



Mapping Posthuman Rhizomes and Assemblages in the Spatial Distribution of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*

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Abstract— This article explores the concept of Rhizome and maps the various heterogeneous assemblages it can initiate when used as a perspective in Posthuman discussions. Neal Stephen's cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* uses intensive qualities like movements, affects, scans and lines as a virtual potential to define the real world. By tracing these qualities in the language of the novel and exploring its affect in the reader a posthuman way of binding the human-non-human and in human is possible.

Keywords— Rhizome. BwO. Posthuman. Cyberpunk



In *A Thousand Plateau* Gilles Deleuze, the French Philosopher names a process of movements as 'Rhizomes' (239) to explain the formation of BwO an imagined and disorganised body schema that does not form any subjects. Deleuze and Guatteri use the term rhizome to contrast it with the structure of a tree and root. Tree signifies organic interiority or dichotomy but rhizome is a system which refers to multiplicity, connection, heterogeneity and asignifying rupture. "Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees" (Deleuze 9). As a biological term rhizome refers to plants with radicles or roots as in ginger. The very basic characteristics of rhizomatic structure is its ability to connect to anything and form multiplicities and reterritorialise after every rupture unlike the tree that has an order (Deleuze 3-12). Deleuze uses it as a transversal thought pattern that interrogates analogy and dichotomies. Rhizomes bring together a broken ecology of processes where different points join to form what he terms 'assemblages'. This assemblage works as an abstract machine and the concept can be applied to all "structures from the behaviour patterns of an individual, the organisation of institutions, an arrangement of spaces, to the functioning of ecologies" (Livesey 18).

The Rhizome conceives how everything and everybody—all aspects of concrete, abstract and virtual entities and activities—can be seen as multiple

in their interrelational movements with other things and bodies. The nature of rhizome is that of a moving matrix, composed of organic and non-organic parts forming symbiotic and aparallel connections, according to transitory and as yet undetermined routes. (qtd in Parr 233)

This has become a groundbreaking explanation for a new kind of ontology today called fractal ontology where several such networks of things or affects are bonded together intensely and they function like an assemblage machine that creates new body, thoughts, and epistemology. The motivating force for assemblage is the desire that remains as a force within everybody. These relations exist as a map and hence they are about flows and movements. This process has a significant role in determining the technology of posthumanism. Rhizome can serve as a tool to describe various heterogeneous assemblages, inter-species relations, and multiple becomings within the posthuman dialogues and Cyberpunk genre clearly defines rhizomatic connections in its narrative.

Cyberpunks of the 1970's present Posthuman spaces which Frederic Jameson has described in the form of 'narratives which are about the processes of reproduction' that ultimately evolves into a 'vaster and properly unrepresentable totality' that enables human subject to collective subjects in a global system (qtd. in Mcaffery 225-28). They belong to the hard core SF that present a cartography of informationalism that opens

spaces for Posthuman subjectivity through a schizoid possibility of territorialising, deterritorialising and assemblages.

Many SF stories, whatever else they are about, are also about the uncanny processes of denaturalization through which we come to experience ourselves as subjects-in-technoculture ... There has always been SF about how technoculture has become our second nature, often in tension with what many of us still like to think of as our first nature, that very alluring version of the human that we have been constructing (and deconstructing) in the West for the past few hundred years. (Hollinger 270)

Their narratives are based on explorations of spaces that gradually evolve from fixed geographic landscapes to a relational and lived space of technologized mapping and networking where cities, people, highways, malls, cars, billboards and commodities are connected to each other to form landscapes termed as "space capsules" or "suburbs" that decentre a central mega city of what Marshall McLuhan and Scott Buckatman describe as "edge cities" (Bukatman 120). Underneath this well-drawn infrastructure there is a very complex social environment of a 'dystopia' that seems to capture everything through a process of coding and survey in a mafia underworld. This spatiality exists as a phenomenological space in SF novum when the writer presents the cyberspace in perceptible terms so as to create a new consciousness of a real space traversed by the logic of networking and mathematical realism.

A space of speed and movements exists as a plane of immanence in this topology that decentres the novum's spatiality into a pure mathematical distribution of actions, probabilities, multiplicities, variations and coding. Manuel Castells defines these spaces as 'space of flows' a characteristic of 'networked society' or 'informationalism', a new brand of capitalism. "By flows I understand purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political and symbolic structures of society" (Castells 442). Arjun Appadurai the anthropologist identifies several such spaces of flows as 'scapes' in postmodern capitalist society. According to Castells the new space is characterised by uneven cartography of inclusion and exclusion through "time sharing social practices that work through flows" called "networks that are horizontal, non-hierarchical, fluid and mobile . . ." and space becomes an expression where "spatial forms and spaces are formed by the dynamics of the overall social structure" (441-42). Arjun Appadurai

identifies these spaces as a process of flows of people, money, machinery, images, and ideologies and identifies them as ethnoscares, finanscares, technoscares, mediascares and deoscares respectively (Bell 62-63).

The flows are used as haecceities of movements in a rhizomatic network of changes through extension, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation in Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*. It presents a spatium in the form of a rhizomatic affect where everything is connected conceptually to each other through flows of movements. The language used in the novel brings in an intermittent usage and juxtaposition of words showing movements of human, automobiles and gadgets. This rhizomatic structure brings out the virtual potential and desires of a networked society that always connects the inside (self) with an outside. So rhizome traces the virtuality or the potential of becoming and locates heterogeneity that brings unlike elements together. Manuel Castells considers three strata for specifying the flow in a networked system. They comprise electronic exchanges like materials of communication network, a spacing of nodes and hubs, and a distribution of managerial elites and process of changes. Snow crash presents an erasure of the agricultural lands through a delocalisation of nature, a de-stratification of the social to a network of corporate firms and franchise and a shift of family to an outside commodity culture as a topoi for deterritorialised movements in a computer generated networking space.

The shifts are actualised as architectural effects called 'sprawls' in the cyberpunks of Gibson. Sprawls refer to disorganised buildings, housing structures and crowded spaces. The world in the novel is privatised and segmented with gated enclaves which Gibson calls as burbclaves where each suburbs have their own rules and services. "When creating a new burbclave, TMAWH Development Corporation will chop down any mountain ranges and divert the course of any mighty rivers that threaten to interrupt this street plan—ergonomically designed to encourage driving safety" (Stephenson 12). A recuperation of movements to inside emerges as folds of multiplicities through a shift of public places like old shops, hotels, urban pathways, and suburbs to an enclosed assemblage of shopping malls in Los Angeles. An enunciation of 'family' to mafia 'communities' like Cosa Nostra disburses the concept of 'home' to an outside and the outside to the inside. Many such franchised city states crop up repeatedly throughout the country and the whole system appears as a rhizomatic space where one does not belong anywhere.

Movements also extend as 'housing' in designing villas, accumulating food from the pizza corners of McDonald, and dispersing the home value to the share markets and real estates. McDonalds itself becomes an iteration of

a customised home space with a homogeneous spatial dynamics through its repetition of the colours, signboards, logo and food thus normalising a home inside it. "McDonald's is Home, condensed into a three ring binder and Xeroxed. 'No Surprises' is the motto of the franchise ghetto, its Good Housekeeping seal, subliminally blazoned on every sign and logo that make up the curves and grids of light that outline the Basin" (Stephenson 191). The network of unending malls, strip malls, fast food deliverers, corporations and chains of service operators create heterogeneous experiences by sheltering, moving and producing bodies, affects, emotions and events. The centrality of space is distributed in this territorialising, deterritorialising, multiplicities and rupture that create a differential plane of rhizomes. Rhizomes are characterised by this heterogeneity and connection and find multiple possibilities of lines of flights to an outside to which the inside connects and flattens in a single plane of consistency for its exteriority. "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo" (Deleuze 25).

Cyberpunk's narration also contains rhizomatic network of hackers, skaters and rebels whose interaction with technology destabilise the control of the space in a play of capture, visibility and invisibility. An invisible control of corporates and technology exist as a virtual power of signification and subjectification in various assemblages. The readers have to take the ground of a perceiver and conceive the objects and their meaning with respect to their different connections if they have to make any sense of it. So the readers are also expected to perform a cognitive understanding of both the technology and the gadgets. In order to understand the virtuality of power the readers must have a comprehension of a virtual, a beyond the perceived reality of various incorporeal events through the language that binds different things together and produce various affects. By introducing new gadgets cyberpunk also makes the readers to reflect upon the virtual affects of technology on human through the visual images that the punk language permits.

For Deleuze "... the virtual nonetheless has the capacity to bring about actualisation yet the virtual never coincides or can be identified with its actualisation" (Boundas 300). If according to Deleuze, one can shift perspectives from the extensive qualities to the differentials of intensive properties it is possible to find connection within and between everything in universe. As Žižek posits virtual can be identified as "traces of affective intensities" with description of qualities as in Lacanian 'sinthomes' or juxtapositions in a montage where 'pure machinic intensities' can create an impersonal pre-reflexive consciousness (Žižek 5-8) in their expressions. It is this

interweaving of the heterogeneous that cyberpunks celebrate between man and technology to describe how we connect with machines through differences. While describing Fedland as a franchise, the Feds are described as corporate assemblages with high tech gadgets on their bodies but the ugly buildings, the damp granite colour of their uniform, scrawny faces and polygraph machines are unaddressed affects of this technological assemblage. An array of agents like single yards, signboards, number boards of roads and, entry and exit gates are described along with police forces like 'the metacops', 'the enforcers' and the 'world beat security' for law and order. But such arrangements give the affect of terror; "that just about everything, like not mowing your lawn or playing your stereo too loud becomes a national security issue" (45). Uncle Enzo's billboard is a perfect example that asks us to be affirmative of the virtual. "YOU HAVE GOT A FRIEND IN THE FAMILY" that continues with "YOU ARE ENTERING A MAFIA WATCH NEIGHBOURHOOD" but also reminds that "UNCLE ENZO FORGIVES AND FORGETS" with a virtual affect of surveillance within the friendly bonding.

The virtuality of this 'decentred control' of bodies and affect is spatialised as an "optical space" (Deleuze *Thousand* 494) with the installation of apparatus like drones, CCTVs, videotapes, lasers, cameras, antennas, voice-stress histo-grams, polygram tests and radars that create an affect of perception. Mr Lee's city state called Greater Hong Kong for instance is one such panopticon with red laser beams, scanners, antennas and satellite uplinks pointed at the sky that provides a spectre of the real space. They create a disembodied system where everything that is real is captured as flows of data, images and simulated desires. The flows always deterritorialise and reterritorialise and hence enact as "veritable becomings" and incorporeal transformations through an immersion of "interlinks" and "circulation of intensities" between bodies in the story (Deleuze 10). They exist as a space of inclusion where the protagonists Hiro and YT could only give a passive resistance. The immersion of Hiro's body into the datascape of the cities can be argued as a perceptual affect. Hiro and his friend YT observe the radar scanner of the cities as an everyday appearance of their technological other with a preconception of its virtuality rather than with the terror of an encounter with the uncanny. YT muses on what "it" can do when she stands before rez, a scanner machine of the Hong Kong Franchisee. She presents herself as a passive body enmeshed as fine details in the back up of that technological apparatus.

"Like any other radar, they are good at picking up metallic objects. Unlike the radar in an air traffic control center, they

can rez fine details. The rez of a system is only as fine as its wave length; since the wavelength of this radar is about a millimetre, it can see the fillings in your teeth. The grommets in your converse high-tops, the rivets in your Levi's. It can calculate the value of your pocket change" and scan "eye colour, credit record, ancestry and blood type." (84)

Hiro memorises his disembodied body, the other body stored in the data base of Uncle Enzo— its BwO—that decoding of organs to its fractal pattern of scanned lines, codes and graphs. Retinal patterns, DNA, voice graphs, finger-prints, footprints, palm prints and wrist prints crosses with his organic parts transferring information from him to the technological other that will soon emerge as an avatar in his video game. Hiro is also that cybernetic organism who is aware of how his body can be processed to bits of information.

As the networked society always thrives between order and chaos, the street spaces are those molecular forms of chaos that Stephenson describes as "gout of radioactive urine ejected south from the dead center of L.A" (145). It is that becoming of every city, a pure affect of chaos crowded with music bands, fans and punks. Through their inhabitation of the technologically unskilled and the vagabonds called as the "the cheap nasty franchises", they become spaces of contest where young men like Hiro and Jason drive like maniacs or get hauled in front of a firing squad. The streets are inscribed within the cities as patches of pure smooth spaces that exist as hallucinatory affects or sensations and spiral towards the fringes of the city as "an organ without a body" when punks appropriate technology. Organs without bodies are "subjectless partial objects" that can have an autonomous existence even though they are separated from their bodies. The Punk "resists its inclusion within the whole of a body" and exists as a "correlate of the subject". It is the urban's "stand-in within the order of objectivity". "It is that part of the subject that it had to renounce to subjectivize itself to emerge as subject" ((Zizek 153-56). "If SF encourages us to look again at the taken for granted, then representations of impossible places constitute experiments in what can be said about place, new ways of thinking about our experience of being-in-the-world"(Kneale 428). Hiro's home is a smooth space that moves from a storage place of a metal U-stor-It to the neon lit roads where he uses both computer and swords as tools for everyday life. The punks spend their nights in U-Haul-Its and play heavy metal music for skate punks.

The punks organise a collective, adaptable networked and evolvable system that can exist as a counter reaction to the technologized global environment outside.

In their hands, technology appropriates with body as an everyday street culture through the affect of speed. As Katherine Hayles remarks "... It is possible to deconstruct the content of the abstraction while still leaving the mechanism of abstraction intact. Moving out of the frictionless and disembodied realm of abstraction requires articulating embodiment and the body together" (198). Oxford dictionary defines punk as "a ruffian", "a fast music" and "a style". Hiro is a pizza Deliverator, a punk who speeds in highways and can only be tracked through his machinic body that gives him malleability for the optical capture. The smart pizza box inside Hiro's car sends customer's address to the computer interface that "traces" his route map and sends it to the mafia don Uncle Enzo. But Hiro connects the whole technology with the "urban and architectural vernacular"— "language of movement" and binds it with the entropy of his nervousness (Buchanan *space* 20) and with the possible control of his time and distance. His act of driving is also his engagement with a mapping of the urban landscapes through the route maps. Time compresses with the speed of travel and spaces like highways and malls diminishes in the author's descriptions of movements, "temporary halts and the capture of Hiro's car with quantum speed" the justification being that bodies become imperceptible with increase in speed. While critiquing on modern technology Paul Virillio considers speed as a machine that makes matter and space disappear (Kellner 103). But such disappearance is also a becoming of the speed that binds Hiro to the machine.

"When Hiro drives he steers erratically, artificially pumped muscles not fully under his control. The bimbo box surges and slows, surges and slows, because he is pumping the gas pedal, because holding it to the floor doesn't seem to have any effect." (30)

The intensification of the speed is linked with the pull of an underpaid worker's "having a life in line" that accelerates with the car's potential energy to fire a "pound of bacon" into the "Asteroid Belt". The entropy of thermodynamics connects with the nervousness of Hiro and with the same cosmic energy of the universe. It is equally modulated by its random shifts reassuring a random in chaos. Bukatman rightly observes "The cyberspace cowboys are those veterans whose experience of technological fusion is literally ecstatic" (172). His control of the car changes randomly like "overriding the warning buzzer" which finally "catapults into an empty backyard swimming pool". It becomes a collective desire of movements, a chaos of American mobility (Stephenson 2).

Rhizome also contains interconnected spatiality that is always open for various transversal connections.

Within the inter space between the urban and the streets, there is a “fringe crowd” where Hiro meets third world diasporic communities and schizophrenic whites. It acts as a mythical space where he meets mythical cyborg called Gargoyles who reminds him of his deep structure of his brain and its neuro linguistic pathways that binds his biological world to the computer network. Gargoyls in mythology refers to a grotesque figure that creates horror in its appearance and makes us think of the uncanny within us.

“You are forming pathways in your brain. Deep structures. Your nerves grow new connections as you use them . . . your bio ware self modifies– the software becomes part of the hardware. So now you are vulnerable– all hackers are vulnerable–to a nam-shub” (Stephenson 126).

These fringes are the places where “interesting things happen” like “transitions and lights fading into shade of the overpass” (122). That is the place where Hiro recognises the fractal identity of his body of flesh to a system of codes and bits of data. The fringes are machinic, the interstitial space of immanence and Lagos is his analogue who informs Hiro of his Posthuman condition of how our relation with technology is an event of computation and flows.

Metaverse, the computer space has a Posthuman ecology with a transversal connection that brings out the visual and kinaesthetic connection of the user combining eyes, hands, body movements, and sexuality with avatar bodies an artificial Intelligence. Stephenson appropriates the landscape of Metaverse into a mythical fringe space where human bodies, biological systems of perception and cognitive patterns are differently connected to computer generated reality that enacts itself apart from the control of its hubs. “The Metaverse is a fictional structure” where human exists in an android experience in “a form that computers understand. It is a vast “nam-shub” like that of the mythical landscapes “enacting itself on L.Bob Rife’s fiber-optical network” (212). They function like “nodes or places capable of forming communities. They have functional characteristics, human and inhuman assemblages, and machinic enunciations.

“Nodes serve as places that are exchangers, communication hubs, playing a role of coordination for the smooth interaction of all elements integrated into the network. Other places are the nodes of the network . . . that build a series of locality-based activities and organizations around a key function in the network” (Castells 443).

The rationality of existence of such a place is explained through the descriptions of our sensual perception while navigating through its imaginary cityscape. He experienced the cities as geometrical shapes of the computer graphics. Hiro considers the hardware as his own body that Logos had reminded him of a body that is yet to be realised inside the computer.

“In the beginning the laptop clings to him in an erotic way and watching the movement of its camera was like visualising a strip tease. “. . . The top surface of the computer is smooth except for a fisheye lens, a polished glass dome with a purplish optical coating. Whenever Hiro is using the machine, this lens emerges and clicks into place. Its base flushes with the surface of the computer” reminding him “of skirts, lingerie, outer labia and inner labia” (23).

His physical connection with the machine through headphones and goggles was an opening of his body to its own desires, stripping off all its stratifications. Then he begins to perceive the ‘space’ created by electronic gadgets as an experience of reality. The virtual images of spatiality like boulevard, streets, offices, house etc. along with his experiences as an avatar appear as a re-enactment of movement in real spaces.

When his real body is matched by his avatar he incorporates his body with the virtual reality. Through an enhanced perception of his eyes and his spatial orientation counterbalanced by the movements Metaverse is generated by Hiro as well as the computer. Through his interaction he realises the boundedness of his visual perception and the fractal reality of a simulated space where he becomes a pov that the computer permits. “Reduced to a point, the pov is abstracted into a purely temporal entity with no spatial extension” . . . (Hayles 39). The space becomes a Posthuman expression of transcendence when it emerges in Hiro’s visual space beyond the limits of his perception and the scale of his accessibility. This realisation of both the real and the virtual world is also the interface of Posthuman understanding. “. . . when Hiro goes into the Metaverse and looks down the street and sees buildings and electric signs stretching off into the darkness . . . he is actually staring at the graphic representations – the user interface –of a myriad different pieces of software that have been engineered by major corporations” (25). It becomes a globalised network space where avatars simulates ‘moving in’ at the office, locating documents in folders, filing cabinets, finding free information in search engine libraries thus experiencing a globalised spatiality through the accessibility of internet.

The distributed control of the network also shifts to non-human agents like virus that creates a viral affect. Viral spaces are expressions of software programmes with a machinic language. Viruses expose the vulnerability of the Metaverse's control as networks through its informational logic. Hiro completely internalises this unboundedness of the system through a hacker's understanding that the metaverse is different in its viral, automated and random nature.

"You talk to the computer in one of these languages and a piece of software called compiler converts it into machinic language. But you never can tell exactly what the compiler is doing. It doesn't always come out the way you want like a dusty pane or warped mirror." (Stephenson 278-79)

Through his experiences with digital actants like viruses he accepts the system's potential of deontologising his position from a human subject to a hacker. The viral spaces are infinitesimal fractal spaces of the cyberspace programmed differently with probabilities and capacities of infecting with information. They decode the spatiality of the digital space by mutation and replication in a symbiotic involution with their software, hence they address the materiality of networked spaces. Hacking turns out to be an unusual encounter between human and machine, human and virus, and virus and system that folds inside to a pack of collective movements from hackers. *Snow Crash* virus changes computer and organic bodies to infected bodies. They edit the coded system which in fact affects the body of the computer and infect all codes of representation of human. Though it is portrayed as an intentional infection initiated by the marginalised, virus is celebrated for its viral nature. In *Snow Crash* virus is also a performative language that expresses itself through glossolalia. When YT meets a woman whose brain is hacked by snowcrash she could only utter glossolalia and stare at her like the blips of a computer screen. The viral infectants behaved like programmed robots with dispersed subjectivities. Virus in cyberpunks is a becoming machine with a complete digital consciousness and carries the actual machinic desire in a control society. It produces links between man and machine by foregrounding the coded structure of human genome and spreads through flows and connections. Virus makes actual body assemblages when it is used as a drug.

The recognition of Posthuman spaces in cyberpunks means locating the becoming machine in human technology assemblage. Hiro realises the machine part of every system that affects other systems and makes multiple assemblages.

"In that situation the people who own the computer are helpless," Ng says. "Right. Because they access the machine at a higher level, which has now been overridden. In the same sense once a neurolinguistic hacker plugs into the deep structures of our brain, we can't get him out—because we can't even control our own brain at such a basic level." (395)

Neal Stephenson perceives a Posthuman capability of the hackers to identify the viral machine in the machinic assemblage. As Hiro reflects a hacker can "... understand the true inner workings of the machine—he sees through the language he is working in and glimpses the secret functioning of the binary code" (279).

Rhizomatic connections reveal multiple heterogeneous bonding between human and technology in this novel. The cybernetic technology in cyberpunks is also found as a simulation technology that actualise affective performative events of human avatars with computer virus, a non-human viral potential of replication and mutation. The capitalist global networking remains as an autopoietic self organised form but the openness and connection of interactive technology affects facilitates rhizomatic assemblages. The accommodation of all differences and diverse alterities expresses heterogeneity as the non-human model of enunciation conducive for posthuman future.

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