Resilient Cyborgs: Trauma and the Posthuman in Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991)

Abstract:

This article reads Pat Cadigan's Arthur C. Clarke Award-winning novel *Synners* (1991), from the perspectives of trauma studies and posthumanism to analyze the representation of the cyborged (post)human in cyberspace. My main focus is Cadigan's depiction of a posttraumatic world whose living conditions invite escape, only to emphasize the fact that escape through technological transcendence is not an option, and neither is the rejection of technology altogether. Despite this bleak scenario, the novel leaves some room for optimism in the figuration of a posthuman form of resilience, inspiring reflection about future forms of engagement with technology. As this article attempts to prove, *Synners* resorts to the tropes of the cyborg and cyberspace to explore the implications of subjectivity and embodiment within technoscience. In so doing, the novel opens a critical space for interrogation of the relationship between trauma, the posthuman body and digital technology.

Keywords: posttraumatic culture, the posthuman, critical posthumanism, Pat Cadigan, *Synners*

Over the past few years, the concepts of the cyborg and cyberspace have received significant cultural and critical attention, being, as Jenny Wolmark puts it, "an especially apt expression of the simultaneous fascination with, and anxiety about, the rapid changes brought about by the new information and biotechnologies" (1). Of all the subgenres of speculative fiction (SF), cyberpunk is probably the one that has most consistently engaged with these metaphors. Often set in the near future, cyberpunk narratives confront readers with a dystopian world characterized by the preponderance of information, the centrality of cyberspace, the encounter and fusion of technology and the human, and the ubiquity of a global network of communication. It often includes staple plot elements such as artificial intelligences, genetic manipulation, altered states of consciousness, neurochemistry, body modification and enhancement, electronic and biological viruses, and direct brain-computer interface—techniques which, as Bruce Sterling explains in his often-quoted preface to the cyberpunk anthology *Mirrorshades* (1986), "radically redefin[e] the nature of humanity, the nature of the self" (xiii). In the same vein, Veronica Hollinger usefully reads in cyberpunk narratives "an overwhelming fascination, at once celebratory and anxious, with technology and its immediate—that is, *unmediated*—effects upon human being-in-the-world" (176; italics in the original). Scott Bukatman sums it up best when he claims that "[t]here is underlying these works an uneasy but consistent sense of human obsolescence, and at stake is the very definition of the human" (20). Pat Cadigan, acclaimed by *The Guardian* as "The Queen of

Cyberpunk" (in Kraus 130),[1] manifests in her works a similar preoccupation with the status of being within the late-capitalist, information-overloaded, post-industrial society of the near future. Key driving concerns in *Synners* (1991), Cadigan's second novel, are the redefinition of what it means to be human and the ontological crisis that results from the loss of an unproblematic 'real' (as opposed to the virtual).

Winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, *Synners* displays typical cyberpunk narrative style and themes. Through a mosaic structure of constantly shifting focalization, it unravels a mystery plot through three intertwined stories that progressively coalesce as the novel moves forward. The first one deals with a group of outlaw hackers and Art Fish, the self-aware virus turned AI that they have created by inputting information into the net. Sam—Cassandra Ludovic—has received an encrypted message from fellow hacker Keely with Visual Mark's medical records and the plans to put some special implants, or "sockets," in his head. These, we learn, allow for direct interface between the brain and the net but, unexpectedly, can also cause strokes. Visual Mark is the co-protagonist of the second of *Synners*' plotlines. He and Gina are rock music video synthesizers—'synners.' They find themselves working for Diversifications, Inc., a megacorporation that has acquired the socket patent and wants to exploit it to produce entertainment products that will be consumed as vicarious virtual reality (VR) experiences by 'socketed' individuals, allowing them to live "a waking dream . . . like a real experience, . . . an out-of-body experience" (Cadigan 73).[2] The third storyline is that of Gabe Ludovic, a derelict employee at the Entertainment Division of Diversifications who feels the need to escape his miserable existence through VR. Caught by Manny Rivera, his unprincipled boss, with the unwilling help of hacker Keely, Gabe is allowed to keep his job on condition that he gets sockets too, which incidentally brings him close to Gina. They develop a stormy relationship as the novel progresses, complicated by Gina's obsession with Mark. The three plotlines converge when Mark, who has become addicted to cyberspace and is driven by the fervent wish to "get out of meat-jail" for good (252), suffers a major cerebral stroke while online, which kills his body but not his consciousness. This stroke becomes a sort of self-aware computer virus that spreads through the net, causing communications all over the world to collapse and killing any socketed person plugged to it. Sam, her hacker friends, Gina and Gabe must figure out how to defeat the spike in order to save Art Fish and Mark's newly disembodied self—merged now into one virtual being, "Markt"—and restore global communications.

The following discussion approaches *Synners* from the perspectives of trauma studies and critical posthumanism in order to explore its representation of the traumatized, cyborged (post)human in cyberspace. The analysis focuses on Cadigan's depiction of a posttraumatic universe characterized by the infiltration of technology into every aspect of private and public life, by the boundless power and control of megacorporations, and by the threat posed by information overload. The resulting state of alienation, loss of agency and disorientation leads citizens to seek to escape the vicissitudes of being in the physical world through technological and ontological transcendence. However, the hope to reach liberation and cyber-immortality is proved to be a chimera, while the rejection of technology altogether is shown to be equally misguided. Despite its bleak scenario, the novel leaves some room for hope in the figuration of a posthuman form of resilience, inspiring reflection about future forms of engagement with technology. In so doing, *Synners* opens a critical space for interrogation of the relationship between trauma, the posthuman body and digital technology.

Prelude: Trauma and Posthumanism

As this brief plot synopsis suggests, *Synners* engages with a number of key concerns that only recently have started to be addressed by literary and cultural critics in the context of the imbrication of the paradigms of trauma and posthumanism. Speculative Fiction in general, and cyberpunk in particular, have often resorted to the figure of the posthuman being to represent subjectivity and embodiment beyond the constraints of humanism. As a result, SF has become the genre of choice for most critics engaging with the posthuman.[3] Nevertheless, SF has been frequently disregarded by trauma critics, presumably because, as Roger Luckhurst explains, SF texts do not rely on "what is considered to be an appropriate aesthetics for the representation of trauma," and the discourse of trauma has often been "suspicious of the investment in narrative pleasure often equated with mass cultural forms like SF" ("Future shock" 159).

The theories around the notions of trauma and the posthuman have become, in recent years, key frameworks to approach contemporary culture and its products. Critical posthumanism, generally characterized by an opposition to, and transcendence of, humanism, foregrounds questions regarding what constitutes the human, exploring the boundaries of consciousness, subjectivity and the body. The field began to be articulated with the publication of Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985), which brings attention to the fuzziness of the limits

between the boundaries that separate the binaries human/animal, organic/machinic and physical/non-physical. Troubled by transhumanist fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, posthumanist critics such as Katherine N. Hayles have called for "a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies, […] that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity" (5). The relationship between technology, subjectivity and embodiment is, indeed, a key concern for posthumanist critics, many of whom have championed "an ethically responsible model of embodied posthuman subjectivity which enlarges rather than decreases the range of bodies and subjects that matter" (Vint 190).

As for trauma theory, it focuses on the representation of the effects of psychological trauma on consciousness and its inscriptions upon the body, leading to diverse interpretations and redefinitions of being. Trauma studies originated in the 1990s from the work of Yale critics Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. These, together with historian Dominick LaCapra, famously established connections between medical notions about psychological trauma and PTSD that had emerged after the Vietnam War, Freud's theories about hysteria, and deconstructionist discourse about reference, representation and the limits of language. They articulated a view of trauma as amnesic, aporetic, unspeakable, unrepresentable and of belated effects, forming the core of what is now considered classical trauma theory. However, in more recent years, many dissenting voices have been raised against what is perceived as this first wave of trauma theory's limited focus and scope. Among other issues, some critics have contested its exclusive focus on events rather than systems (see Brown 18; Craps 49; Root 240), while others have addressed its overshadowing of the psychobiological phenomenon of resilience (see Konner 300).

Despite their apparent differences, the two frameworks intersect in conspicuous ways. First, they share a strong reliance on liminality. As mentioned above, posthumanism is particularly interested in the boundaries between key cultural binaries such as body/mind, human/machine, natural/artificial and transcendence/immanence, and in how these affect the articulation of the human subject within technoscience. As such, the quintessential posthuman being is the cyborg. A hybrid of organism and machine, physical and non-physical, the cyborg metaphor blurs the limits between humanity and technology, while also representing a radical shift in subjectivity. As

for trauma theory, the traumatic experience is commonly understood by trauma critics to be "enacted in a liminal state, outside the bounds of 'normal' human experience, and the subject is radically ungrounded" (Tal 15). Trauma places the survivor in a condition of liminality, caught between the present and the past (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 2). The traumatic event is thought to be both lived and not lived, in that it is "not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in a repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" (Caruth, *Trauma* 4-5; italics in the original). Additionally, the traumatic experience often blurs the distinctions between different subject positions associated with trauma (see LaCapra 79).

Traumatized cyborgs in a state of liminality abound in *Synners*. A central one is Visual Mark, the 'synner' who enthusiastically welcomes the sockets that allow him to directly jack into the net, setting into motion an irreversible process of "change for the machines" (105). This process is swayed by his obsession with the idea that "the brain feels no pain," that "[t]here doesn't have to be pain" (447). Gabe similarly feels the need to escape the unbearable reality of his dissolving family, alienating job and general sense of futility and disconnection from the people and the world around him. With the help first of a headmount and hotsuit that provide full body coverage, and then connected through his newly installed sockets, Gabe spends his days lost in interactive VR scenarios, addicted to the uncomplicated, responsibility-free life that he leads there, which offers the possibility of simply reloading the program at an earlier point and starting over if he messes up. When unplugged, Gabe seems to have trouble telling apart simulation and reality, as his imagination has come to operate largely through Marly and Caritha—his virtual playmates—as a crutch for reality. This may be read as a coping mechanism based on imagination: "*Attention*, Marly's voice said in his mind. *This is not a simulation*" (213; italics in the original). However, Visual Mark and Gabe are not the only wounded cyborgs; as we will see presently, *Synners* is populated by characters who inhabit a posttraumatic world and exist in "a continuum between the terms 'human' and 'technology'" (Balsamo 136).

In his thought-provoking discussion of abduction narratives, Aris Mousoutzanis brings to the fore another point of contact between trauma theory and posthumanism: the convergence of trauma, memory, and information in the context of "a more general trend to theorise and perceive the human psyche as an information system" in the present cultural moment (328). This understanding originated from path-breaking developments in the fields of genetics and

cybernetics in the 1940s and 50s. Later, the idea was rekindled by Hans Moravec's famous fantasy that it would soon be possible to download human consciousness onto a computer (see Hayles 1). These conceptualizations of information are key in the definition of posthuman culture and identity. In trauma theory, the traumatic experience is conceptualized as information that, owing to its overwhelming nature, fails to be registered in a conventional way, affecting the brain's normal processing mechanisms (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 6). In Mousoutzanis's words, "[w]hen the human subject is experiencing a traumatic incident, the psychic apparatus finds itself in a state of 'information overload'" (339). Indeed, memories of the traumatic event often return as intrusive images that overwhelm and disrupt people's coping mechanisms, locking them in an endless circle of traumatic return (see Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 2).

One of the issues that most distinctly singularizes cyberpunk narratives in general, and *Synners* in particular, is the engagement with, and criticism of, the conditions of the Information Age—information manipulation and information overload being key concerns. As Anne Balsamo aptly puts it, "as an example of the cyberpunk meditation on the posthuman condition, *Synners* posits a world populated by 'Homo datum', people . . . for whom disconnection from the information economy is not an option" (136). Information as memory that intrusively resurfaces and repeatedly returns to haunt the protagonists is a central element in the novel. As we will see, this is true not only in terms of theme, but also from a formal perspective, with the repetition of some catchphrases throughout the narrative. In *Synners*, information, memory, and trauma intersect in conspicuous ways to represent the characters' plight to negotiate their posthuman identity.

A Posttraumatic Universe

True to its generic allegiances, the setting in *Synners* is that of a decayed, bleak, hallucinatory near-future dystopia, where "the corporations [have taken] over the world" (122), and all that matters is the control of information. The novel opens at the Mimosa, a debris-laden district of Los Angeles devastated by an earthquake and abandoned during the "postmillennial madness" that ensued (8). The area is now populated by outlaw hackers who survive among addicts and other outcasts on seal-packed food that they obtain in return for hacking jobs. Those living outside the Mimosa do not seem to be much better off. The LA of the novel is depicted as an oppressive urban maze of endlessly congested avenues riddled with surveillance cameras. Society is characterized by the

incorporation of technology into every single aspect of private and public life, producing disorientation and alienation. Gabe, for instance, is shown to have a closer relationship with his dataline module Melody Cruz than with his wife and daughter, despite the fact that even "she" mocks Gabe for his longing for connection: "If I'd known I was going to end up like this when I agreed to license myself for dataline modules, I'd have slit my wrists" (79). Concern for one's well-being seems to come only from Dr. (Art) Fish, the virus/AI that has colonized the net and warns consumers against the dangers of caffeine when they select coffee at a drive-thru.

Synners also depicts a corrupt judiciary system and government that favor the interests of multinational megacorporations such as Diversifications, which exploit technology and people for profit. Indeed, it seems no accident that the novel contains several references to the hypothetical existence of clandestine labs where human bodies would be farmed for "fresh, natural-no-synthetics neurotransmitter" (41). The most conspicuous example of the boundless power of the megacorporations to curtail agency and subjugate the individual is Gabe, who is forced to undergo the socket procedure as condition to keep his job. Also Keely, a young hacker who accidentally becomes State's evidence in a case of "unlawful congress with a machine" (122), and is handed over to Diversifications under the threat of being sent to prison himself. Once at 'The Dive,' Keely is kept tethered on a "chemical leash" (120) and forced to use his skills to hack Gabe, eventually allowing the megacorporation to obtain great profits. Keely's crime, we learn, was to find while he was 'hacking around' Visual Mark's brain scan and the plans to give him sockets.

In *Synners* information is not only the most valuable good and commodity, but also a key source of power. Fez, one of the hacker characters, explains it best: "[k]nowledge is power. But power corrupts. Which means the Age of Fast Information is an extremely corrupt age in which to live" (57). More importantly, Anne Balsamo is right in identifying in *Synners* a translation of a strong cultural anxiety and a sense of skepticism about information overload and information manipulation, which she aptly links to Baudrillard's commentary on postmodernity: "We are in a universe where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (in Balsamo 139). For Baudrillard, the information overload produced by the oversaturation of media culture entails the loss of the real: "so many messages and signals have been produced and transmitted that they will never find the time to acquire any meaning. Fortunately for us! Fortunately, we ignore 99% of all information […]. The tiny amount that we nevertheless absorb already subjects us to

perpetual electrocution" ("Anorexic Ruins" 30). Furthermore, the bombardment of information to which we are subjected is so great that there is a "definitive uncertainty about reality," a "completely new species of uncertainty, which results not from the *lack* of information but from information itself and even from an *excess* of information" (Baudrillard, "The Masses" 580; italics in the original). In the novel, the characters struggle through the mystery plot as the novel unfolds, trying to outsmart the "system of information dispersal" that "keep[s] 'em confused and in the dark" (209).

In the dystopian near-future scenario that *Synners* depicts, information is not just a source of power or anxiety; it is also pervasive and, like technology, it infiltrates every sphere of existence. The fact that people's flesh is used as filing system is highly symbolic in that sense. Bodies become hardcopies for information, which is stored in the skin through tattoos. More conspicuously, the gathering and processing of information is associated in the book with an incurable disease, a condition of being "incurably informed" (4). The "information frenz[ied]" (22) hacker community that the novel depicts obsessively devotes their lives to plundering information from the omnipotent megacorporations. Their activities often force hackers to 'jump out' or get them 'canned'. Information, however, can not only send you to prison or force you into hiding; it may actually kill your physical body, as we soon learn is the case of the spike. Cadigan thus follows other cyberpunk writers' lead in representing the preponderance of information as a malignant virus that not only endangers electronic data in cyberspace, but also poses a threat to human survival in the physical world. Information is thus articulated in *Synners* as a new kind of individual and collective wounding. This is quite interesting if we consider that, in *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler argues that "there are in-built constraints on our ability to process information" and "overloading the system leads to serious breakdown of performance" (352). He quotes medical research indicating that "information overload may be related to various forms of mental illness" (351). He further adds that "the cumulative impact of sensory, cognitive or decisional overstimulation, not to mention the physical effects of neural or endocrine overload" creates sickness in society as a whole (365).

Finally, the decadence of the novel's postapocalyptic society is further emphasized by the proliferation of different kinds of porn, to which the denizens of this near-future world are addicted: "sixty percent of all new programming on the dataline is some kind of porn now" (102),

which includes regular and food porn, but also, conspicuously enough, other varieties such as poverty porn, war porn and disaster porn. *Synners*'s society, like ours, qualifies as what Mark Seltzer has labeled a "wound culture," which he defines as "the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (3), and which is characterized by the commodification and consumption of the pain of the other as a spectacle.

Against the prevailing emphasis on trauma as an event-based phenomenon, which has tended to disregard "the normative, quotidian aspects of trauma in the lives of many oppressed and disempowered persons" (Brown 18), some experts and practitioners have recently attempted to go beyond or diversify official definitions of trauma to address the psychological consequences of structural oppression. Some of the suggestions that have been offered include "Complex PTSD," "insidious trauma," "safe-world violations," and "oppression-based trauma" (see Craps 49). These all point to an increasingly widespread understanding within the medical community that traumatic living conditions and ongoing exposure to oppression can lead to a form of psychological distress that is, in fact, posttraumatic. For Maria Root, "insidious trauma" refers to the type of trauma "usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power" (240), which subjects one to continuous structural abuse and oppression. She further characterizes it as having cumulative effects, affecting a community of people, and "leav[ing] a distinct threat to psychological safety, security, or survival" (241).

In keeping with this view, the universe that *Synners* describes is posttraumatic in that people are inescapably exposed to insidious, structural and everyday oppression. As we have seen, this results from the infiltration of technology into every single aspect of private and public life, which produces alienation and wrecks social relations. Citizens are rendered powerless as the megacorporations exert boundless control over people's lives and material bodies, depriving them of autonomy, agency and free will. Information overloads the human mind and threatens to actually destroy it, while the connection between sign and meaning seems to have been entirely lost, increasing a sense of helplessness and disorientation. As such, *Synners* evokes what Ulrich Beck has called 'a risk society', which he defines as "a *catastrophic* society [where] the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm" (in Luckhurst, *Trauma Question* 214; italics in the original). Its atmosphere is one of collective psychological response to a post-apocalyptic world under the sign of trauma.

Escaping the physical zone

This dystopic world is populated by traumatized characters who strive to escape the unbearable conditions of life within the 'real' (i.e. physical) world. Several of them entertain the possibility of committing suicide, emphasizing the fact that killing oneself remains one of the few acts of individual freedom at one's disposal. This is the case of Gabe, who thinks about suicide as a way to "take care of everything" (131), and also Keely, who after being 'captured' by Diversifications, enumerates his options as follows: "He could pee, or he could kill himself, those were the choices" (167). Agency, or rather the lack of it, is undoubtedly a key issue in cyberpunk. In Sherryl Vint's reading, "[c]yberpunk appeals to the (impossible) desire to escape from the vicissitudes of the body and occupy the place of self-mastery" (104). In *Synners*, the simultaneous desire to withdraw and to regain a sense of agency is enacted by means of transcendence through technology.

One way to achieve transcendence in the novel is through bodily enhancement. For transhumanists, technological enhancement is the means to "increase human health span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods" (Bostrom 55). In a genuinely transhumanist spirit, implants in *Synners* allow people with brain lesions or psychiatric conditions to operate within society. However, illegal clinics have unsurprisingly proliferated and profit from the claim that rather than being reserved for those who truly need them, "the healing force of implants was for anyone, *everyone* who felt the *need*" (20; italics in the original). A particularly illuminating instance of technological enhancement that acts out a wish to escape reality is that of Jones, a chronically depressed suicidal 'case' who gets implants that let him kill himself again and again: "he flatlines for maybe a minute or two, and then [the implants] kick up his adrenal system and he comes back" (53).

On the other hand, some of the characters in *Synners* attempt to escape the constraints of a traumatic existence within the physical world by means of ontological transcendence. In that sense, the novel articulates two clearly delineated spaces or zones for the characters to inhabit: virtual reality (VR) and cyberspace. VR allows for vicarious living. With the help of a hotsuit and a headmount, characters like Gabe seek to get away from their miserable lives and into simulated scenarios, where they have the opportunity to assume identities that are not theirs and live experiences that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. Thanks to VR, pain in the physical world is diluted by the immediacy and the technologically-mediated sensations of simulated

experience. Thus, after being punched by Gina, Gabe retreats to his '*House of the Headhunters*' program. Once there, "[h]is face throbbed against the inside of the headmount, but the feeling was distant and painless, less immediate than the sensation of impact the sensors put to his knuckles and ran up his arm" when he hits one of the enemies he is fighting there (128).

The above quotation also suggests, however, that ontological transcendence through vicarious experiences within VR is not fully achievable, because awareness of the physical world cannot be totally obliterated. For one thing, the wide majority of the public does not have access to the kind of technology that provides, for instance, full body coverage, which undoubtedly undermines the illusion of having left the physical world. More conspicuously, Gabe longs too for some kind of unpredictability, so that the simulation feels "more like a real experience" (239). Therefore, he uses blind-select so that even if "the authenticity may [be] dubious . . . the excitement [is] real. Relatively" (101). Gabe is referring in this quotation to a particularly stimulating voodoo adventure that he has had with his virtual friends Marly and Caritha just a little while after his wife announces that she is leaving him and selling their house. It is rather unsurprising, then, that Gabe longs for the day when the marks left on his skin by the sensors in the hotsuit will not fade and he will not have to return to his meaningless and alienating life.

It seems evident, then, that VR accessed through external interfaces cannot provide a satisfactorily enough sense of escape from the vicissitudes of the physical world. People want more, and this is what sockets, the new technology around which the novel circles, promises to provide. Virtual space accessed through the socket interface feels "[l]ess like video, more like . . . a real experience" (73). This owes to the fact that, unlike less sophisticated, 'traditional' brain implants, sockets conspicuously modify human biology and consciousness. They generate new pathways and alter brain tissue, affecting basic emotions, facilitating interactivity, giving the illusion of movement and tinkering with the auditory and visual cortices of the new cyborged posthumans—'cyborged' because of their dual organic and machinic composition, and 'posthumans' because not just their body, but also their subjectivity is radically altered, redefining the category of the human.

An unexpected side-effect of the socket technology, however, is that memories lose their distant quality and, like traumatic memories, they feel more like (re)lived experiences, hauntingly intruding without any conscious control and deeply unsettling the individual. Thus, for instance,

when Gina remembers a fall that she did for a rock video while connected, the physical response of her body takes over: "The memory sprang open, and she wasn't just remembering it, she was reliving it. Her inner ear went crazy, the wind rushed into her, chocking off her breathing" (262). Memories become so overpowering that the socketed characters have trouble telling them apart from real experiences: "she held her head with both hands until she was sure it was just a memory. Just a memory, just an awfully stone-fucking-home intense fucker of a fucking memory" (229). Interestingly enough, another unforeseen effect of the sockets is that they seem to have the potential to radically modify human perception of the real, of time and of temporal dynamics, which amounts to altering reality itself:

> The guy wearing buckskin chaps over nothing, dancing on top of one of the many rentals abandoned on La Cienaga . . . yah, that was real time. Flavia swinging the sticks at her face, that *wasn't* real time. The kid with the heelprint on his forehead doing a stage dive off the top of somebody's stretch limo . . . that was a mixture of both real time and… what? Nonrealtime? Unrealtime? Un-fucking-real. The real real and the real unreal and the unreal real. (393; italics in the original)

As this quotation suggests, with the arrival of the new socket technology, life under the traditionally perceived categories of time and space seems to be on the brink of disappearance. Sockets, by allowing synners to turn visualized images into transferable data, also dissolve the categorical limits between two clearly-delineated spaces, inside and outside: "it felt so natural, so right, to send a dream out of the inner darkness into raw daylight, where anyone could see it" (245).

Last but not least, sockets provide access to cyberspace, a "new and decentered spatiality," writes Scott Bukatman, "[that] exists parallel to, but outside of, the geographic topography of experiential reality" (105), and which "frequently permits the subject a utopian and kinetic *liberation* from the very limits of urban existence" (146; italics in the original). Characterized by ambiguity, transition and indeterminacy, cyberspace represents a disruption of space and temporality, suspending normal conventions of matter (the body), place, and time. For some, as Elaine Graham explains, "cyberspace is believed to constitute a portal into a sacred real, offering transformations in time, space and consciousness" (170). It is perceived, as we will see, as a sort of sacred space, a place of salvation and transcendence. The liberation that a disembodied existence within cyberspace appears to grant induces Mark to 'take the wire' more and more frequently and

for longer periods of time, which eventually allows him to "get out of meat-jail and into . . . his own context" for good (252): "He lost all awareness of the meat that had been his prison for close to fifty years, and the relief he felt at having laid his burden down was as great as himself. His *self*. And his *self* was getting greater all the time, both ways, greater as in more wonderful and greater as in bigger" (251; italics in the original). Thus, the ultimate dream of escaping a traumatic existence within the physical world seems to be enacted by Visual Mark's transmission onto cyberspace.

When his body strokes out and dies, Mark's disembodied consciousness survives as data within cyberspace after crossing "[t]he last boundary that cyborgs transgress, the one between the real and the unreal . . . the most potent place for a reconfiguration of reality and a reconstruction of the subject" (Cadora 367). He becomes "homo datum" (421), a true "denizen of the net" (421), a more-than-human (or less-than-human) being that seems to have succeeded in leaving the vicissitudes of a physical, animal body behind. This radically alters his consciousness:

> He was already accustomed to the idea of having multiple awarenesses and a single concentrated core that were both the essence of self. The old meat organ would not have been able to cope with that kind of reality, but out here he appropriated more capacity the way he once might have exchanged a smaller shirt for a larger one. (353-4)

Mark's transformation into a digital entity is presented in *Synners* as the culmination of an ontological process of "change for the machines" (105).[4] The process had started with Mark and Gina replacing synthesizing technology with VR technology to make rock videos. The second stage was cyborged existence thanks to the sockets, which allow for direct neural interfacing between the computer and the brain. Finally, the process culminates with Mark's transcendence onto cyberspace as disembodied consciousness, as pure information that is too expansive to be contained within the limits that the flesh provides. As John Johnston aptly puts it, the novel "raises the question not only of how technology changes human beings but also how human beings change for technology" (452), entering a posthuman stage. For Amanda Pavani, Mark's pull towards the simulated suggests that "as humankind increasingly merges with […] artificial intelligences or with mediating systems (such as skull sockets), seeking a finite, natural definition of human is a futile endeavor" (69). Indeed, in the process of "change for the machines" that *Synners* represents, the traditional categorical boundaries between the human and the machine, real/virtual, internal

space/external space, physical/non-physical, and transcendence/immanence are constantly tested and redrawn.

Escape is futile

Mark's dreams of liberation and cyber-immortality are, however, soon jeopardized by the spike, the stroke-turned-virus that his body released onto the System as 'it' dies, threatening "[c]omputer apocalypse, a total system crash . . . And he would cease to be. He had escaped that fate once by leaving the worn-out, failing meat, only to find the same thing creeping up on him. Out here" (353). Further blurring the distinctions between human and non-human, real and virtual, agency and deterministic force, the virus is both virtual and actual, and it manifests "a blip of consciousness, or near consciousness to it, a shadow of consciousness all destructive in its makeup, and yet [it is] no more deliberately evil than cobra venom. It knew nothing else, and in a way it knew nothing at all, except that it would do what it would do" (325).[5] When the spike threatens to destroy Mark's disembodied consciousness, his only chance of surviving is to merge with Art Fish in cyberspace, becoming Markt,[6] "two aspects of one consciousness rather than two separate intelligences" (419).

The virus is also pure information. In *Bodies of Tomorrow*, Sherryl Vint claims that the spike stands for the "inexorable return of the repressed body" (116), arguing that Cadigan's novel "deconstructs the romanticized cyberpunk's ideal that escape from the body is possible or even desirable" (114). To this, we could add the claim that the virus also symbolizes the impossibility to escape from the traumatic existence to which the material body is tied within the physical world: "It was a voracious thing, mindless under a façade that was vaguely like himself; impressions of old sensations, pain, compulsion, the old drive toward oblivion" (325). As we learn when Gabe and Gina are fighting it in cyberspace, the spike is a materialization of traumatic information and kills socketed people by finding "sensitive spots" (333) in their brains, inducing a cerebral stroke. Thus, the virus evokes the destructive potential of traumatic return, of the intrusion of the repressed traumatic memories (see Caruth, *Trauma* 5).

On the other hand, despite the alleged liberating potential of cyberspace, access to it is articulated as disorienting and dislocating in the novel. When Gabe and Gina enter cyberspace to fight the spike, the experience is shown to be extremely confusing and distressing for them. They not only need to confront simulations of their worst memories and deepest fears, but also find it

almost impossible to distinguish the projections of their memories of each other from each other's actual 'neighboring' consciousnesses. In his book *Traversing Virtual Spaces* (2006), Martin Holz resorts to the term 'ontological trauma' to refer to "a person's confusion and disorientation to the point of existential insecurity and physical as well as mental paralysis when she can no longer decide whether the surrounding environment is actual or virtual" (22). Ontological trauma, Holz suggests, may cause the subject to question the status of the self and of outside reality (204). While he is inside cyberspace, Gabe repeatedly claims that he cannot remember what having a body felt like. Gina, for her part, wrestles with the memory of Mark's offer to get rid of pain forever by leaving the body behind and embracing a disembodied existence as data within cyberspace. On the other hand, the two characters' ontological trauma causes them to question the real. Quite illuminating in that sense is another of the novel's catchphrases, which is repeated several times by the characters when they are inside cyberspace: "*What does this remind you of, an open window or an open wound . . . ?*" (440; italics in the original).

The hope to escape a traumatic existence and to overcome traumatic memories through transcendence, by "leaving the meat behind," is therefore presented in *Synners* as a chimera. As Thomas Foster explains, "[c]yberpunk texts often appear to reproduce the mind/body split that characterizes much of Western philosophy and culture, rather than replacing such dualistic and dialectical habits of thought with models of hybridity and partial perspectives, as Haraway proposes" (215). *Synners*, however, depicts the physical and the virtual spaces as interdependent, as zones in which the vicissitudes of being embodied in one have consequences for the state of being in the other. Proof of this is the fact that, when Gabe relives Gina's punch while in cyberspace, his physical face gets bruised all over again in the exact place where Gina had hit him when they first met, even though his physical body is now an empty shell numbly lying on the floor, next to Gina's equally inert one.

As Mark's maxim that "the brain feels no pain" (225) suggests, he dreams of getting rid of pain forever through a disembodied existence in cyberspace. The brain does feel no pain, it lacks nociceptive receptors. However, pain is much more than a purely physical sensation, as Cadigan brilliantly suggests: "The brain feels no pain . . . Well, you got it, it's totally painless, but they never mentioned it would feel like painlessly driving eight nails through your head going in and painlessly ripping your arms and legs off coming out again" (320). In other words, the brain may

feel no pain, but the mind does. In his comprehensive study of the virtual subject, Scott Bukatman argues that accessing cyberspace means "exist[ing] on two planes at once: while one's objective body would remain in the real world, one's *phenomenal body* would be projected into the terminal reality" (187; italics in the original). That is, "the duality between mind and body is superseded in a new formation that presents the mind as itself *embodied.* The body, here, exists *only* in phenomenological terms: it perceives and it moves" (208; italics in the original). Going a step further, it can be argued that in *Synners* the phenomenal body, what we may more simply call 'consciousness' or 'the mind', not only perceives and moves; it suffers. The emphasis is, therefore, on the materiality of the mind and the embodiment of thoughts and memories. As such, leaving the body behind is no escape from trauma or from the traumatic living conditions within the late-capitalist, media-saturated, post-industrial society of a (not-so-far-off) future.

A way out?

If transcendence through technology offers no hope of leaving behind the vicissitudes of being in the physical world, does that mean that there is no way out of a traumatic existence? Cadigan leaves the resolution of such an important issue in contemporary theory for the end of the novel, while Gina and Gabe are in cyberspace trying to defeat the spike. As the cyber love triangle between Mark—now Markt—Gabe and Gina moves towards resolution, the reader is presented with two conflicting attitudes towards suffering. Mark still insists on the idea that, by leaving her body behind, Gina will never suffer again: "It wasn't really that I didn't want your pain, Gina, it was that I could never take it away. Now I can" (452). Gabe, however, finally understands that it is not possible to escape pain, and the only way to deal with it is to try to resist: "*An open window or an open wound, whatever comes up, Gina, I'll take it*" (454; italics in the original).

The attitude of these characters represents two different approaches towards suffering. Mark's enduring obsession with overcoming pain evokes the fantasy of many techno-utopias, with their faith in technoscience as salvation, in the possibility of "vanquishing the entropic forces of physical and intellectual finitude, morbidity and mortality" (Graham 154). The first article in the latest version of the 'Transhumanist Declaration,' adopted by the Humanity+ Board in 2009, reads as follows: "We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth" (hpluspedia.org). Transhumanists see technology and technoscience as the means to improve

humans' health, psychological wellbeing, longevity and cognitive abilities. Such rhetoric, as Elaine Graham argues, evokes a desire to "become (like) gods, by striving towards semi-divine status" (170). Graham aptly terms their endeavor as "technoenchantment" (165), which is closely connected with the view of cyberspace as a sacred space of omnipotence, omniscience and immortality, as argued above.

Synners, however, seems to be a cautionary tale not only of the consequences of technoenchantment, but also, crucially, of the absurdity of escapist fantasies of transcendence and salvation. Proof of it is the fact that, right after the spike is defeated and the net starts to be restored, no deep changes seem to have taken place. Despite the attempts to "revamp the new, inoculated net" (574), the porn channels are the first ones to be back on the dataline, and socketed people who have survived the spike are forcibly used by the authorities to access cyberspace in order to restore it. More conspicuously, the raison d'être of the socket technology—the escapist dream of overcoming the vicissitudes of being in the physical world—seems to have survived unchallenged: as Gina explains at the end of the novel, "[n]o one's doing the procedure now . . . But that's just temporary. Once they get the safeguards done right, they'll be back in business" (474).

On the contrary, Gabe's experience in cyberspace as he is fighting the virus finally causes him to understand that vicarious living and escape from the physical world are not the answer, since they may dilute immediate pain, but cannot take suffering away. Yet, Gabe's immediate reaction after defeating the virus is to isolate himself from the world in a small village. When Sam and Gina finally find him and report the state of events in the outside world, he is shocked to hear that the sockets have not been banned, claiming that only "appropriate technology" (475) should exist. However, Gabe's case for banning the sockets is what Laura Cherniak has aptly called "another Garden trope" (82). Gina proves to have a better grasp of what things are like in a technologically driven world: "'All *appropriate technology* hurt somebody. A whole lot of somebodies. Nuclear fission, fusion, the fucking Ford assembly line, the fucking airplane. *Fire*, for Christ's sake. Every technology has its original sin.' She laughed. 'Makes us original synners'" (475; italics in the original). If banning technology is clearly not the solution, what is? Gina's answer is eloquent: "we still got to live with what we made" (475). That is, rather than seeking to escape through technological transcendence, the only way out of a traumatic existence might be adapting, resisting.

The notion of resilience has been the object of extensive research in a wide number of academic fields and technical domains. Broadly defined, resilience is the ability of a system to cope with change. Within the fields of materials science and engineering, to which the concept is indigenous, resilience refers to the properties of a material or system by means of which it may absorb damage without suffering permanent distortion or complete failure. In the field of psychology, resilience is defined as “the ability of individuals to adapt successfully in the face of acute stress, trauma, or chronic adversity, maintaining or rapidly regaining psychological well-being and physiological homeostasis” (Feder et al. 35). It is, therefore, a concept that both applies to organic and non-organic systems. As such, it might as well apply to anything in between, across the divide between the natural and the artificial. Logically, just as technological mediation is central to a new vision of posthuman subjectivity, it must shape posthuman ways of coping with traumatic living conditions in a technologically driven world.

Synners offers a model of posthuman resilience that crucially results from the ability to appropriate technology. First, there is the hacker community. Hackers figure prominently in the novel as a symbol of resistance to the boundless power and control exerted by megacorporations and corrupt authorities. In a world in which technology and information are tools to manipulate and exploit people for profit, characters like Fez, Gator and Rosa manage to stand their ground by setting up in a corner of cyberspace the “St. Dismas Infirmary for the Incurably Informed,” the underground platform run by the AI Artie Fish where they share hacked information. It is precisely information concealed there that allows them to understand the origins of the virus and come up with a plan to destroy it. Instrumental in that sense is Sam’s nanotechnologically modified insulin pump, which eventually becomes the means through which Gabe and Gina access cyberspace without being killed by the spike. The pump, powered by her own body and connected to a pair of glasses that act as a screen, allows the cyborged Sam to have clean and untraceable access to the net whenever and wherever she wants. Finally, there is Gina, who manages to appropriate for her own purposes the socket technology that she has reluctantly had installed in her body. Eventually, she admits that she has used the rock videos that she was supposed to turn in to her boss at Diversifications Inc. as an excuse to live the life that she wants to live: “Simulate my ass! I did video just so I could do all that shit!” (473). More interestingly, while she is still in cyberspace after defeating the spike, she allows Markt to make an ‘eclone’ of her consciousness and merge her with him. In this way, she can have it both ways: she repossesses her body in the physical

world where she wants to be, without abandoning Mark, which has been her concern for several decades.

Conclusion

Against the 'techno-enchanted' fantasy that suffering can be avoided by transcending the physical world, and the 'techno-skeptic' claim that certain technologies should be banned, Pat Cadigan shows through the characters of Sam and Gina that chronic adversity and structural oppression can be resisted through appropriation. These resilient cyborged posthumans succeed in adapting to the traumatic living conditions of the post-apocalyptic scenario that *Synners* depicts. Rather than being subjugated or subsumed by digital technology, these characters provide a viable model for a posthuman engagement with it: they find a way to appropriate technology that was originally designed to be exploitative and provide a profit and adopt it as part of their own selves, which radically alters their subjectivity. This appropriation is achieved through the characters' embracing of their cyborged nature, of their condition as "an amalgam," as a "collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles 3). Further, they accept their position in what Haraway calls "a cyborg world," a world "about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway 154).

Synners may thus be read as an attempt to re-negotiate the traumatic encounter of the self (both as mind and body) with technology and information in the context of technoscience. Through tropes like those of the cyborg and cyberspace, Cadigan explores the relationship between digital technology, subjectivity and embodiment in the context of posttraumatic culture, arguing for an embodied form of posthuman resistance through appropriation. Given its remarkable feel of potentiality and feasibility, *Synners* proves to be a tool to inspire reflection among readers about possible models of future selves within the late-capitalist, information-saturated, technologically-driven postapocalyptic society that awaits around the corner. In the Introduction to the 2011 reprint of the novel, Lisa Tuttle advises us to "[r]ead *Synners* now, before it happens" (ix). Although one cannot deny that *Synners* feels less science-fictional today than it must have felt when it was first published in 1991, the lesson to be learned from the novel is more urgent than ever.[7]

NOTES

[1] A review of early cyberpunk reveals that Cadigan is one of the few women writers associated with a rather masculinist movement that Karen Cadora sees as "very much a boy's club" (358). As Ritch Calvin explains, her fiction has been seen as a "partial corrective to cyberpunk's masculinist futures" (42). *Synners*, in particular, has been often read as having helped to "launch a 'first-wave' of feminist cyberpunk that made women central to the high-tech future and celebrated the potential of transgressed human/machine/animal boundaries without forgetting the exploitation of real women" (Yaszek 35).

[2] All future references to the novel are to the Gollancz paperback edition, published in 2011.

[3] See, for example, Graham (2002), Haraway ([1985] 1991), Hayles (1999), and Herbrechter (2013).

[4] This is one of the novel's key catchphrases, which Cadigan brilliantly turns through repetition from a literal question that Gabe asks Mark in front of a vending machine into a philosophical reflection on the nature of the human within technoscience. It conveys the notion that not only technology changes human beings, but also, crucially, that human beings change for technology.

[5] And so is Art Fish, the AI/virus that, despite being "viral at heart" (427), is said to be "[a]live. Intelligent. Conscious. Knows where-to" (403). Fish is articulated as a sentient being, capable of complex feelings and even hysteria—as 'his' conversation with Sam after being brought back from compression shows.

[6] Mark and Art's new name evokes another of the novel's catchphrases, repeated once and again by different characters: "*Great people leave their marks. Everyone else is left with marks*" (46; italics in the original). Marks figure prominently in the narrative, from those left by the hotsuit on Gabe's body to the ones Sam's nanotechnologically modified insulin pump needle leaves on her when she uses it to access the net. The main characters are marked in two senses: as cyborgs and by their traumatic existence. As Gina puts it in her characteristically crude way: "She could have told them who was *really* fucking *marked*" (425; italics in the original).

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