Shedding the Mortal Coil: Physicality and Posthuman Identity in Cyberpunk

The Posthuman Subject

Technology, in the modern era, has become an integrated aspect of the human epistemological experience. Technological inventions are no longer mere tools to satisfy vital urges. Technology has indeed taken on the role of mediator between man and reality. It acts as a filter through which certain aspects of reality, otherwise precluded to man, can be seen and understood (Pessina 2000, 49).

Over the centuries, technology has become so pervasive that it has become an integrating part of the human experience not only from a cognitive point of view, but also physically. It has breached the sacred barrier of the human dimension, operating transformations on the body that have shifted humans beyond a purely biological state. Similarly, it can have a comparable effect on the mind, providing access to alternative narrative constructions of the self in virtual environments. In our time, physical transformations are either medical-therapeutic or aesthetic, including for example prosthetic limbs, pacemakers, corneal lenses, (Hayles 1999, 115).

An example of current virtual environments might be represented by MMORPG universes, that is, internet spaces where players assume a fictional identity and interact with other players in a massive virtual world. This rapidly evolving and expanding relationship between man and machine complicates the dichotomic separation of body and mind theorized by Descartes. A third term is inserted into the equation, destabilizing the traditional paradigm and asking for a re-assessment of the "historically specific construction called the human" (Hayles 1999, 2). The invasion of non-biological implants in the body and the development of virtual environments call for the creation of new frameworks of discourse apt at describing this new state of being (249), as humans move beyond a purely biological condition into a postbiologic, posthuman state:

Becoming a posthuman means more than having prosthetic devices grafted onto one's body. It means envisioning humans as information-processing machines with fundamental similarities to other kinds of information processing machines, especially intelligent computers. (246)

It is important to note that there are multiple roads to posthumanism, therefore the results of self-transformation are not homogenous. Posthumanism includes a range of technical and cultural practices, such as "nanotechnology, microbiology, virtual reality, artificial life, neurophysiology, artificial intelligence, and cognitive science" (247). Any of the above, when applied to a human subject, would produce an irreversible transformation of the self that would in turn require a rethinking of the concepts of subjectivity and human identity (McCarron 1995, 263). DeGrazia appears to be sceptical as to whether psychological or physical enhancements may change an

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1 Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.
individual to the point of creating an entirely different entity (DeGrazia 2005, 241), and tends to consider such enhancements as a perfectly legitimate expression of agency and self-creation. However, a hybrid human – a cyborg – does not share the same range of experiences as an 'untouched,' purely biological human (Caronia 2008, 129); what is unclear is to what extent the self can be manipulated before it becomes ontologically different from the starting entity.

Pessina claims that the self (which may be equalled to the mind for the purpose of maintaining the dichotomy) and the body can be distinguished, but not separated.

Nessuno può incontrare un altro senza incontrare anche il corpo altrui. Senza riferimento al corpo altrui non c'è possibilità di alcuna relazione con l'altro: l'altro è per me, innanzi tutto, il suo corpo, anche quando è soltanto un corpo. (Pessina 2000, 90)

Physicality is a core characteristic of human subjects. Through the body, humans interact with their environment and other living beings (86) and exteriorize their mutating nature in space and time. However, it is not specified whether Pessina's definition of body is limited to the traditional, organic human body, or can be extended to include other non-conventional, posthuman forms such as artificial or genetically modified bodies, as well as "positional markers" (Hayles 1999, 37) within virtual environments.

In her study of posthumanism, Hayles introduces an alternative dichotomy, that of materiality and information (12). It is parallel in nature to the traditional Cartesian body/mind distinction; however, it is codified in a way that is more applicable to the age of information and informatics. Its terms are not excessively reminiscent of the traditional biologic nature of the human and expand to include other, not strictly biological entities. The materiality/information dichotomy, as conceived within a post-modern – posthumanist context, entails a hierarchical relationship between the two terms. Materiality is not perceived as necessary to sustain information. Therefore, the latter plays a more important role. When it is abstract, not spatially constrained, information is "free to travel across time and space" (13). It becomes independent and separate from the material forms it is traditionally "thought to be embedded in" (2). The posthumanist view, indeed, gives more importance to information patterns rather than their physical container, so that material form "is seen as an accident of history" and not as an "inevitability of life" (2). The questioning of the mind/body and of the information/materiality paradigm has led to the blurring of distinction lines in other traditionally opposed binary couples. The human/machine distinction is forfeited, as technology is increasingly embedded in the biological body, similarly erasing the opposition between the categories of animate and inanimate (84-85). These hybrid bodies of flesh and machine, called cyborgs, already exist, to a minor extent than it is presented in science fiction, in our daily life.

The concept of the cyborg "problematize[s] body boundaries" (113). It is positioned at the intersection of technology and discourse (114), as it exists both as a product of applied technology and of authorial creation. Even now, the cyborg is a hybrid, existing simultaneously as "entity and metaphor" (114). The double-nature of the cyborg, expressed on multiple layers, may lie at the root of the increasing interest this figure has gained in recent times (115).

People living with non-biological implants that allow them to be fully functional as humans may be referred to as technical cyborgs. Metaphorical cyborgs include, on the other hand, surgeons using electronic equipment to carry out operations, or teen-
agers playing videogames. Science fiction discourse on cyborgs, limited only by the author's imagination, can expand on the technical, real-life dimension of human-machine hybridity, namely, through narrative descriptions of more-or-less plausible worlds populated by all kinds of technologically-enhanced humans. Such mental experiments allow authors to raise questions and explore the consequences of self-transforming practices (Pessina 2000, 44-45) on the subjectivity of a human torn between the biological and the technological. The cyborg indeed embraces and yet suffers from this hybrid condition at the same time (Caronia 2008, 117).

Discussions of posthumanism as concerned with the man-machine relationship include considerations of the topic of cyberspace. The locus of cyberspace, introduced by cyberpunk author William Gibson, is an entirely virtual landscape where the consciousness exists and interacts in a computer-mediated reality, leaving the body behind in the physical world (Hayles 1999, 36). In cyberspace, the mind becomes a disembodied pattern of information, free from the binding constraints of the biological body, which underlines the power of information over materiality. The biological body does not only limit the consciousness it incarnates, but it is also frail and corruptible; technology and cyberspace allow humans to bypass the frailty of the physical state and attain a condition that may be compared to immortality (36-39).

While scholars and researchers in both the sciences and the humanities agree that materiality is important in various ways, they have played a major role in the foundation of "the postmodern ideology that the body's materiality is secondary to the logical or semiotic structures it encodes" (192). This paper aims at investigating how materiality is subsumed, and the body dissolved, in science fiction narrations belonging to the subgenre of cyberpunk. This subgenre has often given voice to posthumanist matters, being traditionally concerned with the co-existence of the biological and the technological within the human subject, and the consequent problematization of the biological body and the renegotiation of the (post)human identity.

Cyberpunk as Implosive Science Fiction

The term cyberpunk first appeared in a story published in 1983 by Bruce Bethke in the science-fiction magazine Amazing Stories, entitled precisely "Cyberpunk." Later that same year, the term was used in an article published in the Washington Post (Dyens 2000, 4) to define the works of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Pat Cadigan, Greg Bear and Lewis Shiner (McCarron 1995, 264). According to Csicsery-Ronay, "as a label 'cyberpunk' is perfection. It suggests the apotheosis of postmodernism" (Csicsery-Ronay 1988, 266).

The word cyberpunk merges the suffix cyber-, derived from cybernetics and signifying a relation to "computers, information technology, and virtual reality, or denoting futuristic concepts" with punk (OED 2011). The second compounding element is borrowed from the punk rock subculture, which refers to a rebellious, anarchist streak against the capitalistic, corporate governments dominating futuristic, chaotic societies. In cyberpunk, it depicts a street counterculture which puts the technology of the dominant classes to its own advantage, intending to turn it against the system itself (Dyens 2000, 4-5). The literary movement, developed throughout the 80's, finds its manifesto in Bruce Sterling's preface to the 1986 anthology...
Mirrorshades (Csicsery-Ronay 1988, 266), where cyberpunk's main theme is defined by Sterling himself as

the overlapping of worlds that were formerly totally separate: the realm of high tech and the modern pop underground. […] an unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent. […] The cyberpunks are perhaps the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction but in a truly science-fiction world. (Sterling 1988, ix)

Indeed, cyberpunk authors wrote in a decade that saw an exponential increase in the development and popularization of technology. Strong research was already underway in fields that seemed to have been taken from the reservoir of science fiction topoi. Advancements in bionic prosthetics, artificial intelligence, virtual environments and world-wide information sharing have marked a substantial shift away from themes related to the exploration of space, which Csicsery-Ronay defines as the "expansive" phase (Csicsery-Ronay 1988, 271). In expansive science fiction, humans looked outward to the vastness of space and to extra-terrestrial consciousness; the knowledge they longed for could only be found outside Earth.

This trend reversed from the 60s onwards, as the exploratory frenzy waned and the focus of attention turned from the outer to the inner, from macrocosm to microcosm. This subsequent phase of science fiction, described with the term "implosive," is "fueled by the desire of dissolution" (272). Implosion implies the breaking down of conventional categories as well as the weakening and eventual loss of the boundaries within which human subjects have traditionally been constructed. Implosive science fiction does not need to leave Earth's atmosphere to confront the Other. The Other is within the human subject itself, in its impossibility to be classified according to existing parameters and to be contained inside traditional boundaries. The gap between binary distinctions is bridged as the two formerly opposed terms merge with the force of implosion; it is now possible to be one and the other. This loss of boundaries leaves the organic human open to invasion and transformation by "alien entities" created by his or her own intelligence (272). Sterling, in the preface to Mirrorshades, distinguishes two kinds of transformation:

[…] body invasion: prosthetic limb, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration [and] the even more powerful theme of brain invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry – techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self. (Sterling 1988, xi)

As it can be inferred from this definition, cyberpunk is concerned with the different ways in which technology can be embedded and fused with the organic elements within the posthuman subject. The topoi presented by Sterling are translated within narrative discourse into the figure of the cyborg and the locus of cyberspace, which was introduced in the previous section. Sterling, however, appears to put more emphasis on the idea of brain-invasion in its different narrative incarnations.

Indeed, the relation between human and machine, organic and artificial, is not configured as one-way, the biological body being "mechanized" by embedding implants in the flesh or laboratory-created DNA strings in organic cells. It is not only the machine invading the human body (Caronia 2008, 95). Technology has also contributed to making the opposite possible, to bring into the open aspects of the human experience that had, up to that point, been almost exclusively private, relegated to a sphere within the psyche.
Bound by the physical limitations of the body, memories, dreams, and fantasies could only be expressed either semantically through language or semiotically through various forms of art. A brain-computer interface – or a brain-to-brain interface – allows such fragments of one's mind to be shared and exchanged directly, as in William Gibson's cyberpunk masterpiece *Neuromancer* and Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers*. The latter will be examined in more detail later. Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), followed by the companion pieces *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), is widely considered to be the first cyberpunk novel as well as the starting point of the literary movement (Hayles 1999, 36).

*Neuromancer* introduces and popularizes the locus of the cyberspace, or matrix, a massive network of information (Featherstone and Burrows 1995, 6) that individuals "jack into" directly from their brains, escaping their organic form and moving in cyberspace as digitalized, "decarnalized" (Cavallaro 2004, 287) consciousness.

Instead of an embodied consciousness looking through the window at a scene, consciousness moves through the screen to become the pov, leaving behind the body as an unoccupied shell. (Hayles 1999, 38)

The pov – acronym of *point of view* – appears in the novel as a noun and indicates a sort of avatar, marking the position of the consciousness within the matrix and acting as a substitute for the organic body. Novels like *Neuromancer* highlight the higher importance of patterns of information within the materiality/information paradigm, as the consciousness can exist as digitalized information within a non-biological, non-human reality. The vulnerability of the organic body in relation to the mechanical form and, more strongly, to the concept of consciousness as abstract data, frequently appeared as a theme in cyberpunk writings after Gibson (Csicsery-Ronay 1988, 273). In certain novels, the organic body is dismissed as a useless "piece of meat [...] whose only possible future is putrefaction" (Dyens 2000, 5-6). Made from corruptible biological matter, it is condemned to succumb to the eroding action of time, similarly condemning the consciousness within to die with it. Unhinged from the corruptibility of flesh, however, the posthuman subject could potentially achieve immortality (Hayles 1999, 36).

We will now see how the devaluation of the physical body is played out in three novels written by as many core cyberpunk authors: *Blood Music* (1983), by Greg Bear, *Mindplayers* (1987), by Pat Cadigan, and Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985). The analysis will focus primarily on the different ways in which the biological and the artificial combine and merge within the human subject. Closer attention will be paid to strategies of deconstruction of the organic body and to how the posthuman identity is renegotiated and reshaped within a mutated universe.

**Blood Music: A Posthumanist Utopia**

*Blood Music* is an extreme example of implosive narration, shrinking the focus not only inside the human body, but within its very smallest components: cells. Virgil Ulam, a top researcher at Genetron biochip laboratory, has been illicitly experimenting with organic cells against the company's policy. When his secret project is exposed, resulting in an order to terminate the experiment and his dismissal from Genetron, Virgil injects himself with the altered lymphocytes he has created so as to smuggle them out of the lab and continue his research elsewhere. The microorganisms, engineered with "the ability to program and reprogram their DNA" (Luckhurst 2007, 224),
continue to evolve in Virgil's blood. They eventually develop into a self-aware, intelligent group collective, working and thinking in clusters of cells. As the organisms – the noocytes – mutate and evolve, they start affecting the biological matter they live in. Virgil is killed before the transformation is complete, but at that point, the noocytes have progressed far enough to understand that the universe is not enclosed within Virgil's body and they eject themselves from him. Spreading to other human hosts in a virus-like manner – they are referred to as "a disease that thinks" (Bear 2007, 92), "plague" (92), "contagion" (106) –, the noocytes can finally complete their path to a unique, pervasive collective, effectively eliminating their human hosts. The now useless bodies are melted and merged together into a "glistening pale brown sheet" (115) which covers the North American urban landscape as if "someone had come along and wrapped surplus army blankets all the way to the tenth or twentieth floors of all the buildings" (153).

The novel, set in Earth's not so distant future, presents a scientific context in which research in nanotechnology for medical purposes is already underway, but not yet commercially exploitable. At the beginning of the story, therefore, the relationship between the biological and the artificial is still one of dichotomic separation.

In a sense, Blood Music traces, step by step, the process of transcending and overcoming humanity, from a genetically-enhanced cyborg, living in symbiosis with a man-made intelligent entity, to the ultimate frontier of posthumanism, amounting to the dissolution of the body as well as to the deconstruction of the human subject as an individual. The ongoing transformation is initially viewed as a terrible calamity by those few untouched by the noocytes as well as people outside North America. They watch helplessly as entire populations appear to be wiped out and cities become "unfamiliar jumble[s] of geometric shapes, […] apparently dismantled and rearranged to suit the purposes of the plague" (164).

In later chapters, however, it becomes clear that the human hosts have not been killed but "just…dismantled" (188). They appear to have moved on to a superior plane of existence. This "passage beyond the flesh" (Bukatman 1993, 270), to borrow Bukatman's words, is to be perceived and embraced as an ulterior step on the evolutionary ladder. This view is made explicit in the novel by the transformed humans themselves, when three of them are temporarily restored to human parameters. They hope to persuade their remaining family member, Suzie, to go through with the "change" and join them in their new enhanced life. Suzie, an intellectually disabled young woman, was not transformed along with the others at first because her blood was toxic for the noocytes. It is through her eyes that the reader witnesses this deceptively dystopic universe and envisions a desolate future for the human race, condemned to total annihilation. However, it appears to be the opposite. Suzie's mother tells her daughter that: "They don't want to hurt, or kill. They need us. We're a small part of them, but they need us. […] They love us" (Bear 2007, 191). Furthermore she tries to make Suzie understand that disintegration of her body does not equal death of consciousness: "We're even more alive, with them. […] When you're with them, you won't need your body anymore" (191).

The body becomes an obsolete bundle of meat, an obstacle to the achievement of a superior state of existence within the noocyte collective, where the consciousness can survive as pure information, unscathed by the spatio-temporal laws constraining the corporeal shell: "You are in an enclosed SPACE. […] You are restrained. You cannot
*diffuse* through the limits of the enclosed SPACE. Is this restraint by your choice?" (159).

The noocytes have also acquired the ability to communicate telepathically with their hosts from within before the transformation is complete. They query about the human body and physiology, as in the quote above, trying to comprehend the workings of this "God in the machine" (168). There is almost a hint of incredulity in their question; to them, the organic spatial dimension in which the consciousness resides is comparable to a cage, blocking the continuous flow of information which lies at the very core of noocyte experience.

The longest sequences of what Hayles calls "man-cell dialogue" (Hayles 1999, 252) involve Michael Bernard, a high-consultant at Genetron who flees to Germany to warn Europe of what is perceived as a threat posed by the noocytes. Put in an isolation room, the microorganisms cannot spread to other hosts, so they halt his "conversion." Bernard, bored by loneliness and intrigued by the noocytes' intelligence, interacts with them telepathically, learning about the organization of the colony within his own body: "we have studied INDIVIDUAL in your conception. We do not fit the word" (Bear 2007, 160). Indeed, the concept of the individual does not exist in noocyte society. They operate as a collective cluster of cells carrying out specific tasks and sharing the collected information with other clusters via telepathic thinking.

"Mentality is thus divided between clusters performing a function. Important memory may be *diffused* through all clusters. What you think of as INDIVIDUAL may be spread throughout the *totality*" (160).

Integration with the noocytes would free Bernard from the isolation of the enclosed room. Hayles sees the notion of physical isolation "as a visible metonymy for his existential condition as a human" (Hayles 1999, 253), which is in turn applicable to the entire human race in their pre-conversion state. There is no isolation in the noocyte collective, no conflicts of interest. Memories and information are shared between clusters as pure data, unmediated by imperfect linguistic communication. What is perceived by the outsider as a catastrophe is instead revealed as a wonderful opportunity for the human race. A disturbing future is turned into a communitarian utopia where the posthuman subject can be incorporated within a collective of "zillions of brilliant people, all friendly, all cooperating" (Bear 2007, 193) and yet retain its own individuality. When encoded in the noocyte collective, Bernard "is individual and, at the same time, he is each of the fellows of his team" (185). The loss of the physical dimension entails the fragmentation of the individual consciousness as traditionally conceived. The self is fragmented and encoded into millions of microorganisms. "There are many BERNARD" (194), the cells tell him. "Xeroxed" copies, finely tuned into each other through a continuous flux of thought and information. It is the end of the human individual as a single entity. However, as Hayles points out, giving up a "unique identity" to integrate into the colony brings multiple gains, that is, the realization of many of man's most ancient dreams. Splitting one's identity into millions of duplicated cells ensures immortality. Even if one of those cells dies, others are there to carry the consciousness into eternity. When not carrying out orders, time can be spent in the "Thought Universe," where "experience is generated by thinking" (207). In this realm of pure thought, there is no limit to what can be done or created. There are no corporeal limitations on cognition either, the mind is not constrained by the environment's laws of physics necessary to sustain the consciousness in a human
body. "It is all possible here, in Thought Universe" (207). Old memories can be relived again, and there is no limit to the number of choices that can be revisited, or the alternative lives that can be explored. The concept of the "road not taken" does not exist in Thought Universe; every fantasy can be fulfilled. In Bear's universe, posthumanism is presented as a positive utopia, an evolutionary step in the history of the cogitating animal. The loss of physicality is nothing to be frightened of, but the achievement of the full potential of the human mind as pure, unrestrained thought, and the ultimate realization of man's deepest desires: the vanquishing of death and complete freedom of self-creation.

**Mindplayers: Fragmentation of Identity**

In Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers*, loss of physicality is not taken to the extreme level found in the universe of *Blood Music*. While Bear's humans liberate themselves entirely from the corporeal element, going through a radical transformation and shifting to a superior plane of existence, the characters in *Mindplayers* are still dependent on their biological body for survival. Sublimation of the body is therefore cognitive, not ontological. The novel expands on and renegotiates the theme of cyberspace, introduced three years earlier by William Gibson in his *Neuromancer* trilogy, exploring the science-fiction topos of man-machine symbiosis.

In *Mindplayers*, cyberspace takes a different connotation. It is no longer a computer-generated environment, recreating an accurate virtual reality governed by simulated laws of physics. Cadigan's cyberspace is neither artificial nor rational, unconstrained by the rules of informatics; it is created and shaped by the interaction of two minds coming into contact. While it represents physical reality fairly accurately, "transition between scenes follows the surreal logic found in dreams" (Heuser 2003, 128).

This space may not run on a computer as software, but it is computer-mediated: it can only be accessed by hooking into a machine, known simply as "the system." The participants share their mental projections, and they can interact with what their imagination – and the psyche, at a deeper level – conjure up, as figments of the mind appear as tangible as objects in the "real" world. These "symbols," as they are called, are a visual manifestation of the Freudian and Lacanian unconscious (129). The activity of "touching minds" is known in the narrative universe as *mindplaying*.

The story opens with Allie, a young woman, being arrested for illicit mindplaying. She is given a chance to avoid punishment if she accepts to undergo specific training to become a professional, licensed mindplayer. Of all available specializations, she chooses to become a pathosfinder, that is, a mindplayer who helps artists find their inspiration, getting their proverbial juices flowing. The diffusion of technology providing access to mind-to-mind communication has collapsed the need for the organic body as a mediator for information exchange. Even if people only hook in for brief periods at a time and still spend the majority of their lives in the physical world, these technological advancements have caused a substantial change in how the concepts of body, identity, and individual, are perceived and negotiated in Cadigan's posthuman society: "You're gonna be hooked up to the system more often than anyone in any other profession. Living eyes weren't made to be popped in and out that often" (Cadigan 2000, 104).
When Allie is hired as a pathosfinder by Nelson Nelson (103), she is told that she has to give up her eyes and have them replaced with artificial eyes, called biogems. This procedure is deemed necessary for mindplayers, as access to the system is obtained by connecting the machine to the optical nerves. For this to be possible, the eyes have to be removed from their sockets for the entire duration of the mindplaying session. As repeated removal and subsequent insertion of organic eyes can damage the optical nerve, substitution is recommended.

The traditional imagery of the eyes as the gateway to the soul, a mirror reflecting the workings of the mind is reworked in a literal sense in Mindplayers. The eyes become an actual portal to the human psyche, a gate that can be opened at will thanks to the intervention of technology. As we will see, the eye is a powerful symbol throughout the novel. Artificial eyes can be designed according to taste: as Nelson Nelson tells Allie, "your new eyes can be just like your old ones or you can have your choice of the weird stuff or any biogem you like – bloodstone, onyx, fire opal, cat's eye –" (106). The importance attributed to the aesthetic appearance of the eyes is ascribable to what Elizabeth Kraus refers to as the "exteriorization of the body" in Mindplayers' universe (Kraus 2000, 111). "You see it all, eventually; all the ways people play with their bodies. Dye-jobs, bleachjobs, certain kinds of transplants, alterations that border on mutilations" (Cadigan 2000, 257).

The body becomes a blank canvas to be painted and decorated – and then retouched or repainted – at will. Body modification can be pushed to the extreme: during the course of the novel, we encounter characters who have undergone extensive, radical transformations, such as the woman in the memory-wiper's shop, who "looked like a raccoon" (115), or the ex-pathosfinder whose skull was made of a transparent material, the naked brain visible beneath (258). The body is reduced to a meat husk, a mere container for the mind.

In Kraus' very cyberpunk-appropriate simile, the brain, as an integrated part of the body, is "merely the perishable 'hardware' of the mind, whereas the mind is thought of as the 'software'" (Kraus 2000, 111). Memories, living experiences, and creative thought: this is what is considered most important in Cadigan's society. Indeed, criminal practices traditionally associated with physical experience – theft, rape, drug use and peddling – appear to have a "mental" equivalent. Violence loses its corporeal dimension; even rape becomes a purely psychological event, entailing initiation of mindplaying activity against a person's consent.

An extremely serious kind of mindrape is represented by mindsuck, which consists in sucking "memories and talents" out of an artist's mind, and selling them to people who "craved the overlay of someone else's experience on their own" (Cadigan 2000, 71). A "sucked" mind is completely wiped out. The personality within can be regrown from scratch, but previous memories and experiences are completely lost. The importance of physical pleasure appears to have diminished in comparison to contemporary society: at a party, participants do not seem to be interested in finding potential sexual partners; instead, they swap memories. Memories and experiences have become reified commodities: entire personalities can be rented or bought and installed in the mind, overlaying the original individual's reservoir of memories and experiences with those of the acquired personality.

Getting franchised involved an overlay on the core person, the mental equivalent of a mask, if a bit more complicated. The physical surgery wasn't absolutely necessary but
most people seemed to prefer going the whole route. [...] They wanted everyone to know which designer personality they had. (94)

Instead of showing off designer clothes, shoes and accessories, Cadigan's posthumans boast about their designer personalities.

Reification of life experiences, with its related practices, raises important issues concerning the nature of identity and individuality in a society where personalities can be duplicated and sold, or exchanged, for other people to claim as their own. A particular identity can be contaminated with so many extraneous memories, or be duplicated for such a number of times as to become impossible to recognize as a single, whole individual.

This process is exemplified in the novel through the character of Jerry Wirerammer, Allie's former boyfriend. He is the one who puts her in trouble for illegal mindplaying at the beginning of the story. He originally has his personality duplicated for sale by a legal distributor of franchised personalities, but soon he starts circulating bootlegged copies of himself: "Some people aren't enough by themselves. They find ways to make themselves more. Some of them litter the world with themselves like confetti" (196).

Jerry duplicates himself to such an extent that he becomes virtually indistinguishable from all his duplicates and the copied personalities. Allie herself wonders "if there [is] a real Jerry anymore" (196), as "he can no longer be located in a specific human body" (Heuser 2003, 129). At the other end of the spectrum the integrity of individuality is challenged by traces of other personalities layering up in the mind as an inevitable consequence of mindplaying, memory exchange and use of franchised personalities. Technology offers multiple means of getting rid of such residues – memory wipes, reality affixing, dry-cleaning – but it becomes impossible to remove them when they merge too deeply within the consciousness, altering it forever.

After that first night you brought me here, I had this – aftertaste in my brain – [...] Of you. [...] Like you were the only person who'd ever gotten to know me so well. [...] I don't know how many people you've gone mind-to-mind with. And they all leave that mark on you, don't they? That aftertaste. How do you handle it? How does any mindplayer handle it? (Cadigan 2000, 42)

Allie uses synesthetic imagery to describe the feeling left in her by the contact with another mind. She borrows a word from the semantic field of eating, a physical activity, to describe something that is restricted to the mental dimension. This is a further sign of the intellectual dimension taking over, in language and practice, what has traditionally been associated with the physical body. As Allie goes on to become a professional mindplayer, this feeling of being invaded by other minds intensifies with every client she comes into contact with. She feels that every mind she has ever touched has left a permanent trace in her personality. All these pieces layering up within her own mind have altered her, "diluting her sense of self" (Heuser 2003, 129).

She fears that McFloy, another mindplayer trainee, has attached his personality indelibly to her mind during a symbolic exchange of eyes, which she calls the "eye trick," which took place in the pool, the virtual collective environment of the training center. McFloy's eye – a cat's eye biogem with a fleck of gold – becomes a recurring image in Allie's mind, a symbol in the Freudian sense, marking the profound effect he has had on her life. Her belief that McFloy to a certain extent is still living as a separate conscious-
ness within her mind makes her lose the ability to conceive herself as a whole, defined individual. During her reality-affixing routine, she gets "Pearl Necklaced" (Cadigan 2000, 197). The image of the Pearl Necklace stands for Allie's perception of her own subjectivity: an "infinitely long" series of self-contained moments in her life, juxtaposed, touching each other but not really connected. Her identity fragmented into disjointed episodes, she can no longer "see where the sum was greater than the parts" (198). The loss of the traditional concept of the individual as a whole is emblematized by the episode of the composers Core and Lam, who have been hooked into each other for so long that they can no longer function creatively on their own. They can only find peace when they bridge back together, forming a third mental entity.

Allie eventually resolves her dilemma during an intense section of reality-affixing. She comes to understand that identity is not static and self-contained; on the contrary, it is fluid and dynamic, being shaped and reshaped by living experiences and interpersonal relationships. While Allie eventually manages to find a certain stability, the balance is so fine that many may not overcome this feeling of identity fragmentation. Cadigan's posthuman society is certainly not as optimistic as the one depicted in *Blood Music*. Franchised personalities, illegal personality duplications, memory exchanges and wipes, as well as extreme body modifications make it hard to maintain the existence of a "coherent, whole self" (Kraus 2000, 111). The fluidity of the posthuman self in *Mindplayers* makes it difficult to identify and anchor the self to a fixed point of reference. With that missing, the fragments cannot be rejoined together to reconstruct a whole identity.

**Schismatrix: Death of the Human Race**

Sterling is the other father of the science fiction subgenre of cyberpunk, along with William Gibson. His introduction to *Mirrors/ades*, a volume of cyberpunk writings edited by himself, is widely considered as a manifesto of the genre. In his most representative work, the Shaper/Mechanist series, however, he avoids the paraspace of cyberreality, which is by now a *locus* of cyberpunk literature.

His postulated fictional future is contained entirely within the physical universe, a "posthuman solar system of asteroid mines, orbital colonies, alien traders, and an anachronistic (and unvisited) Earth, in which different versions of humanity's successors struggle for dominance" (Bukatman 1993, 273). In the series, the relationship between man and machine is depicted as more intimately physical: the opposed factions described in the novel can be considered, in Caronia's definition, as "strong" cyborgs (Caronia 2008, 31-32). They are mutated to an extent that they can no longer be considered entirely human, if human at all.

The two evolutions of humanity in the Schismatrix universe, the Shapers and the Mechanists, represent the genetic cyborg, and the mechanic cyborg respectively. The Shapers are genetically enhanced beings: they are smart, disease-resistant, and physically stronger as well as more flexible. On the other hand, the Mechanists, as the name itself says, are "mechanized" bodies, man-machine hybrids of organic flesh and prosthetic limbs or embedded implants. Still constrained by the biological limits of their body, neither "evolution" has found a way to elude death, but these enhancements allow both to delay it almost indefinitely. Indeed, the Shapers go through peri-
odical rejuvenation processes, and the Mechanists substitute faulty body parts with mechanical replacements.

In *Schismatrix*, the body becomes a reason for conflict, each faction trying to impose their philosophy and to control the galaxy as the unique, definitive evolution of humanity. The plot follows the wanderings of Abelard Lindsay, a first generation Shaper, across the solar system after he is exiled from his Mechanist-controlled home colony. The reason for his exile is to be found in the accidental murder of a Mechanist during a Preservationist demonstration gone wrong. The Preservationists, of which Lindsay was a militant, are a group of insurgents protesting against excessive use of technology in human mutations. Lindsay himself supports a vision of humanity in a pre-technological state: "[…] everything worth preserving in human life [is] our heritage, before the Mechs, before the Shapers. Humanity, mortality, a life not tampered with" (Sterling 1985, 45).

It is through the corporeal dimension that the posthuman fragmentation of identity is expressed in *Schismatrix*. If there ever was a contained, comprehensive definition of human being, the split of the human race into two different subvarieties has rendered this definition useless (Bukatman 1993, 278). During a drug-induced vision, a dream version of Lindsay's friend Constantine tells him: "[…] to hell with you and your cant about humanities. Mankind's a dead issue now, cousin. There are no more souls. Only states of mind" (Sterling 1985, 74).

In the *Schismatrix* universe, mankind is no longer recognizable as a single, definable species. Similarly, the concept of the soul as a common unifying core of humanity ceases to be valid as the human race takes different evolutionary turns. The divergence in body shapes and functions is indeed followed by the development of diverging sets of values and philosophies. Fragmentation in Sterling's universe does not happen within a single mind, but across the species. The shared human "soul" has been split into multiple "states of mind," which are in turn dependant on body configuration. The cyborg body becomes the defining element of the posthuman being. The corporeal dimension can be twisted and tweaked, stretched and enlarged. In over two centuries of travels across the solar system, Lindsay comes into contact with a plethora of bodies of different shapes and mutations.

Both Shaper and Mech enhancements can be pushed to the extreme. Early in his travels, Lindsay has a very disturbing encounter with the *yarite*, the chief executive officer of the Geisha Bank. As they talk, he realizes that "her expression was very wrong. […] Her face was more than calm. It was inert" (42). He then learns that the old Mechanist is a wired body controlled by the Shaper Kitsune as a front puppet used in client-bank interactions: "In some ways the thing had passed the limits of the clinically dead; sometimes they had to slam it into operation like push-starting a balky engine […]" (52).

The body is described as a machine, a remote-controlled robot made of flesh, emptied of its consciousness as old age has irremediably damaged the brain and the nervous system. Even though the body is female, it is referred to as an "it," a "thing." The gender has become irrelevant because the *yarite* is so damaged that she is barely alive; she is not human anymore, she is just a bag of meat "held together with wires and patchwork" (50).

There is a limit beyond which even technology cannot counteract the decay of the biological body; the *yarite* is beyond repair. In this episode the body is reduced to a
lifeless, revolting husk, acting as a vessel for an external consciousness. At the other end of the spectrum, however, the corporeal dimension is stretched and inflated to macroscopic proportions, creating an overwhelmingly sensual and sexual environment. Kitsune gets herself reshaped into an entire building made of flesh that she controls via a mind-link; when Gomez tells Lindsay that "the walls have ears" (249), he means it literally. On one level, shops and offices are "embedded in billows of dark, satiny skin," on another, "voluptuous organics [rise] at every side, euclidean curves scrapped for smooth maternal curves" (249). The skin exudes female pheromones, inducing a feeling of maternal intimacy, and sleeping quarters are provided with "erototechnology" for male "comfort and pleasure" (250).

While Kitsune's passage beyond humanity entails the exaggeration of her corporeal dimension, other posthumans choose to detach themselves entirely from their organic bodies. Some old Mechanists decide to wire themselves directly into computers, trading hybrid bodies for completely mechanized computer hardware, sacrificing the mobility of the body for the mobility of the mind. Ryumin, an old friend of Lindsay's, is one of these wireheads. "There's a whole world behind this screen" (179), he tells Lindsay, referring to the computer screen on which a reconstruction of his physical appearance is displayed for communication purposes: "The mind isn't what you think, Mr. Dze. When you grip it with wires, it tends to flow. Data seems to bubble up from some deep layer of the mind. This is not exactly living, but it has its advantages" (179). In a society where identity is determined by the configuration of one's body, wireheads prove that the organic body is not necessarily central to autonomous existence. Ryumin's description of life as pure information is down-to-Earth; his choice of mutation is one among many in Sterling's fragmented posthuman society, and it is not free of any risks – some eventually lose their consciousness and start behaving like computer programs, going through loop routines with no conscious intentions or will.

However, when viewed in relation to the episode of the puppet yarite, it seems to support the posthuman concept of the importance of information over materiality. While the yarite, without her consciousness, is a disgusting fleshy husk not even deserving a gendered pronoun, Ryumin can live on undisturbed without his body, continuing his travels by flowing his data-consciousness along wires, rather than his body through space.

But life moved in clades\(^2\). Lindsay knew that as a fact. A successful species always burst into a joyous wave of daughter species, of hopeful monsters that rendered their ancestors obsolete. Denying change meant denying life.

By this token he knew that humanity on Earth had become a relict. (179)

Eventually, even the war between Mechanists and Shapers petered out, as they are slowly replaced by a variety of other posthuman varieties, enhanced and mutated to an extent that they are hardly, if at all, recognizable as descendants of the original humans. *Homo sapiens sapiens* has become a sort of evolutionary progenitor for dozens of new species, born not out of natural selection, but of technological advancements. Posthumanism, in Sterling's universe, entails the inevitable loss of human identity from both the physical and the intellectual point of view, as it is repeatedly split and mutated to the point where the original is no longer recognizable. However, Lindsay's

\(^2\) clade, n2: “A group of organisms that have evolved from a common ancestor” (OED 2011).
statement about the direct relation of change and life suggests that the "death" of the human race as we know it in contemporary society is not to be considered negatively. Lindsay himself eventually accepts change in order to preserve his own life: when a disembodied being called the Presence offers him the chance to join it in its timeless exploration of the universe, he does not hesitate to leave his old, battered cyborg body behind.

Conclusion
The authors taken into consideration in this paper imagine very different futures for the human race. However, common themes run through the novels, placing them within the science fiction subgenre of cyberpunk. They can be classified as implosive science fiction, as their focus is centered primarily on the evolution of human experience in the Information Age. The obsessive fascination with the human microcosm is best exemplified in Blood Music and Mindplayers. In the first, the focus is shrunk to the cellular level; in the second, attention to the inward dimension of man penetrates the intimacy of the human psyche. The fascination with space exploration of expansive science fiction has abated; the Other, the alien, can be found on Earth, within our own human dimension.

Man-created technology is literally starting to crawl under the human skin, breaking down the traditional boundaries between animate and inanimate, life and non-life, human and machine (Hayles 1999, 85). The human subject can no longer be conceived within traditional parameters. It has become a hybrid creature, a cyborg, in which biology and technology meet and merge indissolubly. In Sterling's own words, cyberpunk authors are "fascinated by interzones" (Sterling 1985, xi). They are concerned with how the transition into a posthuman state "radically [redefines] the nature of humanity, the nature of the self" (xi). The Cartesian mind/body split is similarly deconstructed, as the relation between the two dimensions of the human subject becomes fluid and dynamic, depending on the degree and type of interaction between man and machine. The split is problematized and then finally overcome, in various degrees, in all the novels examined here. The mind is liberated from the physical boundaries of the organic flesh, which is reduced to a mere husk, a "prosthesis" (Hayles 1999, 3). The body can be enhanced and manipulated at will, or changed entirely; consciousness as digital information is more important than its material container. As a result, the organic body loses its importance. The disintegration, either literal or metaphorical, of the human body is a common theme in all the three novels. However, it is played out differently. While in Bear's posthuman utopia the organic body is viewed as a useless bag of meat, a burden hindering the immense potential of the mind, in Mindplayers it acquires social meaning. It is the exteriorized expression of one's personality, a sort of posthuman version of clothes and accessories.

In Sterling's universe, however, the body plays a much more important role in the development of the posthuman society. The corporeal dimension is stretched, mutated, exaggerated. It acts as the underlying motive of a latent war for centuries before the human race is ready to move on to another, more advanced stage. Extensive mutations in the corporeal dimension of the human subject, as well as its progressive devaluation, necessitate a renegotiation and redefinition of the concept of human identity: the degree and variation of man-technology hybridism in Schismatrix; the transposition of the intellectual subject in Blood Music; direct contact of minds in Mindplayers.
These practices see to entail a fragmentation, literal or otherwise, of human subjectivity and identity. Having exceeded every conventional boundary, the posthuman subject can no longer be defined within the body/mind paradigm, it is "an incomprehensible multiplicity" (Dyens 2000, 6), impossible to rejoin and conceive as a whole. Fragmentation of the self, along with the introduction of posthuman, superior planes of existence and artificial environments, may raise issues on the concept of "reality."

Incarnated in their organic bodies, humans live within a well-defined, classifiable physical reality. As the body is left behind, however, setting the mind free to wander unconstrained, the concept of reality itself needs to be renegotiated. In *Mindplayers*, professionals like Allie need to go through the process of reality affixing regularly, and have their perceptions tested by the system. The process is necessary to "keep up one version of 'reality' as a standard one can refer to" in a society where people hook in and out of an alternate environment (Kraus 2000, 109). In Bear's *Blood Music*, when the character Bernard is transformed and finds himself in the Thought Universe, he appears somewhat skeptical. Virgil Ulam tells him about the unlimited range of experiences and alternative lives he could conjure up in the Thought Universe, but Bernard doubts such visions may be considered as valid life experiences. He claims that he's not "interested in dreams" (Bear 2007, 207). Indeed, he perceives life as experienced within the Thought Universe to be a figment of the imagination, with no value in the "real" world; that same reality he gladly abandoned but to which he had been used for the entirety of his life as a "simple" human. While they may have embraced the noocyte collective and their way of life as a step up the evolutionary ladder, Bear's posthumans still retain memories of their old organic life, and they might still be somewhat constrained by the limits of their old carnal selves.

Hybrid, fragmented entities live in equally hybrid, fragmented realities. It would not be impossible to imagine a posthuman future in which fragmentation of reality would make it impossible to tell what is real, and what is not.

Works Cited


