

SUBLIMATING INTO THE VIRTUAL: SOME FICTIONAL EXAMPLES OF DIGITAL TRANSCENDENCE

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Is cyberspace the future of humanity? The acknowledgment of an era in which the print of human activity starts to affect the planet's geological levels, the Anthropocene, is characterized by humanity's search for solutions towards the incoming ecocide. There are as many solutions as there are people designing them. Strategies move from degrowth perspectives aiming to return to a less technologized way of living to accelerationist impulses seeking to use technology as a way of overcoming the catastrophes of climate change. One of the most debated solutions is the idea of digital transcendence, a proposal as old as modern cybernetics that advocates for uploading human consciousness into machinic bodies to escape the dramatic effects of the mundane world of human bodies. The solution, in this sense, is not only to develop technologies capable of making "us" survive in the universe but also to design utopian places that would grant human minds the possibility of exploring their whole potential without feeling any pain. In essence, what is being proposed in these fields is the creation of an artificial Heaven. In the following lines, I will explain the basic ideas surrounding the problematics of digital transcendence, additionally exploring their impact in pop culture products.

In contemporary discussions surrounding the notion of digital transcendence, the concept is usually linked with pre-cybernetic understandings of metaphysics. More specifically, the notion is associated to Christianity's idea of transgressing the material world, which, at the same time, is influenced by the legacy of Plato and Aristotle's reflections on hylomorphism. These Greek philosophers established the traditional sense of dualism between matter and ideas (later matter and mind under Descartes's terms). In this conceptualization of metaphysics, reality is divided into two different

planes of existence: an empirical one that can be perceived and interacted with by human/material body units, and another superior one in which conscience is the only agentic element that can navigate through. The notion of transcendence, in this sense, refers to the religious solution to overcome this dichotomy, a way to achieve salvation or to reach paradise through the soul's (or conscience's) abandonment of the material plane in exchange of a life in an abstract, utopian, and immaterial location ruled by the Divine. This idea, extrapolated into the philosophical conceptualizations of post-modernity and technocapitalism, gave birth to a rejuvenated conceptualization of transcendence during the last decades of the twentieth century. This concept is based in the anthropogenic possibilities of reaching a perennially desired Arcadia that did not depend on (and was not encouraged by) a monotheistic entity, but on the Enlightenment ideas. This philosophical current of thought is what we now refer to as Transhumanism.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that there is not one single understanding of Transhumanism. As Francesca Ferrando (2012) defines it:

[Transhumanism] problematizes the current understanding of the human not necessarily through its past and present legacies, but through the possibilities inscribed within its possible biological and technological evolutions. Human enhancement is a crucial notion to the transhumanist reflection; the main keys to access such a goal are identified in science and technology, in all of their variables, as existing, emerging and speculative frames—from regenerative medicine to nanotechnology, radical life extension, mind uploading and cryonics among other fields. (Ferrando 2012, 27)

The transhumanist movement divides itself into different currents of thought, each of them defending diverse interactions between human and machine (and between matter and mind). Partial or total cyborgization in the material plane to the transference of human and non-human consciousness has been suggested, as well as a move to machinic locations with the idea of improving humanity's functionality against the natural forces damaging its organic existence. The notion of digital transcendence is a fundamental element in the many theories of Transhumanism. However, it is not advocated for by all transhumanist sectors and, thus, digital transcendentalism should not be confused with transhumanism.

Although its history is long and multifaceted, one may find the earliest enunciations of digital transcendence developing through a strange and productive marriage between postmodernity and traditional Judeo-Christian spiritual metaphysics: the unsubstantial location that William Gibson, author of *Neuromancer* (1984), popularized with the term "cyberspace." Influenced by William Burroughs' notion of the "Interzone" in *Naked Lunch* (1959), in which machines are transformed into creatures and

people are psychically controlled via drug exposure, Gibson configured an idea of cyberspace or “The Matrix” as a virtual locus in which an alternative reality or plane of existence is experienced:

“The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games,” said the voice-over, “in early graphics programs and military experimentation with cranial lacks.” On the Sony, a two-dimensional space war faded behind a forest of mathematically generated ferns, demonstrating the spatial possibilities of logarithmic spirals: cold blue military footage burned through, lab animals wired into test systems, helmets feeding into fire control circuits of tanks and war planes. “Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematic concepts . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. (Gibson 1984, 51)

Although not fully transcendent *per se*, Gibson’s idea of cyberspace, which has been perpetuated in fiction through different forms, imagines the possibility of escaping the technocapitalist material dystopia through accessing a cyberutopia. This alternative space lies in a superior plane of existence in which the limitation of the flesh are no longer existential handicaps to the human intellect. This place, as in religious conceptualization of Paradise, exists in an immaterial sphere ungoverned by the forces of nature flowing through the mundane. However, cyberspace differs from the theological approach because cyberspace enacts the Enlightenment’s paradigm of performativity.” Rather than a simple, absolute happiness near a monotheistic entity, the Gibsonian matrix promised a partial transfusion of the human psyche to an absolute and addictive status of freedom in which the mind can shape its own reality.

Despite being a product of the cybernetic fascination and idealism of the early days of the digital revolution, the Gibsonian cyberspace inspired many critics, philosophers, and authors to rationalize the epistemological changes about to happen in the Western world. Dealing with the development of digital identities during the early stages of the Internet, Sandy Stone explains that the perception of this cyberspace was eventually modified, obliterating the need of a physical body in order to transgress the material frontier (Stone 2020, 121). More importantly, the idea of cyberspace also expanded itself into what we now understand as “the Internet,” a globally connected location with no apparent figures of power reigning over it. The Internet network has traditionally been described as a utopic place operating under Deleuzian rhizomatic terms, that is, as a system which “is comprised not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 127). According

to Christian Beck, the notion of the rhizome can be applied to the operability of the Internet, since

there is no singular 'center' of the Internet but rather multiple strategically interconnected network and router centers – hosted by commercial, government, and academic institutions – that support the majority of Internet traffic, referred to as the Internet backbone. [...] With its decentered, morphological, and cartographic configuration, the Internet possesses the ability to connect people in novel ways, enhance new ways of approaching the lived world, and be a site of radical possibility. (Beck 2016, 336, 338)

Cyberspace is therefore conceptualized not only as a different plane but also an idealize place for a collective social improvement through access to information and communication and, as Stone also explores, a place to escape the limitations and power structures of the meatworld when developing an identity (Stone 2020, 75). The cybernetic networks wondering through our conscience and digital performativity can, in this sense, be observed as a visit to a potential Utopia that, once transcended, would catalyze humanity's enlightened passion for epistemological and ontological liberation.

As in some episodes of the popular British/American television series *Black Mirror*, the idea of transferring consciousness to the immaterial place that constitutes the Net has been philosophically presented as the ultimate transhumanist goal, a way to rearrange the dichotomy between mind and flesh in which the individual (or society) finally achieves a sense of singularity escaping time, performativity, and place. Specifically, the episodes "San Junipero" (2016) and "USS Callister" (2017), which portray a utopian view of a cyberspace to transcend to, are representative examples of this sense of transcendence. "San Junipero" is set in a near future in which people, particularly those with mobility problems, have access to a town-resort matrix (San Junipero) in which they can nostalgically revive an ideal portrayal of the later decades of the 20th century. The episode visualizes the story of Yorkie (Mackenzie Davis) and Kelly (Gugu Mbatha-Raw), two old women who casually visit San Junipero and eventually fall in love. As they both are dying, they are offered the possibility of migrating their consciousness and live forever in the utopic San Junipero, what could be seen as a cybernetic version of the Christian Heaven. In San Junipero, people exist as their preferred version of themselves, being capable of changing clothes, show themselves with younger, more normative bodies, or, even, of suffering deadly accidents without any damage. Cyberspace in "San Junipero" is configured as a transcendental paradise in which a transmigrated consciousness can live happily forever (or at least, until the servers that hold it crash).

“USS Callister” follows an almost similar understanding of transcendence. The episode follows Robert Daly (Jesse Plemons), a programmer for a popular sci-fi multiplayer online company who uses his co-workers' DNA to create sentient digital copies of them and adds them as protagonists in a Star Trek–like personal simulation of the game. After he introduces a new employee, Nanette Cole (Cristin Milioti), she starts a revolt among the digital copies in order to escape Daly’s simulation and enter the actual Internet-based game. During most of the episode cyberspace is observed as dystopic since all characters can be controlled by Daly. In case of noticing any sign of insurrection, Daly can torture or kill any character at will, leaving the digital copies trapped in perpetual submission. As in “San Junipero”, freedom is equated to happiness (and so with eternal paradise) and the tyrannic virtualization becomes the antithesis of the above-mentioned resort. However, when the digital crew manages to rebel and escape the simulation, the atmosphere of the cyberspace they inhabit changes completely. Not only the protagonists’ uniforms abandon the old-fashioned decadent uniforms of Daly’s simulation and change them for more high-tech versions of them, but also see themselves surrounded by a new cybernetic universe of possibilities. They are now in charge of a spaceship that can travel throughout the whole game and interact with other characters, engage in commerce, and visit any planet they choose. In this liberated version of cyberspace, freedom operates as a utopic drive permeating their world’s virtual metaphysics.

The embracement of the inorganic as a way to reclaim a Judeo-Christian/Capitalist paradise has nonetheless been problematized through history as well. As early as 1995, Cyberfeminist philosopher Sadie Plant criticized the idea of escaping materiality as a simulative experience. According to her:

This actual space is not merely another space, but a virtual reality. Nor is it as it often appears in the male imaginary: as a cerebral flight from the mysteries of matter. There is no escape from the meat, the flesh, and cyberspace is nothing transcendent. These are simply the disguises which pander to man's projections of his own rear-view illusions; reproductions of the same desires which have guided his dream of technological authority and now become the collective nightmare of a soulless integration. Entering the matrix is no assertion of masculinity, but a loss of humanity; to jack into cyberspace is not to penetrate, but to be invaded. (Plant 1995, 60)

Thus, Cyberspace can be addressed not as a different plane of existence equivalent to the Christian Paradise but an illusion of mankind’s unfulfilled Renaissance aspirations. It is an escape from matter that assumes that the intricate biochemical reactions constantly occurring in our brains can be transferred to the illusory ethereal technobiology of the machine with a sense of continuity.

Following Plant’s criticism, the existence of immateriality might be highly problematized. As commented by Alejandra López Gabrieldis (2020):

Thinking in information technologies from the perspective of “immateriality”, our focus is directed to an abstract plane and hence we do neither stop and analyze the infrastructure that upholds the technical system (data centers, servers, underground wiring, antennas, etc.), nor the ways in which information is materialized in our surroundings or the ways in which it is somatized in our bodies, nor the morphological dimensions in which matter prints information. (Gabrieldis 2020, 165. *My translation*)

Transferring our consciousness to the machinic system, even accepting the premise that humanity or the data streams in which our consciousness would be virtualized would only be experiencing a simulation of paradise, still keeps up with the troubles of materiality since there is a full arrange of industrial and extractive processes required to maintain the simulation.¹ If oxidation processes eventually damage the different materials through which electricity enacts cyberspace, there would be a constant need for materials such as coltan—already a rare material on Earth. Therefore, the promises of eternal life would be dependent on the physical limitations of the planet’s resources. Fiction has provided interesting solutions for this problem.

This idea is explored in the videogame *SOMA* (2015). In the game, the player takes control of an uploaded consciousness in a techno-anthropomorphic body and leads it through a horrific submarine facility that hides the last remnants of Humanity, a capsule of digital human sentiences. Since the Earth is being corroded by a deadly entity that has killed every human being, the objective of the protagonist is to launch the capsule into space, which will provide a few more hundred years “of life” to humans in a virtualized form. The story drives de player through different philosophical problems within the field of transhumanism such as “who” actually transcends (the self or a copy of it), why would humans want to migrate to a virtual world, and the limitations of transcendence. The satellite, as the player is told, is simply a way to briefly enlarge human existence, and it will eventually lose power and die. Thus, the Heaven-like simulation turns to be a simple patch, a way to deceive humanity into the possibility of real transcendence. This highlights the idea that consciousness uploading is a mere illusion highly dependent on material conditions. If matter disappears or changes, so does the allegedly immaterial plane that humans have transcended to. In the end, as early cyberneticist Nick Land (2011) stated, it seems likely that “Nothing human makes it out of the near future” (Land 2011, 443) ...not even transhuman.

The history of philosophy’s engagement with the uncanny aspects of the virtual world has indeed been productive when developing discourses aiming to transmogrify traditional conceptualizations of matter and no-matter into the digital revolution

¹ This also invalidates the idea of cyberspace or the Internet operating under rhizomatic flows of power since a conveniently privatized infrastructure is maintaining the then-not-so-decentralized nodes configuring the Matrix.

we are still experiencing. Pop culture cultural products have reflected on these premises and provided examples that sometimes embrace the idealization of the virtual and, some other times, problematize it. The ambiguous world of *Neuromancer*, materially dystopic and digitally utopic started a tradition of transhumanist fictions that has led us to very optimistic perspectives, such as *Black Mirror's* episodes "San Junipero" and "USS Callister", and some other more critical with the celestial virtualizations of our species. Optimistic or not, the ideas embedded in these narratives operate as visualizers of contemporary critical thought made in the scientific-philosophic field of cybernetics and therefore, force us to reflect on the possibility of a technology driven future for Humanity in the face of the incoming changes brought by climate change, massive extinctions, and global scarcity.

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