The Wetware of Memory: Posthuman Subjectivities and the Erosion of the Self in T. R. Napper's 36 Streets

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Abstract:
Contemporary cyberpunk fiction has undergone a marked epistemological shift from the spatial logic of cyberspace toward the embodied terrain of neural integration. This article examines
T. R. Napper's 36 Streets (2022) as a paradigmatic instance of this transformation, arguing that posthuman subjectivity is increasingly constituted through the algorithmic modulation of memory rather than the transcendence of embodiment. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Bernard Stiegler, the paper situates Napper's novel within contemporary debates on cognitive capitalism, technics, and postcolonial cyberpunk. Through close textual analysis of immersive simulation technologies such as 'Fat Victory,' the study demonstrates how memory becomes a programmable substrate subject to commodification and geopolitical control. The article proposes the concept of posthuman capture to describe this condition, wherein the human-machine interface intensifies vulnerability rather than enabling liberation.

Keywords: cyberpunk, posthumanism, memory studies, wetware, cognitive capitalism, speculative fiction.

Introduction

Cyberpunk has traditionally imagined technology as something external, a space that the human subject enters and explores. In William Gibson's Neuromancer, this appears as cyberspace, a vast digital matrix that seems to offer a way out of the limits of the physical body (Gibson 6). Yet this idea has been questioned over time. As N. Katherine Hayles points out, human thought and experience cannot be separated from the body as easily as early cyberpunk suggests. The body remains central, even in highly technological environments. More recent speculative fiction reflects this shift quite clearly. Instead of placing technology outside the human, it brings it inside, often into the brain and nervous system. The interface is no longer something one enters but something one lives with. This change suggests a deeper concern with how technology shapes perception, memory, and identity from within.

T. R. Napper's 36 Streets fits well into this development. Set in a near-future Hanoi shaped by corporate power, the novel presents a world where memory can be edited, implanted, and controlled. As a result, it becomes difficult to distinguish between lived experience and artificial construction. The focus, therefore, moves away from digital space as a frontier and toward the inner workings of the mind. And hence, this article argues that such a shift marks a movement from the idea of technological transcendence to what might be called cognitive governance. The central question is no longer access to technology, but control over the processes that shape human experience. By examining 36 Streets, the study explores how contemporary cyberpunk rethinks the relationship between human and machine, especially at the level of memory and subjectivity.

Literature Review

Any sustained engagement with cyberpunk's contemporary phase must begin with the problem that earlier theorists had already identified but perhaps did not fully anticipate in its current intensity. One persistent issue concerns the way late twentieth-century cybernetics often treated information as more important than the body that carries it. N. Katherine Hayles addresses this directly in How We Became Posthuman, where she cautions against what she calls the idea of 'disembodied information.' Her point, put simply, is that thinking and experience cannot be separated from the material conditions in which they occur without losing something essential (49). Although her argument is usually read as a correction to earlier models, it may also be seen as anticipating current developments. Texts like 36 Streets do not move away from the body; rather, they show how deeply technology now works through it.

Around the same period, Donna Haraway offered a different way of thinking about the relationship between humans and machines. Her concept of the cyborg, which blurs boundaries between organism and technology, has often been taken as a hopeful or even liberating figure. It suggests that fixed categories such as human and machine might be unsettled or reworked. Yet later critics have approached this optimism with some caution. It now seems possible to argue that the cyborg has not simply disrupted systems of power but has, in many cases, been absorbed into them. As Thomas Foster notes, the technologically enhanced body can become easier to monitor, regulate, and manage within late capitalist systems (89). In that sense, hybridity does not automatically lead to resistance; it may also create new forms of control.

This tension becomes even clearer in what is often described as "critical posthumanism." Rosi Braidotti, for example, proposes a view of the subject that is less individual and more relational, shaped by networks of connection and interdependence. Her work moves away from both traditional humanism and simple technological determinism, offering a more fluid understanding of identity

(94). Even so, not everyone is convinced that this model fully addresses the realities of contemporary technological systems. Cary Wolfe, among others, has pointed out that discussions of posthumanism need to remain grounded in the institutional and technological structures that actually shape human experience. Without that grounding, there is a risk that the theory becomes too broad to be analytically precise (xvi).

Taken together, these debates suggest that posthumanism is far from settled as a field of inquiry. While it opens up new ways of thinking about subjectivity, it also raises difficult questions about power, control, and the role of technology in everyday life. Contemporary cyberpunk, including 36 Streets, engages directly with these tensions, not by resolving them, but by making them visible in narrative form.

More recent developments in the field further complicate these debates. Hayles's later work, particularly Unthought, shifts focus toward nonconscious cognition, suggesting that cognitive processes increasingly operate at scales and speeds that exceed human awareness. This line of inquiry resonates with Shane Denson's account of "post-cinematic affect," where temporal and sensory experience is modulated by computational systems in ways that may not be fully accessible to conscious perception. Taken together, these perspectives invite a reconsideration of subjectivity as something that is not only distributed but also partially opaque to itself.

If posthumanism raises questions about the status of the subject, the philosophy of technics, especially as articulated by Bernard Stiegler, directs attention to the material supports through which subjectivity is constituted. Stiegler's concept of tertiary retention has proven particularly generative in this regard. By framing memory as inherently prosthetic, he challenges the assumption that recollection is an exclusively internal process (17). Memory, in this account, is always already mediated, stored, and transmitted through technical systems. What appears to be new in contemporary contexts, however, is not the existence of such mediation but its depth and immediacy.

Scholars who work across media theory and political economy have, in recent years, pushed these debates in directions that feel especially relevant to contemporary cyberpunk. For instance, Yuk Hui has drawn

attention to the cultural specificity of technological systems, warning against the tendency to treat digital modernity as if it unfolds in the same way everywhere. At the same time, Matteo Pasquinelli and Tiziana Terranova, working from slightly different angles, suggest that cognition itself has become entangled with economic processes. In their accounts, thinking, attention, and even memory are not simply internal faculties; they can be organised, measured, and, to some extent, extracted as value. From this perspective, memory no longer appears as a private store of experience. It begins to look more like a resource that can be shaped and circulated within larger systems.

It is at this point that contemporary cyberpunk seems to diverge quite sharply from its earlier forms. In William Gibson's Neuromancer, cyberspace still functions as something external, a domain one enters and leaves. More recent fiction, however, tends to unsettle that distinction. Works such as Autonomous by Annalee Newitz and The Body Scout by Lincoln Michel shift attention back to the body, though not in any straightforwardly humanist sense. Instead of escaping embodiment, these narratives explore how the body itself becomes a site where technological processes are written, adjusted, and controlled. The boundary between organism and machine, in this context, does not disappear entirely, but it becomes increasingly difficult to locate with precision.

Alongside this formal and thematic shift, there has been a growing interest in global and postcolonial approaches within science fiction studies. Writers such as Chen Qiufan and Ken Liu have foregrounded the uneven distribution of technological infrastructures, often linking them to longer histories of colonialism and economic dependency. Critics, including Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay and Jini Kim Watson, have taken this further, arguing that technological futures are always shaped by specific geopolitical conditions rather than emerging neutrally or universally. Such perspectives complicate the earlier assumption that cyberpunk describes a single, global trajectory of technological change.

Within this broader conversation, 36 Streets occupies a somewhat distinctive position. Its focus on neural simulation and the manipulation of memory can be read in light of Bernard Stiegler's work on technics and memory, yet the novel also seems to extend those concerns. What is striking here is the degree to which technological intervention operates directly at the level of neurobiology, rather than through external devices or interfaces. At the same time, the novel's setting in Hanoi introduces a specificity that aligns with recent efforts to situate cyberpunk within particular cultural and political contexts. The technological transformations it depicts are inseparable from questions of power, history, and global inequality.

Taken together, this body of scholarship does not point toward a single, unified framework. Instead, it reveals a set of ongoing tensions. On one side, posthumanism continues to provide useful ways of rethinking subjectivity beyond traditional humanist models. On the other hand, the increasing integration of cognition into technological and economic systems raises difficult questions about agency and control. These are not questions that can be easily resolved. What Napper's novel does, perhaps most effectively, is to render these tensions visible, not as abstract problems, but as lived conditions that shape how characters think, remember, and understand themselves.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative and interpretive approach, combining close reading with theoretical analysis. At the same time, it remains aware of ongoing debates in literary and cultural studies about how texts should be studied. Rather than treating 36 Streets as a self-contained work, the analysis assumes that meaning develops through an interaction between narrative form, theoretical ideas, and broader historical and technological contexts. In this sense, the method draws on approaches that try to balance detailed textual analysis with wider conceptual reflection, without allowing one to completely overshadow the other.

A key part of the analysis involves close reading. This includes careful attention to the novel's narrative structure, recurring motifs, and its representation of technology, especially in relation to memory. Particular focus is given to the 'Fat Victory' simulation, which seems to function as more than just a plot element. It helps organise the novel's larger concerns with subjectivity, experience, and control. While close reading

can sometimes risk imposing too much coherence on a text, it remains useful for showing how meaning is built through patterns in language and form. In this study, it is treated not as an outdated method, but as a flexible and still relevant way of engaging with contemporary, technologically oriented fiction.

At the same time, the interpretation is informed by selected theoretical perspectives. The work of N. Katherine Hayles is particularly important, especially her argument that embodiment remains central even in highly technological contexts. This is read alongside Bernard Stiegler's account of memory as something shaped and mediated by technical systems. Together, these frameworks provide a useful way of thinking about how 36 Streets represents neural simulation and the instability of memory. Other ideas from media theory and discussions of cognitive capitalism are also considered where relevant, especially when the novel touches on the commodification of experience. However, these perspectives are used with some caution, so that the reading does not become overly deterministic or reduce the text to a single explanatory model.

It is also important to place 36 Streets within a broader literary context. The analysis, therefore, makes selective comparisons with both earlier cyberpunk texts and more recent speculative fiction. The aim here is not to map out a complete history of the genre, but to highlight certain continuities and shifts. By bringing Napper's novel into conversation with other works, it becomes easier to see how it both draws on and reworks established cyberpunk themes, particularly in its treatment of the human-machine relationship.

Taken together, these elements form what can be described as a triangulated approach. This does not claim to offer a complete or final interpretation. Instead, it allows for a layered understanding of how the novel engages with larger questions about technology, memory, and subjectivity. The method remains open-ended, recognising that posthuman subjectivity is a complex and evolving concept that cannot be fully explained through a single framework.

Analysis and Discussion

If earlier cyberpunk often showed the meeting between humans and machines as a movement into some external digital space, 36 Streets seems to complicate that idea by shifting the focus inward. The key interaction no longer takes place in a separate virtual world but within the workings of the mind itself. What is at stake here is not just the enhancement of the body through technology, but a deeper change in how memory functions. In Napper's novel, memory is no longer stable or private. It becomes something that can be shaped, managed, and controlled. This shift makes it difficult to rely on earlier ideas of posthumanism that focused on transcendence or escape from the body.

Looking more closely at the "Fat Victory" simulation helps make this change clearer. On the surface, it appears to be a form of immersive entertainment that allows users to relive or experience war scenarios. However, reducing it to a simple narrative device would miss its larger role. The simulation seems to function as a system that produces and organises experience itself. It does not just represent events; it creates them in a way that feels real to the user. In this sense, it can be compared to what Bernard Stiegler calls tertiary retention, where memory is stored and reintroduced through technical means (17). What feels different in 36 Streets, however, is how immediate this process is. The technology does not feel like mediation from the outside. Instead, it works directly through the brain, making the distinction between memory and simulation difficult to detect.

This has important consequences for how we think about subjectivity. If, as N. Katherine Hayles argues, cognition is always tied to the body, then altering memory through technology does not remove the body from the process. Rather, it changes how the body itself participates in experience. The subject is still embodied, but that embodiment is now shaped by technological systems. Lin Thi Vu's interaction with "Fat Victory" shows this quite clearly. The memories she acquires through the simulation are not experienced as artificial additions. They feel real, as if they had lived. This makes it harder to distinguish between what has actually happened and what has been technologically produced, raising questions about how identity is formed.

It might seem useful to connect this to Donna Haraway's idea of the cyborg, where boundaries between human and machine become less clear. However, the comparison only goes so far. Haraway's cyborg is often seen as having the potential to challenge fixed categories and power structures. In 36 Streets, the situation appears more complicated. The merging of human and machine does not necessarily create freedom. In many cases, it seems to increase dependence on larger systems of control. Lin's technological enhancements do make her more capable, but they also tie her more closely to structures she cannot easily resist. The result is a form of hybridity that does not dissolve power, but may, in fact, deepen it in ways that are harder to recognise and challenge.

This tension becomes particularly visible when the economic dimensions of the simulation are taken into account. "Fat Victory" is not an open system; it is produced, circulated, and regulated within a framework that bears the imprint of corporate and state power. Here, the analysis intersects with discussions of cognitive capitalism, where affective and cognitive capacities are increasingly subjected to processes of commodification. As scholars such as Matteo Pasquinelli have argued, contemporary economies often rely on the extraction of value from cognitive labour and experience. Napper's novel appears to extrapolate this logic into a speculative register, presenting a world in which memory itself becomes a form of capital.

Such a formulation complicates more affirmative strands of posthumanist thought. Rosi Braidotti's emphasis on relationality and distributed subjectivity offers a compelling alternative to humanist individualism, yet it may not fully account for the asymmetrical distribution of power that structures technological access and control. In 36 Streets, relationality does not necessarily entail mutuality.

The networks that connect individuals to technological systems are mediated by institutions that shape the terms of that connection. Consequently, the posthuman subject that emerges in Napper's narrative is neither autonomous nor fully relational; it is situated within a field of forces that delimit its agency.
The novel's setting adds another layer to this discussion. By placing the story in a corporatised Hanoi, Napper avoids the more generic, placeless worlds often seen in earlier cyberpunk. Instead, the narrative feels grounded in a specific historical and political context. The influence of foreign corporate power suggests that technology does not develop in isolation; it is tied to larger systems of economic and geopolitical control. In this sense, the novel echoes recent work in global science fiction studies, which shows that technological change is uneven and shaped by histories of power and dependency. Memory manipulation, then, cannot be seen as only a technical issue. It is also political, raising questions about who controls the past, how history is shaped, and whose experiences are given legitimacy.

These concerns are not only present at the level of content but also in the way the novel is structured. The narrative moves between different layers of experience, often without clearly marking the boundary between simulation and reality. This creates a sense of uncertainty for the reader. It becomes difficult to tell what is authentic and what has been artificially produced. Such formal choices are not accidental. They reflect the novel's deeper interest in how memory works when it is shaped by technology. In this way, form and theme work together. The reader, like the protagonist, has to navigate a world where the usual markers of truth and experience are no longer reliable.

Because of this, the novel does not lead to a single, fixed interpretation. Instead, it opens up a series of tensions. On one level, 36 Streets seems to support posthumanist ideas about the breakdown of clear boundaries between humans and machines. At the same time, it raises important questions about what happens when those boundaries become unstable. The merging of technology with memory and cognition does not automatically lead to freedom or new possibilities. It may also create new forms of vulnerability, where the most personal aspects of human life can be shaped or controlled by external systems.
Seen in this light, Napper's work can be understood as part of a broader shift within cyberpunk. The focus is no longer only on the excitement of technological expansion or access to new digital spaces. Instead, attention turns to what happens when technology becomes internal, shaping how people think, remember, and understand themselves. The boundary between human and machine still matters, but it is no longer something that exists at the edge of a virtual world. It becomes part of everyday experience, something that

individuals must live with rather than cross.

Conclusion

What 36 Streets ultimately highlights is not a break from posthumanist thinking, but a shift in what is at stake. Earlier cyberpunk often suggested that merging with technology might allow humans to move beyond their limits. Napper's novel, however, treats that idea with some caution. It does not reject the human altogether. Instead, it shows how the idea of the human is being reshaped within systems that are increasingly intrusive and difficult to escape.

From this angle, the merging of human and machine does not simply erase the self. Rather, it produces a subject that is both expanded and unsettled. Memory becomes especially important here. As Bernard Stiegler argues, memory has always been shaped by technical systems, but 36 Streets seems to go further. In the novel, technology does not just store or mediate memory; it begins to shape how memory itself is formed. This raises a troubling possibility. If memories can be created or altered so seamlessly, it becomes harder to say which experiences truly belong to the subject.

At the same time, the novel complicates more hopeful versions of posthumanism. Rosi Braidotti, for example, describes the posthuman subject as relational and interconnected. While this remains a useful way of thinking, Napper's narrative suggests that these connections are not neutral. Access to technology is uneven, and its effects are shaped by institutions and power structures. In this sense, the novel reflects broader concerns about how cognitive and emotional life can be shaped, and even exploited, within contemporary economic systems. And for this reason, it may be more useful to think of the posthuman condition here not as freedom, but as a form of constraint or capture. This does not mean that the agency disappears completely. Rather, it becomes something that is constantly negotiated within limits set by technological and political systems. The subject is neither fully in control nor entirely controlled, but exists in a fragile balance between the two.

Seen in this light, 36 Streets also suggests a shift within cyberpunk itself. The focus is no longer on entering digital worlds, but on living within systems that shape thought and perception from the inside. Technology is not something external to be accessed; it becomes part of everyday experience. Napper's novel does not resolve these tensions, but it makes them visible, leaving open the question of whether this condition should be understood as loss, transformation, or something in between.

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