

Situating Literature in Technoculture: A Reading of Three Postmodern Poems by Steven B. Katz

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Cultural artefacts of postmodernism often occupy and are set against the backdrop of the still emerging realm of the virtual, and therefore the aesthetic dimensions of these works follow a new dialectic that forms part of what is frequently referred to as 'Technoculture'. The present study attempts to identify some of the major preoccupations in cultural texts in general and literature in particular in the wake of the ongoing process of establishing and practising technoculture or the cultural arena of computer, cyberspace, communication technologies and internet, and seeks to locate some these changes in the select poems of the contemporary American poet, Steven B. Katz.

The term technoculture is "used in a woolly manner to refer to technologies implicated in western cultures, and to constructions of culture that incorporates technological aspects." (Green xxvii) Technoculture is generally aimed at examining the issues of technology and culture and the "raw materials with which we construct our sense of ourselves and the communities in which we live and to which we feel connected.", and exploring "the digital age and the meanings of space, time and the virtually real." (Green xxv) Technoculture of cyberspace and the internet and their effects on the world of digital communication are probably areas where human experience is still in an emerging state. According to Lelia Green, "one of the critical issues raised by technoculture is that of community and what we mean by society and connectedness when we have choices which include the digital and the analogue, the virtual and the real." (xxvi) He argues that, Cyberspace offers unparalleled global opportunities for interactivity, and the lacks of bounded areas make it no less a real place than the Roman Forum or the American Senate, and no less real a place than the human mind." (xxxii)

Technoculture operates within the essential context of the creation and circulation of culture where "[a]nything and everything human can be constructed as a cultural text – a life, a car, music, the stock exchange – and we write our culture as a collection of such texts. (Green xxix). As U Franklyn puts it, "our language itself is poorly suited to describe the complexity of technological interaction" and in his view "like democracy, technology is a multifaceted entity. It includes activities as well as a body of knowledge, structure as well as the act of structuring". (14)

The domain of technoculture revolves around the circulation of culture through tools of communication using high-tech devices like computer and internet that enable a real culture to operate in a virtual space created by "internet interactivity." (Green xxxii) More importantly certain of the key concepts in culture like time, space, and place get completely "reconceptualised and reconstructed to fit within the cyberspatial context." (Green xxxii) According to Jan Fernback "cyberspace has become a new arena for participation in public life" as "users can act as media audience "and "yet users are also authors, public rhetoricians, statesmen, pundits." (37) Taking the conceptual framework of 'Public Sphere' as discussed by Habermas, the political health of a society can be judged on the basis of the accessibility, nature and scope its public sphere. The

discourses in the internet “construct technoculture as a liberating force promising freedom and political power to people.” (Green 118)

The aesthetics of technoculture is to be thought of as a new phase in the production and reception of cultural texts, similar to the ones identified in different earlier occasions like the early modern period of mechanical reproduction, and the era of culture industry in the later part of twentieth century by critics like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. These theoreticians and those that followed them attempted to ascertain the various dimensions of aesthetic production with reference to the times that they represented. While Benjamin problematised the questions pertaining to the authenticity of a work of art when mechanisms of reproductions took hold, Theodore Adorno located works of art part of what he popularly called ‘culture industry’, which makes art part of consumer capitalism. According to Benjamin, in the age of mechanical reproduction of art the authenticity or the “aura” of art is interfered with thus jeopardising the authority of art. “[M]echanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from the parasitical dependence on ritual...instead of being based on ritual it begins to be based on another practice – politics.” (Benjamin 226) Similarly postmodernist theories by the Marxist thinkers like Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson tried to fathom the politico-aesthetic implications of works produced in the aftermath of postmodernity, citing such prevailing fashions or inclinations as commodity fetish and the use of parody and pastiche. Eagleton argued that “[t]he aesthetics of postmodernism is a dark parody of [...] anti-representationalism: if art no longer reflects it is because it seeks to change the world rather than mimic it, but because there is in truth nothing to be reflected, no reality which is not itself already image, spectacle, simulacrum, gratuitous fiction.” (387) According to the postmodern theorist, Jean Baudrillard real is “no longer real at all. It is hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyper space without atmosphere.” (146) All these are instances of changes in perception owing mainly to the changing conditions of cultural production, and arguably the changing conditions are brought into force by innovations in the technological front.

The cultural texts that prompted the theoreticians to frame aesthetic standpoints like cyber philosophy and notion of hyperreality showcased transformations in the social sphere mainly brought out by the innovations in technology. These works include experimental novels like Milan Kundera’s *Immortality* that employs postmodern imagology, the sci-fi fictions of the era of cyberspace, Manjula Padmanabhan’s, *Harvest*, a drama set well ahead in future, in which the panopticonic surveillance, using highly sophisticated communication devices, of the neo-colonial elite who awaits to harvest organs from a third world unemployed poor is powerfully portrayed, and films like *The Matrix*, directed by Larry and Andy Wachowsky, and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, and the postmodern poems by Steven B Katz set in the virtual space of computer and internet, to deliberately delimit examples. These instances, and many others, from the age of technoculture, reveals that the production and reception and conceptual or thematic indicators and even the vocabulary of literature and other cultural artefacts have undergone tremendous shifts in paradigm owing to the interface with technology. In *Immortality*, for instance, as Stephen Ross argued

Kundera portrays an image-obsessed society that has reached the point where the image is confused with that which it purports to represent. The result, in this marginally hyperreal version of our own contemporary culture, is a loss of content in the endless proliferation of images that finally refer only to other images in the annihilation of the real. (333)

A number of literary works, more specifically, science fiction, showed a growing interest in narratives about future and parallel universe. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun mentioned elsewhere, “faced with new encounters between computer and humans cyberpunk literature...responded with a seductive orientation that denied representation through dreams of disembodiment these narratives romanticize networks, gritty city streets, and their colourful inhabitants.” (248-49) In films like *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix* “our society tells itself stories about what it is to be human in a world where humans are increasingly influenced by and depended upon technology and technoculture” where “the myths and longing are played out in the context of technologically driven futures where machines can feel feelings and have roles with more humanity in them than the ‘people’ characters do” as Green wrote (167). And more interestingly “[a] recurring theme of these narratives concerns the merging of the human with the machine and questions of the essential nature of humanity.” (Green 167) Cyberspace and cyborg as they are presently imagined in cultural texts are to be taken as symptomatic of a society under the process of a grand transformation where almost all aspects of social is being mediated by artificial intelligence of cyberspace.

The question of situating literature in technoculture may further be explored by a close reading of three poems by Steven B. Katz, viz., ‘A Computer File Named Alison’, ‘In the Beginning’, and ‘After Reading Gordel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid.’ In fact Katz’ poems selected for analysis here provide the readers with the poetics of an early phase of technocultural development as they were published in the early 1990s. All these poems are set in a virtual space; the first two of them clearly indicates that they are set in the ‘space’ within computer and internet. The third poem is a postmodern response, (seemingly, in the truly Derridean way of deconstructing certain of the fundamental notions in our culture) that comes out, as the title suggests, after reading (Douglas R. Hofstadter’s Pulitzer Prize-Winning book) *After Reading Gordel Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (1979).

The poem, ‘A Computer File Named Alison’ is subtitled, “For My Wife”. The poem, narrated in first person, presents a situation in which the speaker has decided to do away with a file he created in the name of his wife, Alison, in order to accommodate other files:

I dated a file named Alison, created
worlds in her name; but needed more space,
new memories to save, new files to live.

The speaker tells that when he pushes the button he would be able to eliminate Alison “from the disc of earth” which is “constantly rotated, read in this dark machine drive of the universe” The poem is a clear example of the discourse of a virtual sphere where concepts like space and elimination have distinct meaning, and where reality is more virtual than real. While creating a metaphoric

earth inside the spacious machine, (“there is only so much space inside machines”) the speaker wonders about the impersonal attitude of “cold, dump, personal computer” taking him literally (and never having to show any emotions) dispersing with the remnants of his wife. The poem concludes with the speaker expressing his inability to conform the computer’s action of deleting Alison, saying “But oh I could not conform it could not conform it” The poem, possibly, presents a universe sans space except inside the machines, and the construction of a universe with its own rules of creation and destruction, where the role of the user is only to conform actions. When relationships are thought of in this kind of a universe there is nothing that cannot be annulled by the pressing of a button. The poem invokes the concept of space in technoculture and explains the human-machine interface in an extended level of impersonality.

‘In the Beginning’ can be read as a pastiche of the story of creation revealed in the Genesis. It parodies the purpose of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* too (to Justify God’s ways to man) in its subtitle, “To justify God’s ways to 21st century.” The poem opens thus:

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# In the beginning was the computer. And God said
:let there be light!
# You have not signed on yet.
:God.
# Enter user password.
: Omniscient.
# Password incorrect. Try again!
:Omnipotent.
# Password incorrect. Try again!
:Technocrat.
# And God signed on 12:01 a.m., Sunday, March 1.
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The poem presents the creation of the world as a computer programme initiated by God in six days by using e-cash, and lot of programming commands. God presents himself neither as omniscient nor omnipotent, but as a technocrat who “signed on 12.00 am, Sunday, March 1,” in his mission to create the world. He creates light, firmament, dry land, sun, moon, stars, fish, fowl, cattle, man and woman, Garden of Eden, desire, freewill, tree of knowledge, and good and evil, until finally when he logged off on the sixth day when the computer was down. Replacing the first word (God) with computer, the poem apparently presents that computer precedes God, or it has been pre-existing as a platform for God to operate his world. At every stage of the creation (programming) the poet brings in actual or near actual passages from the Bible, and finally shows how errors started showing up in the process of creation and in the created universe. The texture of the poem is peculiar with symbols of the programming commands, and the entire poem appears in the form of the stage-wise arrangement of a computer programme. The poem presents the world as basically virtual, invoking the way the internet generation imagines it. After every day’s work of creation God is presented as logging off, to resume work on the next day,

till the process gets complexly concluded with errors like the coexistence of desire and free will, shame and evil and so forth. At almost every stage of creation the computer rejects the commands given by god for reasons like “too many characters” in the command. Finally when God has exceeded the allotted file space, he gives the command to destroy earth before the execution of which the computer goes down making the programmer to sign off. The presentation of God as a technocratic programmer of the (virtual) world, who created things at his will and wish without caring for the contradictory elements like good and evil is what the poem probably achieves. The poem reflects on the radical and contented way the society of technoculture uses its imagination to fathom the new world order of virtual reality.

The poem, ‘After Reading Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid’ (A Pantoum) is seemingly an immediate response to the path-breaking ideas that the poet discovers in Douglas R. Hofstadter’s book, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* that deals with such issues as the question of consciousness and the possibility of artificial intelligence, the meaning of ‘self’, with such diverse topics as mathematics and meta-mathematics, programming, recursion, formal systems, multilevel systems, self reference, self representation. The poem brings out a series of propositions in the most subversive fashion all of which are finally said to be “paradoxically false.” These ideas resemble the amalgamation of art (represented by M.C. Escher, the Dutch graphic artist), music (represented by J.S. Bach, the German composer) and mathematics (represented by Kurt Gödel, the Australian-American logician and mathematician) in Hofstadter’s book, typical of the postmodernist style of erasing boundaries of intellectual realms and making every work a discourse. The poem begins abruptly:

So this musical invention can begin:
 push down in a paradoxical painting:
 all formal theorems are incomplete:
 every procedure’s a stranger loop

(Lines 1-4)

As the subtitle suggests, the poem is a Pantoum, comprising of quatrains in which the second and fourth line are repeated as the first and third lines of the following quatrain. In each stanza the first three lines end in colon, and each line communicates the self-referential nature of phenomena and the impossibility of reaching a transcendental signified or final meaning of ideas and things around us. These lines are to be taken as revelations that essentially illustrate a paradoxical outlook and carries forward a postmodern world view, in which the central notions of our culture are decentred in the poststructuralist fashion. These ideas are presumably adapted directly from Hofstadter. The paradoxical propositions that the poem meditate on include “all formal theorems are incomplete”, “all understanding is self-referential”, “the human mind is a programmed search: / but the meaning is always a random concurrence” “reality is just one of many possibilities”, “language is the necessary software of thought” and societies are hierarchies of information”. These propositions again are modelled probably on the dialogues by Achilles, the Tortoise, and their company that Hofstadter includes at the beginning of each of the twenty chapters of his

book. Like the dialogues in the book the lines here deal mainly with form and content, which at the same time is a serious topic of debate in a number of recent literary theories. Following Hofstadter's book the poet employs metafiction-like self referential statements and wordplay that probably signifies the impenetrable condition of phenomena. The poet makes use of many expressions that originally are played around in Hofstadter's book. For instance, 'strange loop' the expression Hofstadter coins to refer to the self referencing objects, frequently appears in the poem as "stranger loop" ("Every procedure is a stranger loop"). Interestingly, most of these axiomatic statements in general and self referentiality in particular can be located in postmodernist theories, and postmodernism's approach to the world. Moreover, most of these statements validate the way the world of virtual reality conceive the world at large, and arguably are part of the ideational arena of technoculture. The poet however draws the readers' attention to the essentially paradoxical nature of all statements using language, not excluding poetry, as language ceases to represent and draws attention to itself. The poem ends both accepting and invalidating its own propositions:

These statements are most certainly true:
 but there will be harmonic resolution too:
 and so now all this non sense may stop:
 the statements are all paradoxically false

(Lines 68-72)

In the final analysis all these three poems put into practice the conceptual aspects of the literature of technoculture where an overt emphasis on the concept of real and virtual is at the locus of things. They all seemingly carry the anxiety of the virtual and showcase the impossibility of representing reality, as the so called reality available for the poet is already an image, spectacle or a copy.

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