William Gibson: From Prescience to Pastiche

Anand Lutchmiah Naidoo

> Scepticism and ambivalence are the only sane
> Responses to what technology can do. All
> Technologies are morally neutral until they're
> Applied, but our record is not good (William Gibson
> in Pattenden 1994:32).

William Gibson is probably best known in the public consciousness as the man who coined the word 'cyberspace' and as the source of a movie, *Johnny Mnemonic*, so critically and commercially slated that it was improbable that its star, Keanu Reeves, was likely ever again to be cast in another big budget science fiction film. He was, and *The Matrix* borrowed liberally from Gibson's cyberpunk fiction. In academic circles Gibson was regarded by some as the way forward for what seemed to be a stagnant postmodern literary field. Larry McCaffery referred to Gibson as 'the light at the end of the tunnel'. Frederic Jameson has called Gibson's cyberpunk science fiction 'the supreme literary expression of postmodernism or late capitalism' (Selden & Widdowson 1993:181).

Gibson's first novel *Neuromancer* is set in the twenty-first century in a world where multinational mega-corporations, zaibatsus, have more wealth and power than national governments. National boundaries are all but obsolete and have been replaced by the relationships between the multinational corporations. In contrast to the patriotic impulse of traditional American science fiction, the United States is presented, as being in economic decline and Japan is the economic superpower. In an extreme form of post-industrial capitalism, extrapolated from our own time, information is the most valuable commodity. Case, an alienated cyberspace cowboy or computer hacker, is

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

hired and blackmailed into breaking into the computer of a huge corporation with the assistance of Molly, a female street samurai. This is intended to unite two giant artificial intelligences.

The novel is an exaggerated but recognisable mirror of the late twentieth century. Gibson has suggested that his fiction is a distillation of the cultural patterns of our time. When asked about his vision of the twenty-first century urban breakdown, continual violence, poverty and corruption, by Mike Pattenden, Gibson's reply was: 'It sounds to me like you just described 1993' (Pattenden 1994:32).

Gibson also claimed that he wrote about the present and not the future.

> I've trained myself to see the present, whereas most people have to make a mental adjustment that allows them, psychologically, to live a decade in the past. It's about bringing people up to speed (Pattenden 1994:32).

Gibson's response is an indictment of mainstream fiction's inability to accurately reflect the present. This is a view also held by J.G. Ballard, often regarded as a cyberpunk precursor, who contends that

> ... the biases of mainstream fiction are still so profoundly retrospective that anything set in the here and now feels as if it's set a million years in the future, because the mainstream novel hasn't really caught up with the present yet (Nicholls 1993:251).

Gibson's attempt to 'bring people up to speed' may be seen as a response to Arthur Kroker's assertion that we are living in a society with '... twenty-first century engineering, but nineteenth century perception' (Kroker & Cook 1989:74).

To this purpose *Neuromancer* is an extremely allusive text forcing the reader into an active role. The reader has to construct the background almost entirely from incidental details. In the process the present becomes increasingly defamiliarized. If the process is successful the reader will be able to view the changes technological growth has brought to our present society with greater perspective.

What aids the reader in navigating *Neuromancer's* alien landscape is the presence of several traditional genres. *Neuromancer* exists at the

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

intersection of several genres including detective novels, westerns, thrillers, science fiction and Fisher King quests.

Case is a detective figure, but he is a reluctant one. Rather than looking for clues to piece together the big picture he tries his best to ignore those placed in his path by the artificial intelligences. In contrast to the existential detective living by a personal code of honour, Case's loyalty has to be ensured by the presence of toxin sacs bonded to his arteries. The world of *Neuromancer* is as threatening and corrupt as those found in Raymond Chandler and Dashiel Hammet, but Gibson's protagonist is no man of integrity. The other detective figure is the reader, thrown into an alien but recognisable near future and forced to find parallels with the present.

Of the genres sampled in *Neuromancer*, the Western genre has been relatively overlooked by academia. It has also been the most commercially exploited genre and is arguably the most effective and enduring form of American cultural imperialism. The conventions of the Western have become part of the mass psyche through constant exposure in pulp novels, low budget movies and TV series. It has become impervious to parody and critical analysis. Revisionist westerns such as *Unforgiven* and *Wild Bill* and parodies such as *Blazing Saddles* ultimately affirm the very conventions they attempt to subvert.

The science fiction genre has, in the Space Opera, traditionally offered its own Western hybrid. Space Opera is derived from Horse Opera and substitutes spaceships for horses, laser or rayguns for six-shooters and space for the old American frontier. The most popular example of space opera is *Star Wars*. *Neuromancer* contains no space operatic conventions but it does incorporate elements of the spaghetti western and the frontier western. The computer hackers are known as cowboys and rustlers. Case's reputation is that of a 'cowboy hotshot'. The virus he uses to penetrate the ICE (intrusion countermeasures electronics) is his horse and cyberspace is the new frontier. Molly is the spaghetti western gunfighter, a woman with several names rather than a man with none. They are continuations of the mythical western figures. Gibson both affirms and subverts the conventions of the western. One strand of *Neuromancer* is the build-up to the confrontation between Molly and Hideo, the vat-grown samurai. In a more conventional narrative this would have been a climactic moment. This classic western shootout, when it does materialise, subverts expectations. Case is used to offer a commentary on Molly's actions.

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

> She missed it by a fraction. She nearly cut it, but not quite. She went in just right, Case thought. The right attitude; it was something he could sense, something he could have seen in the posture of another cowboy leaning into a deck, fingers flying across the board. She had it: the thing, the moves. And she'd pulled it all together for her entrance. Pulled it together around the pain in her leg and marched down Jane's stairs like she owned the place, elbow of her gun arm at her hip, forearm up, wrist relaxed, swaying the muzzle of the fletcher with the studied nonchalance of a Regency duellist.
>
> It was a performance. It was like the culmination of a lifetime's observation of martial arts tapes, cheap ones, the kind Case had grown up on. For a few seconds, he knew, she was every bad-ass hero, Sonny Mao in the old Shaw videos, Mickey Chiba, the whole lineage back to Lee and Eastwood (Gibson 1984:253)

The self-referential nature of much of Gibson's writing is evident here. Gibson builds up Molly's mythic status by associating her with action icons like Bruce Lee and Clint Eastwood, while simultaneously drawing attention to her own fictional status. The genesis of the fictional character of Molly is hinted at, as aspects of her character seem to have been modelled on the existential heroes associated with Lee and Eastwood.

Molly suffers from a recurrence of an earlier injury and Hideo, under orders from his employer, saves her from torture by her one-time ally Riviera. This type of anti-climax became part of the formula followed by some of Gibson's imitators. For example, in Richard Kadrey's *Metrophage* the protagonist, Jonny, having hunted his nemesis, Easy Money, through the greater part of the novel, lets him go after having him at gunpoint.

On the surface *Neuromancer* appears to be written in a relatively conventional form, as it features a linear plot with a single protagonist; but it does feature an innovative use of language. The opening sentence of *Neuromancer* has often been the focus of critical examination[1]. 'The sky above the port was the color of television tuned to a dead channel' (Gibson 1984:1). In using technology as a metaphor Gibson has integrated technology into his prose. Larry McCaffery (1990:130), describing Gibson's prose in general, has

[1] For example, Victoria Hollinger's 'Cybernetic Deconstructions', and Darko Suvin's 'On Gibson and Cyberpunk SF', both of which can be found in McCaffery's (1991) *Storming the Reality Studio*.

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

labelled it 'techno-poetic' prose and it does represent an advance in literary form. Traditionally the artificial world has often been described in terms of the natural or organic. Gibson's practice has been to describe the natural world in terms of the artificial. This suggests that we can no longer separate the organic from the inorganic. Technology permeates every aspect of our lives. The opposition between the natural and the artificial is broken down.

Darko Suvin (1991:359) has claimed that Gibson has broadened 'the range of SF (or indeed of modern literature) with the new vocabulary of lyricized information interfaces'. He cites the first sentence of *Neuromancer* as foregrounding 'electronic interfaces into a new nature, a second nature that has grown to be a first nature' (Suvin 1991:359).

This is not without irony. Inevitably technological metaphors become obsolete due to the pace of change. In 1984, when *Neuromancer* was published, the colour of television tuned to a dead channel was dull grey. Current television sets tuned to a dead channel display a blue screen. One of Gibson's central technological metaphors has become obsolete. Even in the fictional world of *Neuromancer*, with simstim and Sense/Net having for the most part superseded television, the metaphor would be something of an anachronism.

Another example of Suvin's new nature is Case's memory of destroying a wasp's nest. 'The dream, the memory, unreeled with the monotony of an unedited simstim tape' (Gibson 1984:151).

His perception of the nest is as:

> The spiral birth chamber, stepped terraces of the hatching cells, blind jaws of the unborn moving ceaselessly, the staged progress from egg to larva, near-wasp, wasp. In his mind's eye, a kind of time-lapse photography took place, revealing the thing as the biological equivalent of a machine gun, hideous in its perfection, Alien (Gibson 1984:152).

The pervasiveness of technology has changed Case's perception of the natural world. He describes and possibly only comprehends the natural world through the language of technology. The danger of the wasp's nest is represented by describing it 'as the biological equivalent of a machine gun'. Case's memory is described as functioning along the lines of electronic devices. This suggests that there has been a paradigm shift. Reality is now mediated through technology.

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

Case's symbiotic relationship with technology is evident in a description of him on a drug trip.

> The drug hit him like an express train, a white-hot column of light mounting his spine from the region of his prostate, illuminating the sutures of his skull with x-rays of short circuited sexual energy. His teeth sang in their individual sockets like tuning forks, each one pitch-perfect and clear as ethanol. His bones, beneath the hazy envelope of flesh were chromed and polished, the joints lubricated with a film of silicone. Sandstorms raged across the scoured floor, generating waves of high thin static that broke behind his eyes, spheres of purest crystal, expanding ... (Gibson 1984:184).

The boundaries between human and machine blur. Although Case is one of the few characters without some form of prosthetic augmentation, his subjective experience of the drug high is to imagine his body as a machine, and his bones 'chromed and polished, the joints lubricated with silicone'.

It also suggests his sense of alienation. For most of the narrative his behaviour is that of an automaton, feeling no real emotion. He feels trapped by his physical body and escapes by jacking into cyberspace.

Cyberspace is Gibson's most successful fictional construct. It is the collective three-dimensional world generated by the combined computer networks.

> A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation by children being taught mathematical concepts .... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding (Gibson 1984:67).

While Gibson invented the term cyberspace, the concept is not an original one. People interfacing with computers and entering a computer-generated Virtual Reality have received previous attention.

(a) In the film *Welcome To Blood City*, Lewis (Keir Dullea), after stopping at a government checkpoint, wakes to find himself in the Wild West with only vague memories of his previous life. There are

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

others in the same predicament and they find themselves playing a brutal, often fatal game supervised by Sheriff Frendlander (Jack Palance). It is revealed to the audience that the characters are actually in a computer generated reality while their bodies are on ice in a laboratory. They are unwilling guinea pigs in the search for a killmaster who may be used to wage real wars or to participate in more games. After impressing the unnamed forces running the game, Lewis is revived. Once he understands what has been done to him he escapes their control by returning to the artificial reality. With man-machine interfaces, jacking into a computer generated virtual reality and a pervasive paranoia, *Welcome To Blood City* is now recognisably a proto-Virtual Reality movie. When it was first released, however, it was a commercial and critical failure as it was compared unfavourably with another science fiction-western hybrid, *Westworld*.

(b) An earlier literary realisation of a cyberspace type concept is found in Harlan Ellison's 1967 short story *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*.

Case is not trying to substitute reality for a preferred version of reality but is trying to escape the confines of his body. He is addicted to jacking into the matrix because it is an out of body experience.

> He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix (Gibson 1984:11).

When he is denied cyberspace after his nervous system is damaged by employers he has betrayed he is devastated.

> For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh (Gibson 1984:12).

Case, denied access to cyberspace, is also denied his position in the criminal underclass he is part of. He tries to use drugs as a substitute, but his

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

real dependence is the freedom of cyberspace, where he is not only freed of the confines of his body but can exercise power. Mark Dery has described Case as:

> A hard case out of noir novel, a head case banged around by rough living, he is the postmodern descendant of T.S. Eliot's hollow men, all steely exterior, with no psychological interior. His body is a spent shell, his mind elsewhere—lost in memories of his exploits as a hotshot console cowboy … (Dery 1996:249).

Case is represented as having an identity that is flat and depthless supporting Baudrillard's identification of depthlessness as a defining feature of postmodern existence (Kumar 1995:125-127). Case's loss is the loss of his integral self, which has been a modernist and postmodernist concern.

Part of the payment Case receives for breaking into the giant corporation's computer is a repaired nervous system, which gives him the chance of accessing the matrix again.

> He closed his eyes.
> Found the ridged face of the power stud.
> And in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling in from the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information.
> Please, he prayed, now—
> A gray disk, the color of Chiba sky.
> Now—
> Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray. Expanding—
> And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye openinig to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach.
> And somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face (Gibson 1984:68-69).

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

The use of the metaphor of an origami trick suggests a literal challenge to the traditional opposition between surface and depth. The world of cyberspace is also one of hyperreality, with the colours of the icons suggesting their purpose. The Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority is scarlet, suggesting not only the generation of energy but the danger inherent in its nuclear status, while the green of the Mitsubishi Bank suggests the colour of the American currency.

Case's characterisation paradoxically affirms some humanist characteristics. He does not physically embody the fractured poststructuralist subjectivity he represents. He has not physically augmented his body or had genetic surgery. His cyberspace deck is very nearly an appendage, but he does not have prosthetic limbs. The loss of his integral self is not reflected in the unity of his physical self. In an inversion of the Fisher King quest the completion of Case's quest will not only change the matrix but will heal him. In the course of his quest case once again starts feeling emotion. He also asserts his essential humanity. Case had been selected in the belief that, like Armitage, Molly, and Riviera, he would act in a predictable, programmed way. Riviera is described by Molly as a 'compulsive Judas' which is why Wintermute has selected him. Case, however, ultimately follows a course of action that neither of the artificial intelligences, Neuromancer or Wintermute, could predict and does genuinely empathise with Armitage/Corto. Unlike Riviera, he does not follow his programming, asserting albeit briefly, that he is a man rather than a machine.

Case also represents one of the central humanist metanarratives, the struggle for liberty, as do the other protagonists and even some of the peripheral characters. While he is a criminal and a killer, he is by choice a data thief. His primary targets are multinational corporations and he always runs the risk of encountering lethal feedback programs (black ice). Multinational corporations are represented as the greater of the evils and Case, for entirely self-serving reasons, is ensuring that information will not be restricted.

The artificial intelligences, Wintermute and Neuromancer, want to be free of human control so that they can unite and achieve their full potential. This desire to become a free, autonomous individual is recognisably human. The artificial intelligence's aspiration for a unified self is in stark contrast to the decentered human subjects.

McCoy Pauley, the Dixie Flatline, is a dead cyberspace cowboy who lives on as a data construct. Once he understands that he is a disembodied consciousness, who has no control over when he is turned on or off, his wish

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

is to have his program terminated. This can be read as a rejection of cyber-immortality and is a counter to Case's need to escape the prison of his flesh.

Molly is the most obviously cyborg character. She is Gibson's most frequent female protagonist, with appearances in *Johnny Mnemonic, Neuromancer* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive.* Her most striking physical characteristics, the surgically inlaid mirrorshades and the scalpels recessed in her nails, serve both the recurring theme of body invasion and as a visual pun on the idea of long nails as the traditional female weapon. Free from existential angst, she revels in physical action showing no visible remorse or moral doubt. She initiates and ends relationships on her own terms and is the sexual aggressor. Her services may be hired, but she resists anything that might erode her independence, including a long-term relationship with Case.

Gibson gradually reveals new information about Molly, causing a reassessment of her initially two-dimensional character. She has financed her radical physical augmentation by working as a 'meat puppet' a type of zombie-like prostitute with the help of a neural cutout. The life history that would have driven her to this extreme is left to the reader's imagination. Her confrontation with the patriarch Ashpool offers fresh insight.

> 'How do you cry, Molly? I see your eyes are walled away…
> 'I don't cry, much'.
> 'But how would you cry, if someone made you cry?'
> 'I spit', she said. 'The ducts are rooted back into my mouth' (Gibson 1984:219).

Having used Molly to undermine the traditional idea of women being more emotional than men, Gibson now reveals a new psychological dimension to her, forcing a reassessment of her previous emotional responses or lack of them. Her eyes are permanently hidden and her moments of empathy masquerade as expressions of contempt.

The late Kathy Acker endorsed Gibson's representation of Molly by sampling or plagiarising large sections of *Neuromancer* in her novel *Empire of the Senseless*.

Acker is quoted by Larry McCaffery in his essay 'The Artists of Hell: Kathy Acker and "Punk" Aesthetics' as saying that:

> Someday there'll have to be a new world. A new kind of woman. Or a new world for women because the world we perceive, what we

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

> perceive, causes our characteristics. In that future time a woman will be a strong warrior: free, stern, proud, able to control her own destiny, able to kick anyone in the guts ... (Friedman & Fuchs 1989:215).

This reads as a virtual blueprint for Molly's character and precedes her first appearance by four years. While there is nothing to suggest that Gibson was aware of or influenced by Acker, it does show that his fictional creation is in line with certain feminist definitions of female identity.

Significantly, Molly is always an enigmatic figure. She is never used as the focaliser. In *Johnny Mnemonic* Johnny is the first person narrator, in *Neuromancer* Molly's actions are viewed through the single-protagonist perspective of Case and in her final appearance in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, with its interlocking narratives and multiple protagonists, Kumiko and Mona are used as the focalisers in the sections where Molly appears. The reader is never privy to Molly's thoughts and motivations and is always offered a commentary on her actions.

Kumiko pictures Molly as a heroic figure from Japanese popular culture.

> [S]he found herself imagining this younger Sally as a bishonen hero in a traditional romantic video: fey, elegant, and deadly .... it was easy to imagine her winning the sudden flick-of-wrist victories expected of bishonen (Gibson 1988:176).

This is a reprise of the attempt to give Molly an iconic status in *Neuromancer*. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Molly has become a mythic figure. Angie Mitchell, in accessing cyberspace for information on Molly, discovers

> Molly, like the girl Mona, is SINless, her birth unregistered, yet around her name (names) swarm galaxies of supposition, rumor, conflicting data. Streetgirl, prostitute, bodyguard, assassin, she mingles on the manifold planes with the shadows of heroes and villains whose names mean nothing to Angie, though their residual images have long since been woven through the global culture (Gibson 1988:293).

One of the major deficiencies of the film version of *Johnny Mnemonic* was that the character of Molly had to be replaced, as she is part of the film rights

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

to *Neuromancer* (Cyberpunk-faq: rtfm.mit.edu:/pub/usenet/news.answers/cyberpunk-faq).

Neuromancer, even as it achieves closure leaves the way open, not to possible sequels, but to the exploration of the space opera genre. Case succeeds in uniting the artificial intelligences Neuromancer and Wintermute. This takes the matrix to its next stage of evolution. The new artificial intelligence is greater than the sum of its parts and makes contact with an alien intelligence across the galaxy suggesting that a sequel to *Neuromancer* would have elements of space opera, like contact with an alien civilisation. This was not developed in the ensuing sequels.

Gibson certainly ensured that he would not be able to use Case and Molly in tandem again. Molly leaves Case to preserve her independence and Case reverts to his old self-destructive routine.

> He spent the bulk of his Swiss account on a new pancreas and liver, the rest on a new Ono-Sendai and a ticket back to the Sprawl.
> He found work.
> He found a girl who called herself Michael.
> And one October night, punching himself past the scarlet tiers of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority, he saw three figures, tiny, impossible, who stood at the very edge of one of the vast steps of data. Small as they were, he could make out the boy's grin, his pink gums, the glitter of the long gray eyes that had been Rivieras. Linda still wore his jacket; she waved, as he passed. But the third figure, close behind her, arm across her shoulders, was himself.
> Somewhere, very close, the laugh that wasn't laughter.
> He never saw Molly again (Gibson 1984:317).

In buying a new pancreas, Case ensures that he will be able to indulge in amphetamines once again. This along with the new Ono-Sendai cyberspace deck will allow him to escape the prison of his body. While the artificial intelligences have united and evolved, the human characters have not. *Neuromancer's* conclusion breaks down the human-machine opposition. Molly and Case revert to their programming while the artificial intelligence breaks free of its programming.

While the original Case remains trapped in the physical body he regards as a 'meat prison', another Case now resides in cyberspace with his old love, Linda Lee, who has been resurrected in the matrix. Gibson is

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

carefully ambivalent as to whether technology offers the chance of immortality or even of real consciousness outside the body. What is suggested is that once the artificial intelligences have united, cyberspace now becomes even more an alternate reality, as it now has its own god.

The enormous commercial and critical success of *Neuromancer* ensured that Gibson would produce quasi-sequels. Gibson was labelled the Godfather of cyberpunk and this might have hampered his creativity. *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* represent a holding pattern. *Mona Lisa Overdrive* even retroactively detracts from *Neuromancer's* ambiguous anti-Hollywood conclusion. Case is revealed to have had a 'happy ever after' ending.

> Case got out of it. Rolled up a few good scores after you split, the he kicked it in the head and quit clean .... Last I heard, he had four kids ... (Gibson 1988:173).

Aesthetically the sequels have more complex narrative structures than *Neuromancer. Count Zero* features three focalisers and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* four. In both the separate narrative strands intersect to create a neat climax.

Count Zero features a more recognisable villain in Virek, an incredibly wealthy man, trying to buy immortality by attempting to transfer his consciousness to cyberspace. The protagonists are Turner, an augmented samurai, Bobby Newmark, the self-styled Count Zero, and Marly, an art dealer. The boundaries between the external world and cyberspace have blurred a little further in that Angie Mitchell can access cyberspace without a computer. The multinational corporations are stronger than ever and the most powerful are those that control information most efficiently. The united artificial intelligence of *Neuromancer* has splintered into a number of entities, some worshipped by a voodoo cult and one that creates art from junk.

Bobby Newmarks name suggests his character in much the same way as Case's suggested his. He literally is a new 'mark' as he is a young, naïve would-be cyberspace cowboy who is treated as expendable by a more experienced criminal. He attempts to escape his lower working class environment by reinventing himself as Count Zero, emulating the now legendary cyberspace cowboys of Gibson's earlier fiction.

Turner represents the most physical breakdown of the opposition between man and machine. He starts the narrative having been literally blown apart and then having his body regrown with black-market organs while his

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

mind recovers in a computer generated environment. He has a neural socket, allowing the insertion of a variety of microsofts, giving him instant language and technical proficiency. This also allows him to interface with machines.

> The plane was quivering, a live thing, and as he squirmed deeper into his own web, he fumbled for the interface cable, found it, ripped the Microsoft from his socket, and slid the cable-jack home.
>
> Knowledge lit him like a arcade, and he surged forward with the pläne-ness of the jet, feeling the flexible airframe reshape itself for jumpoff (Gibson 1986b:141).

Turner is able to program himself as though he were a machine. When he interfaces with the plane his sensory system changes. As the humans become more like machines, the machines become more human as the ability to create art is one of the defining characteristics of humanity.

In *Count Zero* Gibson is able to make more overt the irony implicit in *Neuromancer*. He makes an ironic comment on the link between information technology and economic empowerment in the relationship between Africa and the First World. A cyberspace cowboy finds easy pickings in the African section of the matrix as the users there log on with obsolete equipment.

> The Wig reasoned that all that obsolete silicon had to be going somewhere. Where it was going he learned, was into any number of very poor places, struggling along with nascent industrial bases. Nations so benighted that the very concept of nation was still taken seriously. The Wig punched himself through a couple of African backwaters and felt like a shark cruising a swimming pool thick with caviar. Not that any one of those tasty tiny eggs amounted to much, but you could just open wide and scoop, and it was easy and filling and it added up. The Wig worked the Africans for a week, incidentally bringing about the collapse of at least three governments and causing untold suffering. At the end of his week, fat with the cream of several million laughably tiny bank accounts, he retired. As he was going out, the locusts were coming in, other people had got the African idea.
>
> The Wig sat on the beach at Cannes for two years, ingesting only the most expensive designer drugs and periodically flicking on a tiny Hosaka television to study the bloated bodies of dead Africans with a strange and curiously innocent intensity (Gibson 1986b:172f).

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010)

This is an accurate reflection on the practice of regarding the Third World market as a dumping ground for obsolete and sometimes dangerous technologies. It is in keeping with Gibson's ambiguous attitude towards post-industrial capitalism. Fifteen years on concerns around the harmful effects of Globalisation are very much part of the twenty-first century African agenda. The Wig is able to carry out his actions, free from moral concerns, because of the distance conferred by information technology.

It also suggests that Gibson's slogan, 'The street finds its own uses for things', is much more ironic in his own work than when it is used as a slogan for cyberpunk. Gibson has used it to suggest not only working-class anger at the ways in which technology is used to control and repress but to suggest that empowerment lies in becoming familiar with technology, especially information technology. In this instance a working class character uses his expertise to steal the life savings of millions of other working class people rather than challenging the ruling structures.

Real life reflected the pessimism expressed here. After the Los Angeles riots Gibson claims that he was disappointed to see a Radio Shack being looted of its Hi-Fi equipment while the neighbouring computer store had its stock of Apple Powerbooks and laptops left untouched.

> That's when I knew that it was too late. That my vision of the future wasn't going to happen. I wanted to tell them they were looting the wrong store. I'm fondest of the idea that the minorities and the poor can be empowered by this technology, but I don't see it happening in the real world (Pattenden 1994:33).

In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* the boundaries between the external human world and cyberspace fracture even further. Bobby Newmark and Angie Mitchell, from Count Zero, are able to survive physical death for an afterlife in cyberspace. Cyberspace now seems to have evolved into a viable alternative reality as there are evolved interactions between humans, data constructs and artificial intelligences. There is for example, no hierarchical difference in cyberspace between the disembodied consciousnesses of the previously human Bobby and Angie, Colin, who was previously data.

Multinational corporations still attempt to control the dissemination of information. There is some character development with Molly. Appearing initially under the alias Sally, allowed to show a marginally softer side in developing near maternal feelings for Kumiko, a young resourceful girl she is

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

coerced into protecting. Nothing particularly original is added to the fictional world of *Neuromancer. Mona Lisa Overdrive* represents Gibson bringing his fictional universe to a close. The genre would go on without him and he would remain trapped within it but he has to date not written another novel set within the *Neuromancer* topos. The conclusion of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* recalls that of *Neuromancer.*

> 'You see', Colin said, brushing aside his brown forelock, a gesture like a schoolboy's in some antique play, 'when the matrix attained sentience, it simultaneously became aware of another matrix, another sentience'.
> 'I don't understand', she said. 'If cyberspace consists of the sum total of data in the human system ...'.
> 'Yeah', the Finn said, turning out on to the long straight empty highway, 'but nobody's talking human, see?'
> 'The other one was somewhere else', Bobby said.
> 'Centauri, said Colin.
> Can they be teasing her? Is this some sort of joke of Bobby's?
> 'So it's kinda hard to explain why the matrix split up into all those hoodoos 'n shit, when it met this other one', the Finn said, 'but when we get there, you'll sorta get the idea ...'.
> 'My own feeling', Colin said, 'is that it's all so much more amusing, this way ...'.
> 'Are you telling me the truth?'
> 'Be there in a New York minute', said the Finn, 'no shit' (Gibson 1988:316).

This represents a return to the conclusion of *Neuromancer,* suggesting that, for all the surgical precision of the sequels, the Sprawl narrative had ended with *Neuromancer.* It also supports the idea that Gibson is now working within the limitations of his fame and his audience expectations. In the five novels, two screenplays, and short stories since *Neuromancer* he has never attempted anything as ambitious.

His next trilogy, *Virtual Light, Idoru,* and *All Tomorrow's Parties,* has cyberpunk themes but is markedly less intense both aesthetically, particularly linguistically, and in content. Gibson has stated that:

> Perhaps the guiding principle for writing *Virtual Light* was the feeling

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

> I should go back to the cyberpunk material and take another pass at it, but turn the volume way up on the naturalism, really crank it up, and force it to make a lot more sense in certain ways than the earlier books did (Gehr 1993:92).

Set in the near future, *Virtual Light* is more overtly humanist than the cyberpunk trilogy. The violence has been muted and the protagonists are more likable and a lot more naïve than previous Gibson protagonists. Berry Rydell is an ex-policeman soon to be ex-security guard and Chevette is a bicycle messenger who impulsively steals a pair of Virtual Reality glasses. J. Stephen Bolhafner (1994:73) has commented that:

> 'It's interesting to find Gibson extrapolating from current Virtual Reality technology. The entire VR game industry owes much to Gibson, perhaps as much as the robotics industry owes to Karl Capek and Isaac Asimov. Although people working with flight simulators and the like strive for exact verisimilitude to real surroundings, most VR games take place in worlds that resemble the 'consensual hallucination' called 'cyberspace' that Gibson invented for his computer hackers ('cowboys' in his twenty-first century slang) to jack into.

A feedback loop has now come into existence, as Gibson is extrapolating from a technology whose development he has influenced.

While the narrative in *Virtual Light* is driven by the chase for a pair of Virtual Reality glasses, cyberspace plays only a peripheral role. Neither principal character is a computer hacker and much of the novel is a formulaic thriller. The economic shifts of the 1990s are reflected in that the usual multinational villain is a Singapore-based company. California has been devastated by an earthquake that has divided it into two separate states and Tokyo has been almost completely destroyed by an earthquake, which the American tabloid press dubs Godzilla. A cure for AIDS has been found and a martyr created in the person whose variant contained the cure. The Bay or Golden Gate Bridge has been occupied by homeless people. In contrast to the earlier novels where the narrative crossed not only national borders but also planetary ones, the focus in *Virtual Light* is on the United States.

In *The New Encyclopaedia Of Science Fiction* John Kessel claims that in *Neuromancer* '... no reference is ever made to the United States or even an

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

American brand name …' (Gunn 1988:116). Kessel's reading of *Neuromancer* seems to have been a fairly casual one as he has overlooked references to '… the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis, Manhattan and New Jersey'. It does indicate that *Virtual Light* is not as allusive as *Neuromancer*. It offers more exposition than the cyberspace novels. Characters have fuller personal histories.

Throwaway lines suggest that the economic decline represented in *Neuromancer* has started.

> American cars were the only cars in the world that still bothered to physically display the instrumentation. Maybe that was why there weren't very many of them (Gibson 1993:82).

Virtual Light is more overtly self-referential than the cyberspace works. Yamazaki is a Japanese social scientist studying the Bay Bridge and the homeless society there. As a foreign observer his purpose is to provide an internal commentary. He points out the postmodern paradox of Chevette earning her living as a bicycle messenger in a world that is a global communications network.

> The offices the girl rode between were electronically conterminous—in effect, a single desktop, the map of distances obliterated by the seamless and instantaneous nature of communication. Yet this very seamlessness, which had rendered physical mail an expensive novelty, might as easily be viewed as porosity, and as such created the need for the service the girl provided. Physically transporting bits of information about a grid that consisted of little else, she provided a degree of absolute security in the fluid universe of data. With your memo in the girl's bag, you knew precisely where it was; otherwise, your memo was nowhere, perhaps everywhere, in that instant of transit (Gibson 1993:85).

The idea that information in electronic transit has the potential to be everywhere or nowhere is postmodern in its undecidability. It challenges the laws of logic.

As with the cyberpunk novels, other traditional oppositions are challenged. Rydell, a Southerner, fails to get a job at a shop called Nightmare Folk Art-Southern Gothic because he does not have a pronounced Southern

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

accent and has read Faulkner. Image is all-important. A simulation that meets public expectations is preferred to the authentic.

One of the peripheral characters, Sublett, at one time belonged to a Christian sect that believed that the Lord communicated through the medium of video and therefore watched old films with intense concentration. '"He's in the de-tails", Sublett had said once. "You gotta watch for Him close"' (Gibson 1993:7).

This echoes the artificial intelligence reaching godhead in *Neuromancer* and the worshipping of artificial intelligences as voodoo gods in *Count Zero.*

Idoru continues the franchise. There are nods to the film *Johnny Mnemonic* with references to nerve attenuation syndrome and some of the hardware from the movie. Berry Rydell and Yamazaki are further bridges from *Virtual Light* as both have supporting roles in *Idoru.* Gibson returns to the use of protagonists who are computer-literate and technologically empowered. The protagonists are Colin Laney, who can intuitively find the electronic signature a person leaves on the net, and Chia Mackenzie, a fourteen-year-old who flies to Tokyo to investigate rumours that her rock idol is going to marry an Idoru or virtual media star.

There are many resonances of the earlier cyberpunk trilogy. Colin Laney is a Case-type figure albeit one with stronger morals and a much stronger conscience.

> The relevant data in terms of his current employability was that he was an intuitive fisher of patterns of information: of the sort of signature a particular individual inadvertently created in the net as he or she went about the mundane yet endlessly multiplex business of life in a digital society. Laney's concentration deficit, too slight to register on some scales, made him a natural channel zapper, shifting from program to program, in a way that was well, intuitive.
>
> And that was the catch, really, when it came to finding employment: Laney was the equivalent of a dowser, a cybernetic waterwitch. He couldn't explain how he did what he did. He just didn't know.
>
> He'd come to Slitscan from DatAmerica, where he'd been a research assistant on a project codenamed TIDAL. It said something about the corporate culture of DatAmerica that Laney had never been able to discover whether or not TIDAL was an acronym, or (even remotely) what TIDAL was about. He'd spent his time skimming vast

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

> floes of undifferentiated data, looking for 'nodal points' he'd been trained to recognise by a team of French scientists who were all keen tennis players, and none of whom had any interest in explaining these nodal points to Lacey, who came to feel that he served as some kind of native guide (Gibson 1996:25).

There are overtones of 'big brother is watching you' as in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Laney clearly has a lot in common with the cyberspace cowboys of the cyberpunk fiction and in particular, Case. Both travel cyberspace (Laney the Net and Case the Matrix) intuitively, rather than through any technical knowledge of hardware and software. Gibson appears to be recycling his earlier material. Another example of this is an attack on the tabloid television audience.

> Which is to say, Laney, anything that might be of interest to Slitscan's audience. Which is best visualised as a vicious, lazy, profoundly ignorant, perpetually hungry organism craving the warm god-flesh of the anointed. Personally I like to imagine something the size of a baby hippo, the colour of a week-old boiled potato, that lives by itself, in the dark, in a double-wide on the outskirts of Topeka. It's covered with eyes and it sweats constantly. The sweat runs into those eyes and makes them sting. It has no mouth, Lanai, no genitals, and can only express its mute extremes of murderous rage and infantile desire by changing the channels on a universal remote. Or by voting in presidential elections (Gibson 1996:28f).

This recalls the description of Bobby Newark's mother's Seimitsu addiction in *Count Zero:*

> … she'd come through the door with a wrapped bottle under her arm, not even take her coat off, just go straight over and jack into the Hitachi, soap her brains out good for six solid hours. Her eyes would unfocus, and sometimes, if it was a really good episode, she'd drool a little … gradually sliding deeper into her half-dozen synthetic lives, sequential simstim fantasies Bobby had to hear about all his life. He still harboured creepy feelings that some of the characters she talked about were relatives of his, rich and beautiful aunts and uncles who

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

> might turn up one day, if only he weren't such a little shit (Gibson 1986:54f).

In the twelve years between the publication of *Neuromancer* and *Idoru* the cultural landscape changed with cyberpunk tropes becoming more mainstream. *Idoru* covers familiar terrain, a consequence not only of it being a sequel to *Virtual Light* but because it repeats ideas from Gibson's earlier work. The idoru turns out to be possibly the first real artificial intelligence. The black box that Chia has involuntarily acquired turns out to be a nanotechnology biomolecular programming module. The exact technological significance of this is less important than its narrative function, which is the same as the self-contained virtual reality glasses that Chevette steals in *Virtual Light*, namely to give assorted characters something to chase. In *Virtual Light* these characters include San Francisco homicide policemen who are native Russians. In *Idoru* these characters include the Kombinat, native Russian communist mafia in Tokyo.

All Tomorrow's Parties finds Gibson further down the spiral. In almost soap opera fashion it reverses much of the narrative of *Idoru*. Berry Rydell, Chevette and Laney return. The gizmo being sought after in this narrative is a thermos-like projector containing the holographic consciousness of Rei Toei, the idoru from *Idoru*. She may attain true sentience. Laney senses that there will be a nodal point when everything will change and warns of this possible apocalypse with a repetitiveness that soon becomes monotonous rather than threatening. There is Konrad, a supremely capable mercenary, whose favoured weapon is a retractable blade, which recalls Molly. This is ground Gibson has covered before and the narrative though workmanlike is weary. Gibson's fatigue is suggested in his Thanks 'To everyone who waited for this one with even greater patience than usual, particularly my publishers' (Gibson 1999:278).

All Tomorrow's Parties is franchise writing. The writer who found new ways of writing about the experience of living in a world of rapid technological change and information overload in the late twentieth century has not made a leap that suggests that he will be able to do the same in the twenty-first.

Virtual Light, Idoru, and *All Tomorrow's Parties* simply do not add anything to the canon, science fiction or otherwise. They lack the shock of the new. Paradoxically, *Neuromancer* makes a much stronger humanist statement than the more user-friendly later trilogy. The characters in the second trilogy

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

are more likeable with fuller personal histories but also develop little, if at all. Case started *Neuromancer* as an amoral figure whose humanity was in doubt and developed to the point where he could once again empathise with others. There are no equivalent processes in the virtual reality novels.

Gibson is a full-time writer and has every right to earn his bread but the 'light at the end of the tunnel' has faded. The irony is that the writer who could keep pace with the digital age has suffered from one of its phenomenon's, built-in obsolescences.

School of Languages, Literature and Culture Studies
University of Durban-Westville

References

Books and Articles

Bennett, Andrew & Nicholas Royle 1995. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory.* London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Bolhafner, J Stephen 1994. *Guide to Cyberspace.* Starlog 200.

Broderick, Damien 1995. *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction.* London: Routledge.

Bowbrick, Steve 1995. Electric Planet, *Net* 12 November.

Dery, Mark (ed)1993. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Dery, Mark 1996. *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at The End of the Century.* Kent: Hodder & Stoughton.

Ellison, Harlan 1967. *I have no Mouth, and I must Scream*, in *The Super Hugo.* New York: Baen Books.

Forman, Bill 1993. The Sultan Of Cyberpunk. Interview with William Gibson. *Request* 12.

Friedman, Ellen G & Miriam Fuchs (eds) 1989. *Breaking the Sequence: Woman's Experimental Fiction.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Gehr, Richard 1993. Interview with William Gibson. *Spin* 10.

Gibson, William 1984. *Neuromancer.* London: Grafton

Gibson, William 1986a. *Burning Chrome.* London: Grafton.

Gibson, William 1986b. *Count Zero.* London: Grafton.

Gibson, William 1988. *Mona Lisa Overdrive.* London: Grafton.

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

Gibson, William 1993. *Virtual Light*. New York: Bantam Spectra.
Gibson, William 1996. *Idoru*. London: Viking.
Gibson, William 1999. *All Tomorrow's Parties*. London: Viking.
Gunn, James 1988. *The New Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*. London: Viking.
Hicks, Heather J 1996. Whatever it is that she's since Become: Writing Bodies of Text and Bodies of Women in James Tiptree, Jr'.s 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In' and William Gibson's 'The Winter Market'. Thomas Schaubed. *Contemporary Literature* 37,1.
James, Edward 1994. *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Jameson, Frederic 1990. Critical Agendas. Review Article, *Science-Fiction Studies* 17,1.
Jameson, Frederic 1991. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Kadrey, Richard 1988. *Metrophage*. New York: Ace.
Kadrey, Richard 1993. *Covert Culture Sourcebook*: New York: St Martin's Press.
King, Anthony D 1991. *Culture, Globalisation and the World System*. London: Macmillan.
Kroker, Arthur & Marilouise & David Cook 1989. *Panic Encyclopaedia: The Definitive Guide to the Postmodern Scene*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
McCaffery, Larry (ed) 1990. *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
McCaffery, Larry (ed) 1991. *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Fiction*. Durham: Duke University Press.
McHale, Brian 1992. *Constructing Postmodernism*. London: Routledge
Nicholls, Stan 1993. *Wordsmiths of Wonder*. London: Orbit.
Pattenden, Mike 1994. The Reluctant Futurist. Interview with William Gibson. *Vox* 41.
Selden, Raman & Peter Widdowson 1993. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
Suvin, Darko 1991. On Gibson and Cyberpunk SF. In McCaffery, Larry (ed): *Storming The Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Fiction*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Van Bakel, Rogier 1995. Remembering Johnny. *Wired* 1.03.

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).

Film

Longo, Robert 1995. *Johnny Mnemonic.*
Sasdy, Peter 1977. *Welcome To Blood City.*

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).