Christopher D. Kilgore, "Bad Networks: From Virus to Cancer in Post-Cyberpunk Narrative." *Journal of Modern Literature* **40. 2 (2016): 165-183.**

Cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction which represents the future as a dystopia combining elements of technological development and social degradation. It usually features marginalized characters which combat totalitarian systems by employing outstanding computer skills and, therefore, using the system against itself. An important part of their arsenal are computer viruses, the metaphor which Christopher D. Kilgore discusses in *Bad Networks: From Virus to Cancer in Post-Cyberpunk Narrative*, and which, he argues, has been in some instances further developed into a new cancer-metaphor.

Kilgore starts his discussion by stating that viruses are ambivalent entities existing between life and nonlife. He traces the importation of the concept from biology to computer science and reflects on how the theme was subsequently embraced by the cyberpunk narratives in which the "virus has adopted an equivocal cultural coding, seen variously as a tool for liberation, repression, or megalomania" (168). He also affirms that literary criticism has traditionally interpreted the rebellious anti-establishment of cyberpunk narratives as ambiguous – at once commemorating and criticizing late capitalism – and believes post-cyberpunk, developing from the 1990s onwards, is aware of this paradox, welcoming it as a means through which to question its own assumptions.

Kilgore then turns to the analysis of *Snow Crash* (1992), by Neal Stephenson, a romance in which world domination is sought by actually employing a computer virus against humans, in other words, somehow turning a digital immaterial entity into a biological one. Kilgore argues that this plot-device blends the digital "computer network" and the "human social network", producing what he names as "a medium-independent info-virus". In conclusion, by merging the virus schema and various notions of "information", *Snow Crash* manages to move "from computer 'systems' to human 'systems'" (170).

The analysis then turns to the character of Agent Smith in *The Matrix* (1999) and its sequels. After his interaction with Neo, Agent Smith "un-plugs" himself from the Matrix and gains the ability to replicate indefinitely and to infect human digital avatars, becoming, thus, a medium-independent info-virus. Kilgore claims, however, that Smith's new skills and his search for immortality actually shift the virus-based schema into a cancer-based one.

In order to illustrate this point, Kilgore discusses some arguments presented by Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and combines them with further developments in cancer research as presented by Siddhartha Mukherjee in *The Emperor of All Maladies* (2010). He states that many critics have deconstructed Sontag's claim that metaphorical language in medical discourse should be abandoned altogether, but accepts her interpretation that the cancer metaphor creates a "genocidal effect" within the body politic. Kilgore then specifies that his objective is not to equate Smith to "malignancy", as understood by Sontag, but to show that the pattern of *mutation > replication > search of immortality* is parallel to cancer itself. The author then argues that, since Smith cancerous skills were acquired by interacting with Neo, it follows that the hero is actually a carcinogenic retrovirus, which gives new

light to the interdependence of their relationship and challenges the superficial good/evil dichotomy normally employed by critics.

Kilgore concludes that the passage from an info-virus to an info-cancer schema is employed to recognize "the problematics of the cyberpunk relationship with techno-capitalism" and that, instead of stating simplistic dichotomies, the plot's form "see the oppositions themselves as instabilities inherent in all ideologies of growth" (175).

Kilgore examines next Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007), a post-post-colonial experimental novel in which a scientist called Mycroft Ward tries to preserve his disembodied consciousness by producing written notes which take possession of the personality of others, thus creating another medium-independent info-virus. However, Ward colonizes his victims bodily as well as intellectually, which leads Kilgore to affirm: "if Agent Smith is the Matrix's leukaemia . . . , then Ward is a tumour in the entirety of human society" (178). He points next to some elements of self-criticism within Hall's text which attack the cyberpunk's topos of escaping death and parallels, at the same time, the unlimited growth of the international financial market. Kilgore then concludes that the cancer-schema is, at once, a criticism of techno-capitalism and a traditional application of the war metaphor to cancer.

The article is well-written and convincing and offers an interesting extension of Sontag's arguments on the representation of cancer in medical discourse and artistic literature.

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