is also a brainy, astute personage. As a literary character, she is above all the result of intertextual symbiosis. Her portrait shows clear links with other fictional females that, along the postmodern period, were also marking the coming of the postfeminist woman along with the increasing fears of traditional men who felt that such newly empowered woman was dangerously eroding their ancestral male privileges.

2. Intertextual Postfeminist Molly

Cultural history points to the politically conservative America of Ronald Reagan's 1980s as a period when many men wished to recuperate the traditional patriarchal position they thought they had lost because of the advent of the counterculture and the social revolts of the 1960s. A second wave of 20th-century feminism combined then with the growing economic supremacy of Japan and West Germany to produce an alarming sense of insecurity among American males (Ludas, 2011). Thus, in line with other cultural artifacts created at the time, the first

² For LaCapra structural trauma results from the realization of the intrinsic mortality of the human condition; it may happen prior to any specific traumatic experience of individual character or be the result of several or many traumatic events that threaten individual or collective existence (LaCapra, 2001: 76-81).



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wave of cyberpunk fiction echoed in its own way the patriarchal social anxieties of the period both in gender and in economic grounds. It was in this context that Gibson added to his fiction the conviction that Aristotelian categorical thinking, far from having been erased from the western world-view—as deconstructivists intended—would develop in the future into new distinct, re-framed binaries to form the discursive columns of a highly dystopic society. Among others, the old binary man/woman was going to experience a tantalizing revision, as shown in Molly Millions' depiction.

Intertextually, Molly evokes the classic Amazons but she also appears to be a female version of Wolverine from Marvel Comics. In turn, she became a predecessor of other popular female protagonists, most noticeably of Trinity in *The Matrix* trilogy. As mentioned above, she first appeared in "Johnny Mnemonic", published in *Omni Magazine* in May 1981, and later reprinted in Gibson's popular short-story collection *Burning Chrome* (1986). In this narrative, Molly enters the story abruptly to rescue Johnny from certain death by providing him with her bodyguard services for a considerable sum of money. The most obvious genres that Gibson parodied—in the postmodern sense provided by Linda Hutcheon³—along his short story are the

western (with its typical duel at the saloon) and the detective thriller, with the motif of the chase becoming highly relevant till the end of the tale. Johnny provides readers with the main, and male, perspective in his role as homodiegetic narrator:

Lewis was grinning. I think he was visualizing a point just behind my forehead and imagining how he could get there the hard way.

"Hey", said a low voice, *feminine*, from somewhere behind my right shoulder, "you cowboys sure aren't having too lively a time".

"Pack it, *bitch*", Lewis said, his tanned face very still. Ralfi looked blank.

"Lighten up. You want to buy some good free base?" She pulled up a chair and quickly sat before either of them could stop her. She was barely inside my fixed field of vision, a thin girl with mirrored glasses, her dark hair cut in a rough shag. She wore black leather, open over a T-shirt slashed diagonally with stripes of red and black. "Eight thou a gram weight".

Lewis snorted his exasperation and tried to slap her out of the chair. Somehow he didn't quite connect, and her hand came up and seemed to brush his wrist as it passed. Bright blood sprayed the table. He was clutching his wrist white-knuckle tight, blood trickling from between his fingers.

But hadn't her hand been empty?

He was going to need a tendon stapler. He stood up carefully, without bothering to push his chair back. The chair toppled backward, and he stepped out of my line of sight without a word. (*Burning Chrome* 4-5; my emphasis)

Molly had planned to work for Lewis's boss Ralfi, an intermediary who wanted to earn the bounty of the contract put on

³ In her classic study on (postmodern) parody, Hutcheon defines it as "repetition, but repetition that includes difference [...] it is imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways. Ironic versions of 'trans-contextualization' and inversion are its major formal operatives, and the range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage" (1985: 37).



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Mnemonic's head. However, when Johnny promises her two millions if she can get him out, she becomes his protector and rescues him, outsmarting and defeating the two other men in this futuristic version of the saloon duel:

"Name's Millions. Molly Millions. You want to get out of here, boss? People are starting to stare". She stood up. She was wearing leather jeans the color of dried blood.

And I saw for the first time that the mirrored lenses were surgical inlays, the silver rising smoothly from her high cheekbones, sealing her eyes in their sockets, I saw my new face twinned there. (6)

Eventually, the strange-looking cyborgian rescuer takes Johnny away to a refuge where he can hide among the members of the Lo Tek urban tribe. However, a Yakuza assassin goes after the male protagonist's head, because Johnny is, like Molly, also a cyborg. More specifically, he functions as an embodied representation of Marshall McLuhan's analysis of globalized reality (1964: 7-21). Johnny is the medium that carries the message in himself, in a hard disk that he had implanted in his head and where he transports important information. Thus, he—more precisely, his head—becomes the message the Yakuza is looking for with an aim to "erase" it.

After the two protagonists' victorious escape from the duel at the cyberpunk saloon, amidst the bleak dystopic cityscape Gibson reinforces the popular, ritualistic, and traditional ingredients of his story with a second and final duel. The Yakuza assassin finally reaches their refuge and Molly tells Johnny that the hitman is "fast, so fast [...] His nervous system's jacked up. He's factory custom" ("Johnny Mnemonic", 8). The members of

the Lo Tek tribe resort to a primitive combat ring to solve disputes, the Killing Floor, and Gibson displaces the importance of the male protagonist who gives the story its title to grant the attributes of old heroic narratives to the female character. As his champion, Molly takes Johnny's place in the Killing Floor and faces the lethal Yakuza cyborg, killing him after an intense fight and, thus, literally saving Johnny's head (20-21).

In medieval epic poems, male heroes such as Beowulf, Roland or Cid Campeador take the place of the physically unfit King to fight for him and defeat his enemies. In the ritualistic ring devised by Gibson, a female champion has replaced the male heroes of old patriarchy to, again, rescue a weak man in danger. Interestingly, in the film version of "Johnny Mnemonic" that Robert Longo directed in 1995 patriarchal gender roles were fully reestablished, despite the fact that Gibson was the scriptwriter. In the film, Johnny, played by Keanu Reeves, shows his evident qualities as a fighter, whereas his sidekick female companion, here called Jane instead of Molly and played by Dina Meyer, is rather a failure as bodyguard, being incapable of defeating Johnny's chasers or protecting him efficiently because she is sick. In this patriarchal version of Gibson's story, the male protagonist becomes the one who eventually saves the weaker female character from imminent death.

Molly reappears, as noted above, in *Neuromancer*. This is the way Gibson's heterodiegetic narrator, combined with Case's male gaze, describes his female character early in the plot:

[Case] realized that the glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth



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pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag. The fingers curled around the fletcher were slender, white, tipped with polished burgundy. The nails looked artificial.

"I think you screwed up, Case. I showed up and you just fit me right into your reality picture".

"So what do you want, lady?" He sagged back against the hatch.

"You. One live body, brains still somewhat intact. Molly, Case. My name's Molly. I'm collecting you for the man I work for. Just wants to talk, is all. Nobody wants to hurt you".

"That's good".

"Cept I do hurt people sometimes, Case. I guess it's just the way I'm wired". She wore tight black glove leather jeans and a bulky black jacket cut from some matte fabric that seemed to absorb light. "If I put this dart gun away, will you be easy, Case? You look like you like to take stupid chances". (20)

In other words, Molly certainly looks "dressed to kill" but not in the shrewd, *femme fatale* way: transhuman augmentations have changed her into a fighting cyborg even if her more powerful weapons, the retractile blades under her nails, are still concealed from the view of focalizing Case. The male protagonist can notice only that her nails "look artificial". However, as happened to Johnny Mnemonic, Case soon focuses on Molly's surgically implanted glasses, a cybernetic device that also has a Pynchonian intertextual reading, as discussed later. Meanwhile, at the same time, *pace* Gillis, Molly appears in the novel to make it clear that her mission at the time is to enroll Case's "live body, brains still somewhat intact", for the cause she has been paid for. This means that the type of

new woman that she represents is not the only (post)human who is defined for being still physically 'meat'. The metaphor also applies to Case. Molly's boss wants him for his capacities as a hacker, for which he needs a suitable physical body, without which he could not be a console cowboy in virtual reality. Even when readers meet Dixie Flatline later in the narrative, this disembodied consciousness that only lives as software requires a physical entity to activate him (*Neuromancer*, 68). In other words, despite the old categorical assumptions favored by many critics, in Gibson's cyberpunk universe, to exist and do his job in virtual cyberspace a hacker also necessitates his meat: no body means no possible access to virtual reality. Consciousness, even as software that is played in a machine, always requires the help of physicality, the old Cartesian duality body/mind being a delusion that science supports no more. Gibson has reframed the old binary physical/virtual by erasing the dash: no physical means no virtual.

Despite being a dangerous mercenary, Molly's first description in the novel, from Case's perspective, does not exclude sexual connotations that may lure the male stare ("She wore tight black glove leather jeans", 20). In part, I agree with Leblanc when she comments that Molly "is deliberately unfeminine, lacking the traditional womanly attributes of both the 'Madonna' and the 'whore'" (Leblanc, 1997: 72). However, Case's male stare cannot refrain from finding a sexual angle in the female bodyguard, something that cannot be found in Johnny's first impressions of Molly, despite the fact that eventually they become lovers until Johnny's death—as Molly recollects in *Neuromancer* (114). Furthermore, Gibson's alteration of traditional



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categorical binaries also functions to locate his female protagonist beyond both patriarchal and feminist views and into less essentialist postfeminist grounds. In fact, later in the story, Molly also refers to her past as a “meat puppet” or prostitute, in this way recalling the double role, as soldiers and sexual dolls, allotted to the female replicants in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). As she confesses, Molly needed the money to pay for her implants but her consciousness was “unplugged” every time she was with a client; she became a senseless object of sexual manipulation:

“This cost a lot”, she said, extending her right hand as though it held an invisible fruit. The five blades slid out, then retracted smoothly. “Costs to go to Chiba, costs to get the surgery, costs to have them jack your nervous system up so you'll have the reflexes to go with the gear . . . You know how I got the money, when I was starting out? Here. Not here, but a place like it, in the Sprawl. Joke, to start with, 'cause once they plant the cut-out chip, it seems like free money. Wake up sore, sometimes, but that's it. Renting the goods, is all. You aren't in, when it's all happening. House has software for whatever a customer wants to pay for . . .” (96, original ellipses)

Abandoning her own consciousness or even allowing somebody else—Case—to have access to it are the two most remarkable transhuman activities Molly is exposed to, though, over time, they go beyond sexual implications into a rebalance of gender power. One has to guess that Gibson intended the historical irony: with the help of the deadly implants paid with the money she earned as a prostitute in her past, Molly turns

into a fighting ninja capable of defeating the most dangerous men—Case soon addresses her as a “street samurai” (23). As such, she proves to be in both narratives not only an active, strong, and reliable sidekick for her male partners, Johnny Mnemonic and Case. She comes to the point of saving the life of the first and doing all the hard physical work for the second; without her, male success is not possible. The following fragment depicts the way Case conceives of Molly as a version of stereotypical action hero actors Bruce Lee and Clint Eastwood, when she has already become his replacement in physical reality:

She had it: the thing, the moves. And she'd pulled it all together for her entrance. Pulled it together around the pain in her leg and marched down Jane's stairs like she owned the place, elbow of her gun arm at her hip, forearm up, wrist relaxed, swaying the muzzle of the fletcher with the studied nonchalance of a Regency duelist. It was a performance. It was like the culmination of a life-time's observation of martial arts tapes, cheap ones, the kind Case had grown up on. For a few seconds, he knew, she was every bad-ass hero, Sony Mao in the old Shaw videos, Mickey Chiba, the whole lineage back to Lee and Eastwood. She was walking it the way she talked it. (135)

Meanwhile, the male protagonists also behave in rather unconventional ways, which classifies them as materialized examples of the fear of weakness many men expressed in the 1980s. As mentioned above, Johnny is described by Gibson also as a cyborg, a carrier of information he stores in a technological device he has implanted in his head. However, in patriarchal jargon Johnny



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overtly qualifies as a 'sissy', to the point that Molly has to replace him in the ritualist fight where she can finally defeat the Japanese hitman. After that, they will stay together for a number of years until the Yakuza kills Johnny. In *Neuromancer*, Case proves to be also an anti-heroic male protagonist, incapable of winning any physical fight. In fact, others inject neurotoxins in his body to cripple or kill him if he does not follow orders. Not surprisingly, as happened to Johnny Mnemonic, he avoids physical combat and frequently goes into virtual space leaving his 'meat' behind, a word that not only stresses the total abandonment of his body when he enters virtual cyberspace. The substitution of meat for flesh also suggests that the male protagonist of *Neuromancer* changes into a 'spirit' that has the ability to solve problems only in the virtual matrix. Thus, Gibson creates a sci-fi mythology in his early personal universe where the Platonic and later Christian binary body/soul has developed into the reframed binary *meat female fighter* (Molly)/*virtual male hacker* (Johnny and Case), mixing up the traditionally positive and negative connotations of the original binary.

However, along this process of transformation, Molly is not a mere female body behind the male mind or soul. In fact, in anthropological grounds, the 'manly soul' allegedly represented by Case in *Neuromancer* does not even coincide with the traditional representation of the soul as female that we see, for instance, in the Christian religion and in Jung's definition of the anima.⁴ The strong intertextual ethos of

⁴ Direct references to Jung are found in Gibson's early fiction—for instance, in his short story "The Gernsback Continuum"

Gibson's fiction helps us to understand further the reasons why he alters the old dichotomies male/female and body/soul in his early narratives. Molly becomes not only one of the new female heroes from the 1980s, evoking powerful figures from ancient mythologies or comic books and anticipating later cultural figures that copy her characteristics.⁵ The intertextual links centered on the figure of Molly extend to Pynchon's representation of female energy in some of his short stories and especially in his first novel, *V.* (1963). I contend that Molly is also Gibson's intertextual version of the Pynchonian Lady V., the emblematic female representative of human and social

(1981)—also connecting it to Pynchon's oeuvre. Jung defines the archetype of the anima as follows: "Anima means soul and should designate something very wonderful and immortal. Yet this was not always so [...]. It is something that lives of itself, that makes us live; it is a life behind consciousness that cannot be completely integrated with it, but from which, on the contrary, consciousness arises" (1971: 26-27).

⁵ Not only Trinity in *The Matrix* or the Princess in *Shrek* bring to mind Molly's influence on contemporary popular culture. Brian McHale contends that Gibson's contemporary fellow writer Kathy Acker "appropriates and rewrites material" from his first novel (1992: 233), including female ninja Molly, who would be a model for female protagonist Abhor in Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*. In this sense, Joseph Conte inconsistently argues that in "shifting attributes from Molly to Abhor, Acker critiques the fantasies of cyborg sex and violence that are rather tightly laced in *Neuromancer* and mocks the adolescent male subjectivity that comprises the largest audience for science fiction" (2002, 211; my emphasis). Apparently, for Conte adolescent female subjectivity is devoid of sex and violence fantasies.



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energy previously symbolized by Venus and the Virgin, according to Henry Adams's theory, famously quoted by Pynchon in his earlier short story "Entropy" (1960). As I have stated elsewhere, Pynchon's oeuvre, from his early short stories to his latest novel, *Bleeding Edge* (2013), embodies life energy—as representation of the Jungian anima archetype—in the figures of different female characters. No doubt, the first and most influential one of those characters is Lady V., a mysterious woman who becomes progressively more dangerous from Pynchon's earlier stories to his novel *V.*, where she finally dies after having experienced a long process of turning into a cybernetic creature. Along the first decades of the 20th Century, the energy used by the human species to colonize and control the planet becomes increasingly dangerous, passing from electricity to radioactivity, and so does Lady V., in the different manifestations that Pynchon draws of her, by adding artificial prostheses to her body (see Collado-Rodríguez, 2015: 256-57). It is specifically relevant to point out that when she dies in Chapter 11 of *V.*, in her manifestation as Bad Priest, Pynchon's character experiences a process of ritualistic dismemberment along which a number of children start removing her prostheses. Finally, anticipating Molly's most obvious implant, they "peeled back one eyelid to reveal a glass eye with the iris in the shape of a clock" (Pynchon, 343). Later, energy becomes incarnate in other female characters of variable morality, as indication that Pynchon's Lady V. can be, as the Jungian anima, good *and* bad (Collado-Rodríguez: 258-59)... and so can Molly.

3. Transhumanist Molly in a dystopic world

With her cybernetic eyes and nail implants, Molly also becomes the symbol of the female transhuman cyborg as a new source of replenished energy. Her place in the intertextual chain may help us to explain why Gibson still depicts strong female protagonists in his later narratives but, more specifically, why Molly is not just a sidekick of the male protagonist in either "Johnny Mnemonic" or *Neuromancer*. She becomes the essential source of energy for the male protagonist to be triumphant, and her achievements are the result both of her mental capacity and of her enhanced body. Thus, Molly represents an early invitation to the readers of Gibson's universe to ponder over the transhumanist project. However, the aim of (bio)technological advancements in his narratives is not exactly the one shared by believers in current transhumanist philosophy.

As it happens when we consider gender issues, in Gibson's fiction transhumanist enhancement constitutes, above all, a means to survive amid the chaotic remains of civilization; Molly is not rich and she uses the money she earns in her dangerous adventures to further enhance her capacities as a warrior. As mentioned above, in Gibson's fiction biotechnological implants are used by prostitutes not to feel what is been done to them or by mercenaries to become better combatants; traces of optimistic transhumanist philosophy and aims are not to be found in the original cyberpunk project. Critics frequently argue that transhumanist philosophy represents the continuation of the humanist project; it does not offer any significant response to



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the damage the human species has done to other species and to the environment in the Anthropocene, as critical posthumanism does. On the contrary, transhumanist believers think that by using prosthetic and biotechnological enhancements humans are on their way to perfection. Thus, in their introduction to post- and transhumanism, Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner openly contend that “transhumanism, according to its self-understanding, is a contemporary renewal of humanism. It embraces and eventually amplifies central aspects of secular and Enlightenment humanist thought, such as belief in reason, individualism, science, progress, as well as self-perfection or cultivation” (2014: 8). Such optimism about humanity’s future is not to be found in Gibson’s early fiction because it is based on a dystopic representation of the world. As it happens in Pynchon’s fiction, Gibson’s characters fit in the influential understanding of posthumanity that Norbert Wiener started to develop in the 1950s, when he already highlighted the notion that we “are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves” (1954: 96). Our bodies continuously experience new physical changes in line with the information stored in our DNA, the environment we inhabit, and the circumstances to which we are exposed along our lives. Accordingly, with each new implant she gets, Molly does not become a more perfected transhuman but a deadlier fighter because she inhabits a naturalist world in which only the fittest can survive. The posthuman in her is not the transcendental goal pursued by the optimistic brand of transhumanism, but the more realistic result of her courage when facing the hardships of the world she inhabits. Certainly, her prostheses

are the outcome of technological improvements brought about by several centuries of humanism but also of thousands of years of human violence against themselves and against the planet. Clark and Rossini argue that transhumanist “prostheses are skeuomorphs of humanism, vestiges of heroic aspirations that preserve rather than challenge the Cartesian mind-body split so definitive of Western modernity and the Eurocentric myth of progress as technoscientific development” (2017: xiv).

However, Gibson’s fiction is not so categorically simple. The mind/body binary reaches transhuman combinations in *Neuromancer* that, while apparently reaffirming the Cartesian humanist binary, also go beyond it until the binary dissolves. Within the writer’s cyberpunk universe, Simstim technology describes a rather fluctuating reality where gender, sex, and individuality have been left behind. A Simstim desk allows Case to switch into Molly’s perceptual system. That is to say, the technological device produces in the receiver the simulated responses that the other subject actually experiences in the ‘meat’ world. According to the narrator, Case feels somehow superior and disgusted with physical reality, even when it manifests via the device:

Cowboys didn’t get into Simstim, he thought, because it was 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. (39)



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However, Case's own belief in his superior position—the male 'mind' controlling the female 'body'—does not resist a merely superficial analysis of what really happens and who is, in fact, the one who succeeds in their mission. Although still following Case's perception of Molly's movements, the narrator makes it very clear who is really the active one in the technological sensorial combination:

The abrupt jolt into other flesh. Matrix gone, a wave of sound and color . . . She was moving through a crowded street, past stalls vending discount software, prices felt penned on sheets of plastic, fragments of music from countless speakers. Smells of urine, free monomers, perfume, patties of frying krill. For a few frightened seconds *he fought helplessly to control her body. Then he willed himself into passivity*, became the passenger behind her eyes. (39, emphasis added; original ellipsis)

Fortunately for their mission, Molly remains in control of her body (which includes her mind), while Case is relegated to being a passive spectator of their technological symbiosis. Of course, the use of Simstim raises gender issues in the narrative, but the transhuman result makes Molly's role more solidly postfeminist. To this effect, Conte reminds us that as "anyone who has participated pseudonymously in chat rooms, or Multiple User Dungeons, on Internet services knows, gender, race, age, and appearance can all be altered, constructed, or exchanged in virtual reality" (2001: 212). Conte also suggests that the alteration at will of gender identity may become politically liberating (212). However, in this example located at the beginning of cyberpunk fiction, Molly is

not Case's mere avatar but the active one of the dual consciousness involved in the process. She is clearly the (dynamic) protagonist, her technological enhancements being, in addition, an extra tool to help her to accomplish their mission.

Insistently, some critics have claimed that, after all, Molly is a 'body' for hire, a physical commodity, both earlier as a prostitute and later as a bodyguard (Schmeink, 2014: 227). However, in the two stories studied here she is always the active protagonist and actual winner. Nonetheless, at the end important issues seem to remain uncertain. Is not Gibson's dystopic future the obvious result of ancestral patriarchal rule? Is not Molly simply a tomboy, a woman playing the role of a macho man? To answer in the affirmative would be to condemn masculine individuals to be the only violent, and at times perverse, gender in the human species, an assumption that both history and genetics seem to contradict. Within the context of a life understood in naturalist terms, to find a definitive answer is not easy. Paraphrasing American poet and feminist critic Adrienne Rich, we need to view William Gibson in the exact position in which he has been born and educated: he is 20th-century American-Canadian, white and male, but, despite those circumstances, he has created Molly Millions in the terms debated here. As Rich affirmed, "A movement for change lives in feelings, actions and words" (1994: 223), and Gibson's choice of words for his characters is clear enough: *active* belongs to woman.



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