



RESEARCH PAPER

Hyperreality and Cultural Crisis in Nikesh Shukla's Meatspace: A Post Cyberpunk Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the moral and ethnic values of post-cyberpunk society. Globalization and technological advancement have transformed the concept of being human. Cyber technologies have created a new media culture landscape in which sounds and images shape political beliefs and social behavior, and serve as the foundation of individuals' identities. This paper compares several discourses associated with cultural crises in the post-cyberpunk milieu, as presented in Shukla's Meatspace, to argue against the romanticization of techno-culture. Within the framework of Baudrillard's hyperreality and Postman's technopoly, this paper investigates the representation of identity in techno-culture and finds how post-cyberpunk narratives in Shukla's Meatspace employ discursive strategies e.g. satire, allegory, and dystopian realism, to explore the complex and contradictory relationship between network communication and cultural values. Findings highlight the impact of network communication on society and culture, and how post-cyberpunk narratives challenge the dominant narratives of techno-utopianism, offering alternative visions of the future.

KEYWORDS: Hyperreality, Identity, Nikesh Shukla, Post-Cyberpunk, Techno-Culture

Introduction

The once-held belief that technology would inevitably replace culture as the foundation of progress has been challenged by the realization that modernity is essentially predicated on the dialectical interaction of diverse cultures. When technological innovation outpaces culture's ability to adapt, this mutual interdependence is disrupted. In our contemporary digital world, technology plays an undeniably pivotal role in every aspect of society, to the extent that it appears to have assumed dominion over our daily lives. This post-cyberpunk era, which has received significant critical attention in cinema, has received less scholarly attention in its literary counterpart. This study aims to address this lacuna by examining the representation of cultural crisis in post-cyberpunk literature through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality, a state in which reality is mediated by images and simulations to such an extent that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two, and Neil Postman's technopoly, a society in which technology has become so pervasive that it threatens to overwhelm human values and culture.

Baudrillard's and Postman's theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the techno-culture depicted in post-cyberpunk literature, which often portrays a world where the boundaries between real and simulated worlds are blurred and technology dominates all aspects of human life. This study draws on Nikesh Shukla's *Meatspace* (2014) to explore the impact of hyperreality and technopoly on cultural values and identity representation in a post-cyberpunk milieu, which can lead to feelings of

alienation, dislocation, and loss of identity. The study highlights the importance of critical engagement with techno-culture and the need to develop ethical frameworks to address the following question that lies at the forefront of this accelerated technological progress: can a nation maintain its history, originality, and humanity while fully embracing the sovereignty of a technologically driven world? (Postman, 1992).

Literature Review

The postmodern era has been marked by significant societal changes on a global scale, dating back at least to the end of World War II. These transformative shifts have been prompted by a decline in the core tenets of Enlightenment thought, as Bennett (2005) argues. For him, the primary aim of the cyberpunk movement was to illuminate the prevailing trajectory of society: a dystopian future where social structures collapse, yielding an almost anarchic system due to the materialistic fixation of emerging businesses in the 1980s (Bennett, 2005). The distinction between the physical world and cyberspace serves as a central motif in cyberpunk literature, allowing authors to highlight the shortcomings of 1980s neoliberal values.

The term "cyberpunk" was first coined by Bruce Bethke in 1983. Gibson (1984) defines cyberspace as a "daily coherent fantasy that billions of lawful users share. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts ... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system." This suggests that the concept of cyberspace has become a shared reality for millions, shaping the modern experience.

The emergence of the "new abstractions of the computer, globalization, and finance capital from the Reagan-Thatcher era," as highlighted by Fredric Jameson (1991), contributed to the rise of cyberpunk literature. This movement, seen as anti-globalization and anti-late-capitalist, has faced substantial criticism. Early cyberpunk authors argued that their genre was not about social transformation or opposition to capitalism. According to Joseph Christopher Schaub (2001), cyberpunk projected the culture of 1980s America into a distant, dystopian future by extrapolating from its materialistic obsessions.

Greg Egan, renowned for his pioneering work in the realm of cyberspace, in his book "Diaspora" (1997), explores cyberspace and the future of human society in a manner distinct from the earlier visions of the cyberpunk movement. Egan's book argues for humanity's place on Earth and beyond. Through his literary endeavors, he strives to envision a future where human existence has been altered by inhabiting the vast realm of cyberspace. In contrast to William Gibson's "Neuromancer" (1984), which remains elusive about the specifics of accessing the matrix or the history of artificial intelligence, Egan's technical prose convincingly immerses the reader in the realism of his imagined cyberpunk universe. His style is descriptive, gradually introducing readers to the intricacies of this cybernetic world. Cyberpunk, in rejecting the traditional norms of science fiction, pushed neoliberalism to the extreme, envisioning a more dystopian future devoid of utopian possibilities.

Post-cyberpunk and cyberpunk literature emphasize an interdisciplinary approach, portraying the interdependence and co-dependence of modern fields, much like the symbiotic relationship between bodies and prosthetics. This synergy, according to Cavallaro (2000), creates fresh discourses. Foster (2005) elucidates how cyberpunk literature challenges the negative connotations associated with the encroachment of science and technology by forging a positive connection with these innovations. Neal Stephenson's novel "Snow Crash" (1992) was among the first to be classified as a cyberpunk work. For Turkle (2011), today's computer education emphasizes simulation, navigation, and interaction, in stark contrast to the past focus on calculation and rules. As

society has progressively transformed to resemble science fiction, it mirrors the realities of a technologically advanced civilization (Connor, 1997). Hayles (1999) offers an interpretive history of the evolution of cybernetics and its consequent social and political implications.

Material and Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions and experiences of individuals in post-cyberpunk cultures regarding the complex interplay between hyperreality and the physical world. By conducting in-depth interviews and analyzing cultural content, the study aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics of hyperreality in post-cyberpunk societies and its broader implications in an increasingly digital and technologically-driven world.

Informed by Jean Baudrillard's (1981) influential analysis of hyperreality, the study focuses on the blurring of boundaries between categories such as physical/virtual, visible/abstract, and reality/fiction. Baudrillard argues that hyperreality is a state in which the line between reality and simulation becomes increasingly indistinct, and abstract representations saturate our perception, disintegrating the demarcation between what is real and what is artificial. This hyperreality is shaped by an abundance of images and abstractions drawn from media, advertisements, and popular culture, which are deeply embedded within the cultural fabric of post-cyberpunk societies.

Baudrillard's analysis posits a multi-layered disconnection between the physical reality of the world and its abstract representation. In "The Mirror of Production" (1973), he suggests that traditional alternatives, like Marxism, gradually lose their efficacy in challenging the dominance of capitalism. This is because hyperreality exerts a firm grip on our contemporary cultural landscape, raising fundamental questions about whether what is portrayed is indeed real or merely a form of abstraction.

By investigating the lived experiences of individuals in post-cyberpunk cultures, this research aims to shed light on the complex and nuanced ways in which people navigate and interact with hyperreality. The study's findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary cultural phenomena and the broader implications of hyperreality in an increasingly digital and technologically-driven world.

Text Analysis

Technology has rapidly transformed our world into a global village, connecting people from diverse cultures, communities, and nations. The power of technology has made geographical boundaries irrelevant, allowing individuals from different backgrounds, religions, genders, and races to communicate and interact with each other daily. This unique interaction prompts people to reevaluate the complex web of relationships between them, their environment, and the technology that binds them together. Their capacity to communicate on an unprecedented scale is driven by the ever-expanding realm of the internet and the ubiquity of smartphones. As technology continues to evolve, it compels us to explore new ways to preserve our humanity and enhance our quality of life.

This study contributes to the existing scholarship on post-cyberpunk literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the representation of a cultural crisis in post-cyberpunk literature through the lens of Baudrillard's hyperreality and Postman's technopoly. It also highlights how post-cyberpunk literature challenges techno-utopianism and offers alternative visions of the future.

In Nikesh Shukla's "Meatspace" (2014), this study encounters a narrative that exemplifies the principles discussed above. The protagonist, Kitab, is portrayed as wholly immersed in the virtual realm, diligently curating his online persona on social media platforms. Simultaneously, he appears to neglect his emotional life in meatspace, the physical, material world. His dependence on social media, his smartphone, and a wearable computer teeters on the edge of addiction. At one point in the novel, he remarks: "All this eats up to 10% of my battery, which is a currency in modern living. Without battery, you can't tell anyone where you are or what you're eating" (p. 28). What may appear as addiction can also be interpreted as a manifestation of the previously discussed concept of an expanded mind, where transparent technology plays a pivotal role. Kitab serves as an exemplar of a cyborg, facilitated by this transparent technology, which integrates the virtual world seamlessly into his cognitive experience to the extent that it becomes an integral part of his extended mind. Kitab exhibits an overwhelming desire for his virtual presence. He reflects:

My phone rings. I try not to answer it. Rach's number is that. I disregard it. She calls once more. I permitted my pocket to ring. She phones me again unaffected. This time, I can't resist picking up the phone when it rings. Need to connect. I respond. (Shukla, 2014, p. 29)

Kitab's tube ride vividly demonstrates the blurring boundaries within the elements of the cyborg's expanded mind:

Knowing there is no signal in these tunnels, I check my phone. Knowing there is no reception, I tic-like scroll the screen down to refresh. I need to be connected. I must be informed of the situation. I'm curious how our brains operate during these brief periods of signal loss. How do people who commute deal with having intermittent 3G service and having to read, listen to music, or talk? I'm shaky and anxious to check Twitter. (Shukla, 2014, p. 119)

Kitab's virtual presence is as important to him as his physical presence, which is why he feels anxious when he loses internet connectivity. The wearable computer and the virtual world have become integral parts of his extended cognitive system, and a temporary mobile network outage triggers discomfort similar to damage to a part of his nervous system. Kitab takes virtual reality and pervasive computing for granted, assuming that they will always be accessible. In line with Thrift's notion that the only way to be is through ubiquitous computing, Kitab embraces this reality.

When Kitab reflects on his past relationship, he notes: "Rach once commented, after reading through my Twitter feed, that she couldn't believe I'd had all these thoughts and beliefs and never thought to share them with her" (Shukla, 2014, p. 36). It is evident that Kitab, having already incorporated the virtual element into his cognitive landscape, does not feel the need to express his thoughts to his real-world partner. He does not perceive a dichotomy between living a life in the physical and virtual realms; in fact, they together constitute his reality. When Rach accuses him of living in an unreal world, he counters her by stating, "It's real" (Shukla, 2014, p. 36). This exchange highlights the ontological dilemma that individuals face in a rapidly evolving world of ubiquitous computing. In the pursuit of harnessing the benefits of ubiquitous computing, the human mind assimilates external prostheses in the form of mobile computers, and there seems to be no going back. The boundaries between the real and virtual blur, and Kitab's reality is a fusion of the two worlds.

Nikesh Shukla's "Meatspace" (2014) embodies the very essence of the shifting nature of reality, a concept central to the postmodern cultural transformation as explored by Baudrillard (1994) in his essay "Simulacra and Simulation." Baudrillard notes that there is a departure from the reality that adheres to conventional truth, and an emergence

of the era of simulation, where referential boundaries are systematically liquidated. This hyperreal environment of cyberspace thoroughly permeates the lives of the novel's protagonists, where the virtual world feels more tangible than its actual physical reality. The internet has evolved into an indispensable tool, integrated into virtually every facet of their daily lives. The characters are perpetually immersed in this online world, preoccupied with checking notifications, composing witty tweets, sharing snapshots of their lives on Instagram, and cultivating blogs to cultivate their virtual personas. This excessive immersion in the virtual hyperreal world leads to a distancing from the reality of the physical world and real-life interpersonal relationships. The once clear demarcation between private and public has been profoundly transformed by the ubiquitous presence of the Internet.

Kitab's devotion to the internet is profound, and his online presence becomes his primary reality. The novel opens with the line: "The first and last thing I do every day is see what strangers are saying about me" (Shukla, 2014, p. 1), capturing the pervasive anxiety that dominates Kitab's existence. His laptop is his constant companion, always within arm's reach, underscoring his unbroken connection to the virtual world. His daily schedule is meticulously organized by Google Calendar alerts, which include activities like checking emails, Facebook, Amazon, Twitter, and other social media notifications. It is clear that Kitab's reality revolves around these online interactions, and he finds it challenging to shift his focus away from the virtual realm, even in the presence of real-world relationships.

The idea of public and private has undergone a substantial shift due to the prevalence of social networking sites. People have redefined their concepts of public spaces, encompassing a sphere defined by friendship and common interests created by online networks. Kitab's interactions with real people in his physical proximity reflect his detachment from them in favor of his online activities. He refers to Kitab 2 and Rach as "actual humans," implying a certain level of disconnect. He consistently prioritizes his virtual reality over his physical reality, a sentiment echoed by Rach when she accuses him of leading an unreal life. Kitab1, however, insists that his online existence is indeed real, highlighting the ontological quandary that individuals encounter in an increasingly digital world.

Kitab1 frequently loses himself in cyberspace, drifting away from interpersonal relationships in the process. His inability to divert his attention from the online realm to engage in meaningful in-person interactions pushes these real-world relationships to the periphery of his life. Even when he is physically present with others, he remains emotionally detached and engrossed in his online connections. This growing obsession with the virtual world comes at the expense of his real-world relationships, ultimately contributing to the erosion of those connections (Shukla, 2014).

In Kitab1's view, this tattoo serves as a metaphor for the realities of the virtual world. He sees it as a symbol of his commitment to the parallel world, a world filled with virtual connections, tweets, posts, and electronic books. His tattoo, permanently etched on his skin, becomes a physical manifestation of his identity as a writer, aligning with the virtual world's abstract realities. He questions: "What's more meatspace than having anything tattooed on the meat of you?" (Shukla, 2014) This reflection highlights his belief in the significance of his tattoo, equating it to the concrete nature of the internet itself. He emphasizes its permanence and authenticity, drawing a parallel between his tattoo and the enduring digital footprint created by online interactions.

Kitab1's thoughts and actions are shaped by his online presence, and this transformation of his reality is evident in his words. His reality is built upon images from postmodernist society and the online world. He subverts his reality, making the virtual world's abstract reality and postmodern pop culture imagery tangible, while pushing the

physical reality of the actual world to the periphery. His words almost sound like proverbs of the digital age, reflecting the evolving dynamics of contemporary society (Shukla, 2014). He actively employs the internet to gain more readers and followers, a strategy endorsed by his friend Aziz. Their exchange highlights the increasing importance of virtual interactions and the role they play in shaping contemporary culture. The blurring of lines between the virtual and the real has had a profound impact on people's lives, particularly the younger generation. Kitab1 is so engrossed in the online world that it seems to have supplanted his real-life relationships and connections. His family and friends in the real world become increasingly irrelevant as he prioritizes his online interactions. Even his girlfriend Rach criticizes his excessive internet use, highlighting his absence in their shared physical space. His disregard for her concerns underscores his preference for online connections over real-world relationships. This shift in priorities is emblematic of a broader societal transformation where real-life bonds are weakened in favor of virtual interactions.

The impact of online communication on language development and identity is another aspect of Kitab1's life. He recognizes the evolving nature of language in the digital age, with new words and phrases constantly emerging to describe digital interactions. The digital world has become an integral part of people's lives, shaping their self-perceptions and identities. These shifts in language and identity are further evidence of the profound impact of online interactions on the way individuals perceive themselves and their offline lives. Kitab1's interactions with his family and friends are also a testament to the displacement of real-world relationships by online connections. His brother Aziz serves as his only real-world connection, and Kitab1's yearning for Aziz's presence illustrates the depth of their bond. Aziz's departure elicits a strong emotional response from Kitab1, further emphasizing the significance of virtual relationships. Kitab1's lack of engagement with his father, Rasesh, highlights the deficiency in their communication. The internet becomes the go-to solution for addressing problems, exacerbating their disconnection. This transformation in their relationship reflects the overarching theme of virtual interactions overshadowing real-life connections (Shukla, 2014).

In the novel, human relationships take a back seat to the allure of the digital world. The characters in the story frequently come from broken families, lead solitary lives, and heavily engage in online social interactions, yet they lack close and meaningful connections in the real world. Their interaction with postmodern technology and cyberspace becomes a means to combat their loneliness and construct their unique realities. Another character in the novel, Cara, exemplifies this trend. She chooses to live independently from her family and dedicates her efforts to furthering her company's online goals. In her pursuit of success in the online realm, she even hosts virtual dinners through Skype to share the joys of life. These Skype Dinners are designed to mimic the experience of a traditional dinner party, but they unfold in the digital realm, emphasizing the blurring of lines between the real and virtual worlds. The characters in the novel find their real-world existence and their virtual lives in cyberspace tightly interwoven. The narrative paints a vivid picture of a growing hyperreality where the boundaries that once separated these two realms have dissolved. In this hyperreal culture, the characters often prioritize their constructed subjective realities over the tangible aspects of their daily lives and the physical world. The online world becomes a canvas upon which they paint their versions of reality.

Conclusion

Technology and technology-related artifacts play a pivotal role in constructing the synthetic images that pervade post-cyberpunk civilizations. These images assert how the symbolic realm exists as simulacra. Ideology has been supplanted by simulacra in post-cyberpunk societies. This paradigm is most apparent in the case of the Gulf War, where individuals have become so accustomed to experiencing reality through media

representations that they define reality based on how it is portrayed in various media and online platforms. The very essence of what individuals perceive as reality is composed of these dynamic abstract representations. Under the pervasive influence of pop culture and hyperreal media, they continue to absorb reality through the lens of these virtual modes, as their minds remain consistently immersed in these abstractions and representations. Their perception of reality is no longer anchored in the physical realm but rather shaped by the version of reality presented in media, cyberspace, advertising, and popular culture. This constructed version of reality is the authentic one for those living in this situation, as depicted in post-cyberpunk literature. This study reveals the blurring of boundaries between real and simulated worlds, the increasing dominance of technology in society, and the erosion of human values and culture. This literature challenges the dominant narratives of techno-utopianism and offers alternative visions of the future.

The character analysis in this study underscores the profound impact of digital connections, as individuals across the globe can easily adopt and be influenced by the cultures of different communities. For example, a person living in England may be deeply influenced by the lifestyle and values of someone residing in France. This analysis also highlights the subversion of traditional gender roles and the transformation of cultural moral values through the influence of technology. It emphasizes the intricate and interlinked relationship between society and technology.

This study reinforces the idea that technology has not only reshaped human society but has also transcended national and cultural boundaries, bringing about a global shift in the way we live and interact. It underscores the ongoing dilemma faced by society, torn between the necessity of embracing technology for progress and the fear of losing its cultural and ethnic identity and values in the process. As we move forward in this ever-changing technological landscape, it is imperative to find a harmonious balance that allows us to harness the benefits of technological advancement while preserving the core of our cultural and moral heritage.

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