

BATTLE ROYAL: WHO PWNED POMO?

Cyber punk literature is generally shunted off into one of two categories: as new, pushing-the-envelope, stunning, purely Post Modern; or as a cheap modernized version of a pulp magazine with slightly more justified sexual content. Fortunately for the consummate fence sitter, there is a third choice, which amalgamates both. Or, more accurately, the third choice is to assume that the first choice inevitably leads to the second choice. The result of reproducing and continuing a subject once considered avant-garde and mind-altering is that it becomes established, codified, and normal. The mind has been altered; having to do so on many occasions is usually indicative of a learning disability or extreme stubbornness.

In order to support what shall henceforth be labelled the fence-sitter option, there shall commence a battle royal between an example of so called first wave cyber punk, *Neuromancer*, and second wave cyber punk, *Snow Crash*. Each will be pitted against each other in various categories usually considered integral to Post Modern literature.¹ The categories are: decentralization, ordered universe, use of binaries, grand narrative and finally the question of closure. Marks shall be tallied at the conclusion, though there are opportunities to gain extra points for doing particularly well.²

A large part of Post Modernism is centred around decentring. Instead of looking at kings, princesses, righteous heroes, etc, the characters usually hail from the outskirts of society. Also, there should be little glorification of human achievement since humans are just mildly intelligent animals. Both novels work in this respect. The main character of *Neuromancer*, Case, is a drug-using hacker with a penchant for latching onto the “wrong kind of girl”. He takes the job offered to him—otherwise there would be no plot—but does so for monetary gain and so that he can ignore the meat (his body) and continue living in a fabricated reality of which is his loath to leave even to urinate. Hiro Protagonist, the hero and protagonist (surprisingly enough) of *Snow Crash*, is not “using” (3 Gibson) as the phrase goes, but is still a hacker of mixed ethnicity who is unemployed, financially impaired, and likes to play with swords. He is also out to make money. In both cases the common crowd, referred to as the “meat” (8 Gibson) in *Neuromancer* and “biomass” (75, Stephenson) in *Snow Crash*, is rendered as a heaving mass of mindless flesh ruled by selfish physical needs. This idea is more integral to the plot of *Snow Crash*, but present in both nonetheless. The novels differ in how the protagonists fit in with the rest of humanity. Case is disdainful of the “meat” but is forced repeatedly to succumb to it. No amount of effort, cleverness and dumb good luck can raise him above the other detritus. Hiro, however, does rise about the biomass. In fact, Hiro turns out to be so cool, and so good at making the right connections that he gets paid tons of money, gets the girl, saves his friend, and turns the whole thing into a great ad campaign.³

This leads into the second category: ordered society. There are two worlds to contend with in each novel, the “real” world and the digitalized world. In both cases the real world is lawless, corrupt, dirty, and generally uncaring to the humans that live within it. The digitalized realities in each novel are not so similar as they first seem. The difference lies in how these virtual realities affect the way humans function within them. The metaverse of *Snow Crash* is clean, well regulated and—usually—

1 This list is by no means all inclusive of the various aspects of Post Modernism and its techniques, nor should it be. It would take away half the fun.

2 Marks shall hereafter appear in the footnotes. Marks are given in “kudos,” with 1 kudos meaning the story contained a particular Post Modern element, and 2 kudos indicating that this element was used in an effective way to from a Post Modern perspective.

3 *Neuromancer*: 2 kudos for follow through.
Snow Crash: 1 kudos for effort.

Neuromancer bad people go through a lot of trouble so that something bad can do bad things to bad people and other bad people benefit and there are a lot of drugs and human collateral; there is no clear winner besides the matrix and everything still sucks. Humanity has no clear direction and appears to be slowly melding together in one, unthinking mass of meat and metal. It is no longer clear what signifies human, or machine, or animal. The fact that *Snow Crash* has any kudos at all indicates that some conventions have followed through while others have not. Cyber punk is expected to throw the reader into a different world, which *Snow Crash* does. Yet in the end that world is reaffirmed as having the same ideal as this one—if everyone is a good person than things will work out. All the good, clever people are reward and all the bad, not quite as clever people are killed in various clever ways. Clever is defined as being a good capitalist, buying all the right stuff, climbing the corporate ladder and achieving the American dream (which is ironic in that in the novel America is only loosely defined as a single nation). It is inherently optimistic and modernistic. Cyber punk has become like a document that has been photocopied one too many times: through repeated reproduction, the original impetus has become blurred and nearly indistinguishable.

Works Cited

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1984

Stephenson, Neal. *Snow Crash*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2003

