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The Defeat of the big Other in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*

According to Slavoj Žižek in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the Lacanian Real is defined as “the brute, pre-symbolic reality which always returns to its place” as well as “the entity which must be constructed [after trauma] so that we can account for the distortions of the symbolic structure” (162). This symbolic structure is the language that provides the framework, the symbols, for the construction of the superficial Imaginary order. But in a postmodern world, this big Other is oppressive or corrupt and at times ineffectual leading to paranoia, cynicism or even ennui. The need for a new Other becomes increasingly apparent because the current Other no longer adequately shields us from the Real. The restructuring of the Symbolic order through the redefinition of signification—the development and acceptance of the Other of the Other—becomes mandatory because an awareness of the Real is too overwhelming. Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* provides an avenue toward a revised and updated Other by wresting power from the postmodern big Other and resituating this power in the hands of the speaker/user of language so that they may create this new and improved Other. *Snow Crash* seems to convey a sense of the possible, a heroic solution, and ultimately an element of rational human control—rendering society no longer helpless automata moving about in a cage constructed of signifiers. This control appears in many forms: manipulation of technology, history, people, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, language. The control of language by the users contradicts the

hopeless/helpless tendency within some postmodern theory. *Snow Crash* returns to a version of language that enables and enlightens rather than blinds and controls.

Stephenson's novel has attracted critical attention since its publication in 1992., Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Katherine Hayles, William Haney, and Sabine Heuser have discussed neurolinguistic interfaces, computer viruses as metaphors, posthumanism, cyborgs, postmodern/cyberpunk aesthetics, and virtual realities but the novel's use of Logos as an agent of freedom from the current Symbolic order has been neglected. There are a number of reasons for this omission. All of these subjects clearly focus on science and science fictional concepts. These discussions are understandable since Stephenson's novel has been referred to as a post-cyberpunk novel or postmodern science fiction novel. These topics are explicit in the plot, but the very nature of Logos argues for occlusion, much like the awareness of the Imaginary as a construct eludes popular acknowledgement. Instead, Stephenson selects a small group who can know/use Logos for the betterment of humanity, specifically Hiro in the Metaverse and Juanita in the real world of the novel—thus replacing the big Other of postmodernism with a new, hopeful, and empowering Other defined by those who take part in it. William Haney, in his book *Cyberculture, Cyborgs, and Science Fiction: Consciousness and the Posthuman*, however, argues “Snow Crash suggests that there is no access to Logos today except through silence”—that Logos exists in the space between “name and form, sound and meaning” (Haney 120-1). This position indicates a focus on the ephemeral quality of language, but Stephenson is nothing if not concrete in his use of empowering language. To insist his use is anything metaphysical is to misconstrue his means and his message.

Logos, for Stephenson is a tool for constructing and controlling worlds, much as Lacan's Symbolic order provides the framework for the Imaginary order.

This view of language as the controlling Symbolic order is certainly nothing new. It has even been given a scientific, rational name. In 1976, Richard Dawkins, in his seminal work *The Selfish Gene*, compared cultural data to genetic data in order to describe how certain social behaviors might be inherited or passed down through centuries of human development. Stephenson utilizes this idea in order to construct a world that is both controlled by technology and infected by cultural viruses. These viruses attack the memes by hacking through the meta-linguistic framework, or codes, underpinning the framework of the brain in order to bring about a change in their cultural system. These codes are rules designed to enforce a system of order. In Stephenson's text, these codes are both wet and dry; they impose order on humans as well as virtual avatars and the world these avatars inhabit. He uses this comparison several times in the novel. In Stephenson's view, "all information looks like noise until you break the code" (Stephenson 74). When Hiro, the protagonist and hero of the novel first learns of Snow Crash, he asks, "is it a virus, a drug, or a religion?," Juanita, a newly converted Christian and former hacker answers that it is all three. (Stephenson 200). This threat to society is at once a Symbolic and biologic—it has the power to change belief and physical behavior. As any system of codes would suggest, a change in the rules enforces a new, updated order under the control of those who write the code. This new system makes the mysterious scientific, the ancient modern, and the connected fragmented.

Stephenson explores language programming but instead of using Logos as architect of the Symbolic directly, he situates Logos in the ancient and lost language of

Sumer. According to the text, the language of Sumer was actually a string of syllables that represented memes, or *me*. Each *me* instructs the user in the skill for which it was designed. There were *mes* for baking bread, working with stone, being a mother, etc. Without these *mes*, the culture of Sumer would not have survived or flourished. By using the *me* of Enki which Stephenson describes as “rules or principles that control the operation of society, like a code of laws, but on a more fundamental level,” he makes a direct comparison to Dawkins’ meme (Stephenson 251). But the comparison doesn’t stop there; Daniel Grassian notes Stephenson’s creation of the *me* “argues that a mechanical infrastructure exists in the human mind and that subsequent technological advancements help make humans further mechanistic, and thereby subject to outside domination or hypnotization” (Grassian 253). But, in *Snow Crash*, the individual survives the reprogramming of the unified. Thus, *Snow Crash*, through its use of both wet and dry encoding, simultaneously makes a connection between all living things but quickly sends them scattering as the individual resists the reprogramming through the power enabled by Logos. The Sumerian language was eventually erased because it was realized that a language used for building a civilization could also be used to enslave that nation. This theoretical back-history sets the stage for the scholar/archeologist/evangelist L. Bob Rife to discover the language of Sumer’s peculiar talent for reprogramming individuals by the use of *me* that can redefine neurolinguistic patterns already established since early civilization to suit the architect/programmer.

Like the sprawling interconnected mythology within the story, the message of the novel uncovers and relays to a contemporary society the dangers of what Richard Dawkins describes as the meme. At a deep level, this meme transmits the cultural biases

of a civilization. Stephenson legitimizes this concept of the meme and mythologizes it by attributing it to the ancient and fallen cradle of civilization, Sumer. Likewise, he appropriates mythology and Judeo-Christianity for his post-cyberpunk world, a world that is as diverse as Babel after the Infocalypse described as the scattering of civilization by destroying the language of Sumer. In this modern culture, like the scattering described by the Tower of Babel story, Stephenson's particular take on the broken world is a Los Angeles consisting of separate antagonistic, walled, armed, and guarded Burbclaves of different ethnic/religious/corporate interest groups. Antithetically, the Metaverse—an online virtual world—appears to provide a slightly less segregated society similar to the one in which we now live, divided not by literal walls, but by appearance and level affluence. Carl Boehm has noted that “Hiro understands the disorder of the physical world, an ironically shadowy world that is a reflection of the ideal world he has created in the Metaverse, so he reverse engineers a utopia based on justice by understanding the imperfections of his ‘real’ world and thus encoding a truth in the virtual realm based on those imperfections he finds in the physical world” (Boehm 398). Few would fully agree that the virtual world depicted in *Snow Crash* exemplifies a utopia. In fact, looking at the two worlds in *Snow Crash*, individuality and creativity that Stephenson admires in computer hackers and considers the essence of human nature. As *Snow Crash* demonstrates, however, the posthuman ‘infocalypse’ serves primarily to undermine the uniqueness of human nature” (Haney 127). This commentary on the uniqueness of as Zizek would argue the authenticity of human experience plays out in the articulation of the Metaverse. Ironically, according to Zizek, a virtual world, like the Metaverse, “provides reality itself divested of its substance, of the resisting hard kernel of

the Real—in the same way that decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real thing, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so” (Zizek 38). In the text, this manifests as generic and specialized avatars, a landscape that defies traditional boundaries, and a denial of the laws of physics. One can appear in pixilated monochrome colors or high definition vibrance. One can drive hundreds of miles per hour forever without reaching a boundary. One can be invisible and float above the heads of other avatars or walk on the Street sampling the millions of wares available to anyone. However, it is a constructed reality. In the text, the threat of computer viruses in this Metaverse becomes a threat to the coded Symbolic order because of the similarity between Sumerian and computer programming language. The neurolinguistic pathways that Sumerian works across are similar to the ways in which programming languages must control an operating system—there must always be rules. For example, “When Hiro wrote the Black Sun’s sword-fighting algorithms, code that was later picked up and adopted by the entire Metaverse—he discovered that there was no good way to handle the aftermath....So Hiro had to kludge something together, in order that the Metaverse would not, over time, become littered with inert, dismembered avatars that never decayed” (Stephenson 102). Like the real world in the novel, the Metaverse must be adapted to deal with real problems—like trash. And with this trash comes the difficulty of all operating systems, i.e. the big Other—control. Who controls the operating system? Who has agency? When a virus is unleashed in the Metaverse, it threatens those who are jacked in because the virus targets the brainstem. It is described to Hiro as similar to learning computer code. As he became more proficient at writing code, he was actually remapping his neural pathways: “You were forming pathways in your brain. Deep

structures. Your nerves grow new connections as you used them--...your bioware self-modifies—the software becomes part of the hardware. So now you're vulnerable—all hackers are—to a *nam-shub*" (Stephenson 126). It is precisely for this reason that Hiro must do something about the virus being unleashed upon the hackers in the Metaverse. This virus could reprogram all of the people who write code for the Metaverse and place them under the control of one person, depriving them of agency and reducing them to automata.

In *Snow Crash*, Virtual Reality and the Symbolic come crashing together so that in order to save those in the real world, the protagonist must actually defeat the virus in the virtual world, subverting the superficial facsimile as presented in Zizek and once again giving agency to humans to revolt against language and the pervasive and controlling big Other. L. Bob Rife's desire for a unified encoding of humanity is disrupted by the human revolting against the postmodern big Other and attempting individuation. The current Symbolic order is subverted in favor of the individual's right to program himself/herself. Stephenson's distrust of the Imaginary order symbolized by Dawkin's memes and the assimilated Sumerian civilization is finally exorcised by his hero's programming savvy and his struggle for individuation: "Hiro recognizes that language of any sort is only a signifying tool by which one conveys ideas to another, and he realizes that his process is flawed because language itself is a shadowy replication of truth. Hiro sees past the replication of language into the true process of communication" (Boehm 400). He breaks free of the binds of language, subverts the big Other, and constructs a new Other that will not bind all who dwell within it, rather he enables others to act as their own agents of change and control. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay and Katherine

Hayles have agreed that “In the novel's vision, human rationality, so much a part of the liberal subject, acts as a higher level coding of allowing humanity to escape from the ultimate dehumanization that the identification of machine and computer presages,” and empowers humans to act as individual masters of their own reality. (Csicsery-Ronay). Alternately, Haney argues that “*Snow Crash* supports the preservation of individuality, autonomy and consciousness by negating the equation of humans with computers” (Haney 129). And while Haney concludes that this move also reduces autonomy with an absence of consciousness, I would argue that it is in fact a product of consciousness that produces the ability to withstand the preset Symbolic order or deep structural programming that is indicative of the postmodern cynicism and resultant paranoia or ennui. Just as Hiro’s Snow Scan antivirus provides a vaccine for the digital Snow Crash, the nam-shub of Enki, the literal speech that acts, the Logos, inoculates those who would come in contact with the physical virus. But it isn’t enough to imagine a vaccine. Stephenson ends the novel with two figures whose code changes reality, either Virtual or Physical—Hiro and Juanita. While Hiro is capable of designing and manipulating the Metaverse, Juanita leaves the scene with the power to reprogram people in reality. Juanita can theoretically design and manipulate people: “[she] ...becomes a ‘ba’al shem,’ a mystic who knows the secret power of words and uses them to bring about material changes in the world” (Hayles 276). Haney adds: “[Juanita] of all the characters comes closest to going beyond duality, to embodying pure consciousness and the unity of name and form, sound and meaning, but the novel can only represent this state metaphorically by way of negation....The novel implies that Juanita has found an ineffable balance between these opposites, namely the void in thought” (Haney 128).

Again, I contend it is unnecessary for Stephenson to imagine Juanita's new ability. It has already been considered in the case of L. Bob Rife. Instead, the very fact that a person can possess this ability and that people throughout history have manifested it—Enki, the Deuteronomists of Judaism, Christ, and now Juanita—proves that humans have agency and are not relegated to automata of the Lacanian big Other.

Zizek argues postmodern cynicism, paranoia, and helplessness are caused by the destabilization of the big Other, the Imaginary order, and a frustration with its institutions. This frustration leads to a kind of Symbolic revolution, inevitably culminating in the formulation of an Other of the Other and a new and improved Symbolic order. This idealized version is Logos, the original world-builder, creator, and freedom-giver. In *Snow Crash* we have an articulation of this revolution. Stephenson imagines a society that upon the threat of a more oppressive big Other replaces the postmodern operating system of helplessness with a Logos operating system that allows for empowerment, agency, and ultimate control over religion, knowledge, history, and language ushering in a new and improved Symbolic order of our own conscious design.

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