Diamond Age: + Stephenson Bio Essay, Research Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Few writers are as eloquent, comprehensible, or knowledgeable in their writings as cyberpunk novelist, Neal Stephenson. Stephenson has an imagination seldom seen in this day and age. The acclaim with which his novels are received worldwide is largely due to the unconventional yet prophetic messages and seemingly insignificant intricacies included in each of his books. It is easy to see how his brilliance radiates from his novels, compelling you to read on into the plot twists and thrilling climaxes that keep you on your toes. People who enjoy high quality literature should definitely acquaint themselves with Neal Stephenson and his style of writing and attempt to discern what exactly makes Stephenson arguably one of the best authors in the history of the cyberpunk genre.

NEAL STEPHENSON’S PERSONAL LIFE AND LITERARY CAREER

Neal Stephenson was born in Ft. Meade Maryland on October 31, 1959. Stephenson comes from a long line of intelligentsia, whom he lovingly regards as “propeller heads” (”Cryptonomicon” screen 1). His father, David Town, was a professor of Electrical Engineering, his mother, Janet Stephenson (maiden name Jewsbury), was a lab technician, and her father was a biologist (”Neal Stephenson” screen 3). In 1985, Stephenson married Ellen Marie Lackermann, homologous to Stephenson’s scientific lineage, is a practicing physician (”Cryptonomicon” screen 1).

Stephenson attended Boston University intending to major in Physics. That plan was changed once he realized that the geography department was “using the coolest computers” (”Neal Stephenson presented by Science Fiction and Fantasy World” screen 1). After graduating in 1981, He became conscious of the reality of work as he found that he could not get a decent job with his credentials. Stephenson went from job to job, searching for something he could stick with, following a strict rule he made for himself when he was younger:

One day in fourth or fifth grade, my best friend came to school wearing leather shoes. Until then, we had all worn tennis shoes. And I still wore tennis shoes. I was horrified that my peers, people close to me, were already showing signs of domestication. I had never worn leather shoes that didn’t hurt my feet. At that point, I began thinking about occupations I might be able to find for myself that would enable me to wear tennis shoes, or not wear anything on my feet at all. That was my litmus test for careers all the way through my teens and 20s. (”Breaking the Code with Neal Stephenson” page 7)

In the spirit of this “litmus test” Stephenson became a teaching assistant, a research assistant, a researcher, a library clerk, and finally, a writer.

Neal Stephenson has had a fairly successful writing career. He published his first book, The Big U, a year before he married, in 1984. Reminiscent of “National Lampoon’s Animal House,” The Big U focused on the students of a “Mega University” which was erected on a radioactive waste disposal site, and the various high jinks they execute (”Neal Stevenson” screen 1). Despite a recent gain in interest for the book, Stephenson said in Index.html, “The Big U is what it is: a first novel written in a hurry by a young man a long time ago” and “If the book were judged on its own intrinsic merits, it would not attract such a high price or engender such curiosity” (par. 19). Somewhat contradictory to Stephenson’s thoughts, Alan Cheuse of the New York Times Book Review stated that the book was “a lot of fun” and that it would interest it’s principal audience “alert and inquisitive students with a taste for campus comedy” (”Neal Stephenson” screen 1). Despite positive reviews, Stephenson still shuns his earliest work.

His second novel Zodiac: The Eco-Thriller, published in 1988, won an audience among eco-activists and radical ecologists (”Neal Stephenson” screen 1). Zodiac: The Eco-Thriller, was about a young Bostonian who ventures to humiliate powerful corporations by exposing to the public the corporations’ illegal pollution of the world’s oceans (Amazon.com: Buying Info: Zodiac: The Eco-Thriller par. 1-2). Steve Levy of Newsweek described Stephenson’s second novel as “a tale of ecoactivism that won the hearts of tree huggers” (screen 2). Zodiac: The Eco-Thriller earned excellent reviews such as the one preceding, and the praise of fans, however it failed to sell extremely well (”Neal Stephenson” screen 2).

After Zodiac: The Eco-Thriller, Stephenson began typing most of his work on computers. According to his interview with Michael Goldberg, writing on the computer posed certain problems to Stephenson’s working atmosphere (4). Stephenson explains in the same interview these problems and his interesting solution.

I tend to get very self-conscious when I’m working, and I’m easily distracted. Just the sound of my fingers hitting the keys distracts me. It used to be, when you typed on an electric typewriter, that the machine would hum away, squeaking, thundering, clacking or whacking against the paper, making noise. Now, on a computer, you can hear your fingers clicking the keys, but everything else is quiet. For some reason that’s distracting to me. It makes me self-conscious. But if I’ve got some tunes going so I can’t hear it, I seem to be much more productive. (Goldberg 4)

Stephenson listens to music tailored to the scene he intends on writing. Therefore, while he wrote his third novel he would listen to action packed music for the more fast-paced scenes in the book. According to Breaking the Code with Neal Stephenson, for his third book Neal Stephenson listened to “a great deal of loud, relentless, depressing music” (screen 2).

Stephenson’s third and most acclaimed novel the illustrious, Snow Crash, sold incredibly well. Zodiac: The Eco-Thriller gained attention, and his third novel used his newfound awareness to catapult him to a new status as one of the leading cyberpunk authors (”Neal Stephenson” screen 1). Snow Crash is about a young man named Hiro Protagonist a skilled hacker, samurai, and pizza delivery boy, who is fated to save the world from an ancient drug/virus, that threatens his futuristic civilization (”Amazon.com: Editorial Reviews: Snow Crash” par. 1-2). Lightly based on William Gibson’s Neuromancer, Neal Stephenson states, “Stephenson manages his own original and compelling take on what has become a clich in the science fiction field” (screens 1-2). This action-packed thriller gained Neal Stephenson attention from domestic venues thought to be the most difficult to reach for the cyberpunk genre. Alarming sales were more than backed up with ample commendation from critics (”Neal Stephenson” screen 1). Even noted science fiction novelist William Gibson praised the book “Fast-forwarded free-style mall mythology for the 21st Century” (”Amazon.com: Editorial Reviews: Snow Crash” par. 6). Snow Crash was Stephenson breakthrough novel; it set the stage for his next novels to be admired.

Diamond Age, Neal Stephenson’s fourth novel was published in 1995. The enormous publicity gained by Snow Crash gained Diamond Age a Hugo Award, a prestigious honor granted to best science fiction novel of the year (”Neal Stephenson” screen 2). During the writing of Diamond Age Neal confessed in Breaking The Code with Neal Stephenson that:

Screaming Trees and Alice in Chains were a couple of my favorite bands, and still are. I was listening to the entire Seattle gang. It sounds incredibly unimaginative of me. Soundgarden, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Screaming Trees, Alice in Chains, a little bit of Tad, the usual suspects. Some Sugar, too, I guess. (Goldberg screen 3)

Music definitely affected Stephenson’s writing style, as the more lethargic music of Diamond Age created a thoroughly laid back paper. Diamond Age is about a working class girl named Nell who is given a stolen book capable of teaching her all she needs to survive in life. Diamond Age was not an action packed thriller, similar to it’s predecessor Snow Crash, rather it was an intriguing look into a future relying almost completely on nanotechnology. Stephenson describes his work as “equal parts Victorian novel, fairy tale, and sci-fi; a tantalizing peak into the 21st century that bogs down in its various subplots” (Rambraut screen 1). This novel exhibited Stephenson’s ability to explain difficult technical concepts in a way that is not only easy to read, but interesting and fun (”Neal Stephenson” screen 2).

NEAL STEPHENSON’S PHILOSOPHICAL BELIEFS

Neal Stephenson’s Literary Beliefs

Neal Stephenson thinks of himself as a cyberpunk author. Cyberpunk is a division of the science fiction genre that has been particularly unpopular of late. The phrase cyberpunk was coined in the early 1980’s as a joke by the editor of Isaac Azimov’s sci-fi magazine, Gardner Dozois. Recently the cyberpunk genre has been subject to the bombardment of critics, the genre’s nihilistic nature, and negative outlook on the future of our species were unappealing to most readers. Terry Rossino was quoted in the Los Angeles Times saying, “After cyberpunk took off, a bunch of crappy authors wrote a bunch of terrible novels, pretty much killing the genre” (”Neal Stephenson mines history for his cyberpunk sagas” screen 3). Concurrently, those critics changed the title of Neal Stephenson’s genre in an attempt to separate him from the inferior authors of cyberpunk. About this Rossino added:

Stephenson is probably described as post-cyberpunk because he’s known to be a kinder, gentler or maybe just smarter, more talented writer. It’s a compliment to classify him as post-cyberpunk, because nobody wants anything to do with cyberpunk anymore (”Neal Stephenson mines history for his cyberpunk sagas,” screen 3).

Stephenson has his own opinions about the cyberpunk genre. He defends the genre to the fullest extent of his ability. In the following quote from the Los Angeles Times Stephenson offers a probable reason for his self-proclaimed genre’s recent fall in the eyes of critics “I think if you sit down and read some cyberpunk fiction, it’s not necessarily as nihilistic as the image it has” (screen 2). He goes on to say:

People tend to contrast cyberpunk with stuff ‘Star Trek,’ which presents this extremely optimistic view of the future–the idea that if we just had better technology, we could make all our social problems go away. So compared to that, cyberpunk might look a little bleak, because cyberpunk writers think that view is ridiculous. They do see social problems; they do see human nature not at its best. But I don’t think human nature in cyberpunk fiction is shown to be any worse than we’ve seen it to be in the 20th century (”Neal Stephenson mines history for his cyberpunk sagas” screen 2).

While being an extremely profound argument, it has failed to sway the thoughts of the critics (”Neal Stephenson mines history for his cyberpunk sagas” screen 1-3).

Authors of science fiction are often described as prophets (”Neal Stephenson presented by Science Fiction and Fantasy World” screen 1). These writers have the seemingly uncanny ability to disclose future advances in technology and society within the pages of their books. Neal Stephen has received this label, but believes that “when fiction anticipates reality [ ] it’s often a coincidence as the result of a writer’s prescience.” Stephenson goes on to refute the probability that science fiction authors are prophets, saying that ideas presented in sci-fi novels are as prophetic as a stopped clock (which is correct twice a day). Thus, the seemingly visionary novels produced by science fiction authors are correct as a matter of probability and previous experience in scientific fields. Stephenson believes that predicting is not, or should not be the focus of a good science fiction author. Rather, emphasis should be placed on studying the science and making a story internally consistent.

Neal Stephenson’s Scientific Beliefs

Neal Stephenson includes the most whimsical technologies in his novels. But are they really so far-fetched? When asked about the possibility of a real Metaverse, a fanciful combination of Internet, graphical computers, and virtual reality featured in Snow Crash, in the near future Stephenson gave an affirmative. He admitted to Chris Nashawaty in Foreseeable future:

Within the last year I’ve seen several demo projects, including WorldsAway (backed by Fujitsu). There’s any number of would-be Metaverses either coming out now or next year, but none as technically sophisticated as the one in Snow Crash. But I believe we’ll come pretty close to that model of the Internet in five years. (par. 3)

Stephenson also believes that the Metaverse, once fully realized will be asserted into many aspects of human life, and probably not for any good reason. He believes that the best interest of the media companies is to expose everyone to the Metaverse so better ratings are attained, more paying customers, and commercials reach more people. This might seem to pervade the Metaverse, but Stephenson declares that it is “morally ambiguous” and your outlook of the Metaverse is dependant on the content you are subjected to through it (Nashawaty screen 1). It could be used to entertain, with “daytime talk shows, or vulgar sitcoms, or even gambling,” or it could be used to educate the masses. Stephenson believes that a Metaverse would offer a wider selection of activities, so leisure time would not be wasted on the mediocre. He is wary of all the freedom offered by the Metaverse, people’s weaknesses would be easy to exploit in such a powerful medium, i.e. compulsive gamblers could gamble all day (Nashawaty screens 1-2).

Nanotechnology was the cornerstone of Diamond Age; Stephenson believes that this technology will advance our civilization considerably. Nanotechnology is the usage of microscopic “constructions” to perform a task. In Diamond Age, Stephenson writes of submicroscopic robots, used to perform various feats, from tagging criminals, to fighting war, to healing the sick. When asked exactly what nanotechnology is, Stephenson replied:

The basic idea is pretty simple. A girder that holds up a bridge is made up of atoms stuck together. If you could take those atoms and plunk them together in exactly the right way, like Tinkertoys, then you could make materials that are or millions of times stronger and ore reliable than we have now. So you could make a girder that was just as strong but much smaller and featherweight. You can make tiny little machines that are submicroscopic, and under the right conditions they could build. But they’re so small and delicate that they’d have work in complete darkness and in a vacuum… It’s bound to happen sooner or later (Nashawaty 2).

It appears, however arbitrarily, that Stephenson has predicted yet another technology. Recent advances in nanotechnology led to the creation of submicroscopic propellers, motors, and even power sources. The nation’s top scientists in the field have estimated that a fully operational submicroscopic robot is just over the horizon.

DOMINANT THEMES DEVELOPED IN STEPHENSON’S MAJOR WORKS

Female Protagonists

An example of a dominant theme is Stephenson’s unconventional usage of a female character as the protagonist. This theme is present in Stephenson’s best novels, Snow Crash and the award-winning Diamond Age. Although larger amounts of the novels’ actions are centered on a male character, “the true hero is young and female” (”Neal Stephenson” screen 2). Stephenson’s affinity for female protagonists is described in his quote from “Breaking the Code with Neal Stephenson”:

I think in many ways female characters are inherently more interesting because there’s more going on with them. Pulp fiction, science fiction, and technothriller-type fiction are full of rugged loner male characters who are completely disconnected from any sort of social or familial web of relationships. The reality is, there aren’t many men like that. One is even less likely to find women like that, so I think that a lot of times women characters are more interesting. (5)

The female protagonist included in Stephenson’s most popular works, adds uniqueness, as it is seldom seen in science fiction literature.

Ineffective Government

This is a repetitive theme in the cyberpunk genre (Avins screen 3). Loss of influence, or all out failure of government systems, is present in nearly all cyberpunk literature, and Stephenson’s novels are definitely not an exception. In Neal Stephenson’s Snow Crash the government is almost non-existent; instead, the United States have been divided into city-states founded by large corporations (”Amazon.com: Editorial Reviews: Snow Crash” para. 4). In Diamond Age Shanghai (and presumably the entire world) was split into tribes of people with differing goals, segregating the populace into separate, yet co-dependant “castes” (Goldberg 6). Stephenson has a poignant quote about his decision to display the government as weak and inefficient, “I think that if you do even a cursory reading of 20th century history, you can’t help but come away with a somewhat skeptical attitude towards government power” (”Diamond Geezer,” para. 17).

” A Little Flight of Fancy”

This theme can make or break any science fiction author. The theme refers to futuristic technology in sci-fi novels, if the technology is too outlandish it is deemed unbelievable and is looked down upon. As a rule, Neal Stephenson keeps the technology in his novels very much like as it is now, only with something extra. Stephenson says, “I think the best approach is to stay with hard science as far as it can go and then, if you want, go on a little flight of fancy – but try to blur the dividing line a little” (”Diamond Geezer” para. 27). This theme is implemented in all of Stephenson’s books. In Snow Crash the Metaverse is the prevalent technology, and despite its splendor, it is a simple cross between internet, graphical computers, and virtual reality.

Omnipresent Societal Dilemmas

Social tribulations are another common theme among cyberpunk authors. Critics often contrast cyberpunk author’s grim view of the future with Star Trek’s “all society’s problems have been abolished” outlook (Avins 2). Stephenson feels that Star Trek’s logic is, if there is enough for everyone, people will stop fighting and become peaceful (Diamond Geezer para 36). Stephenson also says:

We’re very close to a post-scarcity future right now – at least in my country. There’s poverty, but at least there’s not starvation, except in really odd places, and there’s disease but there’s not plague. There’s not people dying in the streets, and there’s homelessness, but most people can find a roof over their heads if they need it – it may be in a homeless shelter, but it’s something. it certainly hasn’t stopped people being nasty to each other. I mean, look at OJ. He wasn’t lacking for anything, nobody in that sick sub-culture in LA was lacking for anything, but all it did was remove the limits from how tawdry they could be to each other. That’s all post-scarcity did for them – break down the barriers that kept them from being as grotesque as they could theoretically be. (”Diamond Geezer” para. 37)

Stephenson believes that society can never get rid of its problems, because, as long as it is man’s nature to hate, it is also society’s nature. It is this outlook that Neal infuses, as a major theme, into each one of his books.

CONCLUSION

People who enjoy high quality literature should definitely acquaint themselves with Neal Stephenson and his style of writing and attempt to discern what exactly makes Stephenson arguably one of the best authors in the history of the cyberpunk genre. His novels have gained him fame such as the cyberpunk genre has seldom seen. Stephenson has been deemed by critics and colleagues alike the “Hacker Hemmingway” (”Neal Stephenson” screen 1). Stephenson’s skills, and popularity are indeed reminiscent of Hemmingway. As Neal Stephenson’s latest book Cryptonomicon is about to be sold, the fame from preceding novels creates a buzz among a newfound mainstream group of readers. Stephenson should be around writing novel for years to come.

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