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**POSTMODERN ORIENTALISM**

**William Gibson, Cyberpunk and Japan**

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## ABSTRACT

Taking the works of William Gibson as its point of focus, this thesis considers cyberpunk's expansion from an emphatically literary moment in the mid 1980s into a broader multimedia cultural phenomenon. It examines the representation of racial differences, and the formulation of global economic spaces and flows which structure the reception and production of cultural practices. These developments are construed in relation to ongoing debates around Japan's identity and otherness in terms of both deviations from and congruities with the West (notably America).

To account for these developments, this thesis adopts a theoretical framework informed by both postmodernism as the "cultural dominant" of late capitalism (Jameson), and orientalism, those discursive structures which produce the reified polarities of East versus West (Said). Cyberpunk thus exhibits the characteristics of an orientalised postmodernism, as it imagines a world in which multinational corporations characterised as Japanese *zaibatsu* control global economies, and the excess of accumulated garbage is figured in the trope of *gomi*. It is also postmodernised orientalism, in its nostalgic reconstruction of scenes from the residue of imperialism, its deployment of figures of "cross-ethnic representation" (Chow) like the Eurasian, and its expressions of a purely fantasmatic experience of the Orient, as in the evocation of cyberspace.

In distinction from modern or Saidean orientalism, postmodern orientalism not only allows but is characterized by *reciprocal causality*. This describes uneven, paradoxical, interconnected and mutually implicated cultural transactions at the threshold of East-West relations. The thesis explores this by first examining cyberpunk's unremarked relationship with countercultural formations (rock music), practices (drugs) and manifestations of Oriental otherness in popular culture. The emphasis in the remainder of the thesis shifts towards how cyberpunk maps new technologies onto physical and imaginative "bodies" and geographies: the figuration of the cyborg, prosthetic interventions, and the evolution of cyberspace in tandem with multimedia innovations such as videogames.

Cyberpunk then can best be understood as a conjunction of seemingly disparate experiences: on the one hand the postmodern dislocations and vertiginous moments of

estrangement offset by instances of intense connectivity in relation to the virtual, the relocation to the “distanceless home” of cyberspace. As such it is an ever-expanding phenomenon which has been productively fused with other youth-culture media, and one with specifically Japanese features (anime, *visual kei*, and virtual idols).

## PREFACE/ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In addressing the representation of Japan in the works of William Gibson and the expansion of cyberpunk into a global multimedia cultural formation, an approach that relies in part upon a configuration of “postmodernism” in the engagement with a particular cultural problematic, requires at the outset some preliminary explanation or even justification. In *Theorizing Culture* the authors outline their commitment to finding a “fresh approach to theorizing cultural forms, practices, and identities” as a project that can only be achieved by “looking beyond the limitations engendered by the troublesome word ‘postmodernism’” (Adam and Allen xiii). They find widespread concern over postmodernism that extends well beyond the charge that it is “a politically conservative form” (xv) resulting more often than not in the “view-from-nowhere” which is found to be indicative of much postmodern cultural theorizing. Moreover, they note analytical categories such as “representation” are in the process of being “slowly displaced into the academic dustbin” (xiii).

Postmodernism may have become “everybody’s favourite *bête noire*” but it has served the “function of shifting the paradigms in cultural studies” as well as doing the kind of work which “inevitably provokes controversy and protest” (McRobbie 1-2). This thesis is informed by Fredric Jameson’s analysis of postmodern culture as “the logic of late capitalism” and cyberspace as the new infrastructure of postmodern capital, which resonated with the cyberpunk movement’s own understanding of where the new cultural and political subjectivities of the information age were to be found, and epitomized by the figure of the computer hacker. In the fluid cyberpunk world of “teeming and shifting signifiers” (Sponsler 628), postmodernism in particular has been able to “develop a critical vocabulary which can take this rapid movement into account” (McRobbie 4) and map the deeper mutations of technologically-mediated subjectivities. Although postmodernism may not quite be the “breath of fresh air” it once was, it still allows cultural critics to shift their gaze away from the search for meaning in the text towards the “sociological play between images and between different cultural forms and institutions” (McRobbie 4).

As well, the thesis considers postmodernism in conjunction with Edward Said's formulation of orientalism, the Orient as a construction of the West. This allows for the questions to emerge around issues of representation that specifically concern Japan, the "complicated exception" to the Middle and Far Eastern countries in Said's phrasing, leading to a consideration of racial and cultural difference in a global and polyglot context. As Rey Chow points out, "cross-cultural and cross-ethnic transactions have become not only a daily routine but also an inevitability" (*Protestant Ethnic* viii). Yet the conversation on cyberculture has been directed away from questions of race. The thesis recognizes the continued importance of looking carefully at "the specific and ineluctable issue of representation in cross-ethnic situations" (50) which arise out of postmodern paradigms. This applies to renewing the focus on the practices of representation (the signifier) in order to gain clearer understanding of racial and cultural differences. In the global commodification process, for instance, Chow counsels that what is often being transacted is "so-called ethnicity, which is understood in the sense of an otherness, a foreignness that distinguishes it from mainstream, normative society" (22).

There is much to be said, then, for "opening discussion out, taking risks with our ideas, for exercising our disciplines, taking them for a walk and exploring the points at which they seem to reach a limit" (McRobbie 2). Exploring some of these limits in terms of postmodern society, re-examining the notions of racial difference reinscribed as cultural diversity and pluralism, and the cultural commodification of Otherness are among the ideas "exercised" in the chapters that follow.

In my view, there is much insight to be gained from looking at instances of cross-cultural representation as offered in the work of cyberpunk writers such as William Gibson. Produced on the cusp of the revolution in personal computers, and at the threshold of the emergence of a digital, mobile, connected world, the explosion of the Web, Gibson's fiction has much to commend it. Gibson recalls in the 1990s how the cyberspace in his early novels "isn't really something that people are using on a day-to-day, mundane basis" which is where "the really interesting penetration is, with these emerging media" (Interview, Sandbox 1996). In looking at how notions of race are shaped and challenged by new technologies such as the Internet, Gibson's representational innovation of cyberspace provides singular examples of, as Chow has

argued for cultural studies, “a field in which representations of our others are a regular and unavoidable practice” (*Protestant Ethnic* 54). The point of interest is “how stereotypes are or can be reproduced, the special relation they have with graphicity, the potential cultural transactions they mobilize, and the lingering questions of power that ensue therefrom” (61).

Taking up one link in particular which postmodern orientalism is well-placed to engage, the “new world of the visual image where culture is dominant” (McRobbie 3), there are overlapping concerns here for cyberpunk: in reading Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer*, it has been noted, the “primary register is a visual one” (Myers 898). Two brief examples from some recent cultural material highlight this dominance of the visual, and the postmodern orientalism that characterizes it. The director Guillermo Arriaga (commenting on Tokyo as one of three critical locations for his recent film) notes: “Just one single image gave me the idea for what was to be later transformed into the Japanese tale of *Babel*”; this became one of a set of “apparently unrelated” images which afforded him “a justification for filming and exploring a possible story of different types of insufficiency – absence and loneliness – in one of my favorite cities for its mystery and contradictions” (qtd. in Hagerman 202).

Moreover, a recent best-selling techno-thriller like Robert Ludlum’s *The Bourne Supremacy* shows how portable and adaptable this material can be. The opening of the novel has a “cyberpunk” setting, Hong Kong’s Kowloon Walled City, and provides a suitably garish street slum cum bazaar location for a brutal assassination. The film version transposes unproblematically this orientalist scene to exotic India (the chaotic street scenes of New Delhi are juxtaposed with the transcendental tranquility of a beach at Goa). What strikes me is the resilience of these particular stylized evocations which recur, even though they are manipulated, and how the power differentials in the very deployment of such stereotypes remain muted.

My approach in the thesis, drawing on the term “reciprocal causality” describes uneven, yet mutually implicated cultural transactions at the threshold of East-West representational relations. In doing so I am mindful of my own position in relation to this material as a long-term resident of Japan. Ethnicity is not a static space occupied by ethnics who are, somehow, always already there, but also a relation of cultural politics

that is regularly enacted by a Western (“Americanized”) audience, which is complicit in the construction of such ethnicity. At the same time they are the sites of productive relations that should be reread with the appropriate degree of complexity.

The thesis has been the culmination of a long and arduous process. Much of the writing has been done in two countries, New Zealand and Japan (where I have lived for a number of years), and oftentimes the space in-between. Progress has at times been slow, almost crab-like; the research experience could be likened to a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the sea-bed in search of answers to a very eclectic set of questions. As a result, a number of significant debts have accrued over the years.

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