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The Sentimental Futurist: Cybernetics and Art in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1992)

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William Gibson's career and reputation threaten to imitate the panic narrative logic of his own fictions. Gibson was immediately cited as a form of postmodern apotheosis, on the basis of a few stories and a first novel. But largely because of his own enormous influence on the creators of Virtual Reality and cyberspace, we are speeding away from the stars of his imaginary constellation so fast that cyberpunk, the literary movement Gibson was said to epitomize, has all but vanished in the void. Moreover, since the explosive success of *Neuromancer*, Gibson has studiously cooled and moderated the hellbent intensity of his fiction; consequently, in the opinion of many readers, he has lost some control and conviction.

Gibson is, nevertheless, one of the most inventive and ambitious artists in SF, perhaps in spite of *Neuromancer*'s success in mixing hard SF and scintillating lyric. Unlike most SF, Gibson's writing is concerned with art, in overt and subtle ways — specifically, with SF as a medium for art. His critics miss the point when they take exception to the prominence of style over such putative hard SF qualities as fidelity to scientific plausibility in projecting the future.[1] I would argue that the lasting values of Gibson's works lie precisely in his careful and complex crafting of an SF language that simultaneously expresses a lyricism of estrangement ,and an allegory of the present. Where traditional SF repeats obsessively the delusion that it is a form of epic representation of the fate of humanity, Gibson's fiction returns, as to a tonic, to the question of how artists can represent the human condition in a social world saturated by cybernetic technologies.

In this essay, I will argue that Gibson attempted to solve the problem in *Neuromancer* through a form of sentimental futurism. He adopted the artistic and technosocial vision of a neofuturism, albeit "sentimentally," without celebrating the inexorable victory of autonomous technology. In *Count Zero* (1986), Gibson repudiates the futuristic intensity of his first novel. The second novel emphasizes the fragmentation of experience and social reality in a hyperextended cybernetic control system and, with it, the primacy of the art of collage. Gibson strives in *Count Zero* to restore a place for ethical and artistic freedom by subverting the apocalyptic fusions of Neuromancer. With *Mona Lisa*

Overdrive (1988), the trilogy concludes with a chaotic synthesis — allowing the coexistence and co-evolution of an art of mystical allegory, embodied in the Aleph, and an art of realistic simulation, embodied in the AI, Continuity.

SF writers have referred occasionally to their own artistic activity in their works, but usually only in passing and with little effect on their main narratives. Delany, Disch, and Zelazny are some striking exceptions in the U.S. tradition. In general, where artists' self — reflection feeds back sufficiently to dissolve the generic protocols of SF, those writers — Lem, Cronenberg, and Ballard, for example — become only tangentially or grudgingly associated with the genre. But Gibson's novels can be read as a continuing attempt to make sense of the SF writer as a critical and ethical interpreter of his own generic universe of discourse. The problem of cybernetic system feedback is not limited to the themes and techniques "in" texts; it leads to questioning the very purpose of constructing futuristic narratives. To put it another way: if the "real world" in which SF artists construct their narratives, and from which they gather their material for SF treatment, is already a work of SF simulation, what is it that an SF artist can do? For Gibson, this is not primarily a political and ethical question but a question about the possibilities and meaning of art in a world that has absorbed and usurped the traditional purposes and scenes of art.

Cybernetics, Art, and SF. The problem that cybernetics poses for the traditional genre of SF is, ironically, greater than for non-SF writing. The widespread application of cybernetic information processing and communications control systems throughout social life leads to a collapse of social space, a Baudrillardian implosion.[2] SF's pantographic glory had been represented by the concept of "outer space." In general, before the noir turn of the 1960s, SF luxuriated in a form of mythological superrealism. Realistic fiction's idealization of spatial relations attained a pinnacle in SF's cosmic stage set. When projected into space, history, romantic quest, or indeed any human adventure could pretend to acquire a heroic aura. Faster-than-light-travel and other temporal anomalies allowed the protagonists of SF a scene of infinite dimensions and boundless access. Realism was a privileged style of presentation for this mode because realism encourages the representation of human activity as a syntagmatic negotiation of space.[3] For the same reason, SF continued in the romantic adventure mode, for it is the adventure that emphasizes the physical and cognitive conquest of previously unassimilable and symbolically highly charged spaces. SF as a genre industry flowered after the heroic adventurers ceded the cognitive conquest of terrestrial spaces to the prosaic anthropologists. SF rushed in to offer a compensatory ideology of inherently unassimilable space as a venue for the relentless restaging of heroic, ethical, and pseudoscientific assimilation. The limits on conquest were not internal to the human

condition; they were part of the external objective condition of the universe and, hence, an irresistible challenge.

Like all realisms, the realism of SF's outer space pretended to offer a window on the actual landscape of the world, in this case the landscape of the future -- not a literal prediction, of course, just a continual reinforcement of the attitude that the assaults of scientific adventuring subjects on the objective material world will continue in a naive representational mode of appropriation. Cybernetics, when it appears in classical realistic SF, has the role of adjunct regulator, a handmaiden. The Asimovian robot is programmed to be subject to idealized human ethics; the classical ship's computer is always subject to noble human override. By the time we reach Gibson and the cyberpunks, cybernetics have saturated mundane reality to a degree that few SF writers have ever wanted to contemplate. Ironically, it was not in space travel that this cyberneticization exerted its transformative power. After all, several Apollo missions were occasions for brilliant manual control of spaceships. The saturation occurred through mass communications and weapons systems. Soon, daily life was the most charged arena of technological innovation. The colonization of space ceded place to the colonization of the quotidian. Outer space gradually ceased to be a heroic site, becoming instead the dreary and boring outland. The thrill of human transformation was occurring within Spaceship Earth. The cyborgization of the body (through cybermedecine and surveillance), the absorption of politics into computerized international communications and finance systems, the sciences, the arts, economic life, and the whole range of human relationships mediated by high technology, vitiated the power of mythological space adventure.

It is a commonplace that, in realistic fiction, either the setting or the characters must remain stable. The familiarity of one permits the reader to gauge the strangeness of the other. If both are strange, there is no "solid ground" for the reader's predictions, expectations, or resolutions. Once it became clear that the cybernetic transformation of everyday life had called into question the character of human social existence, outer space had either to become familiar and domesticated or a projection of character.

The most fascinating response to this collapse of space into the infinite transformability of the human world was Gibson's cyberspace and its realworld cousin, Virtual Reality. In a single move, Gibson restored the heroic spatial expanse that SF had lost in outer space and laid the groundwork for developing a system of symbols for cybernetic implosion. Cyberspace, after all, is a purely human system, a "consensual

hallucination," with no objective status. In it, the Cartesian *res cogitans* continually reinvents the *res extensa*. It cannot be conquered for humanity because it is an aspect of humanity at the outset. The best that can be hoped for is its conquest for unalienated, enlightened human beings from the powers of avarice, fetishization, and global reification that control the cyberspace field. Gibson's cyberspace novels are, from this perspective, adventures of disalienation, attempts to imagine the redemption of a hostile alien continuum of humanity's own making.

The collapse of space from the infinite physical universe to the infinite imaginary datascape of cyberspace reflects a similar collapse of the distances that had propped up precybernetic arts, to the de-defined, de-auraticized art of postmodernity. The saturation of reality with technosocial feedback systems raises in even more pronounced form the problem of art described by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Trying to account for the revolutionary impact of film, Benjamin argued that the serial production of works of art by mechanical means removes art irreparably from the realm of historical uniqueness and the immediate material conditions of its production. Art, which had always been invested with the religious quality of "aura," is absorbed by the process of commodity production and undergoes the same transformation from unique object to abstract process that characterizes the industrial capitalist mode of production. This new process brings with it, Benjamin argues, the revolutionary possibility that the masses will be able to enjoy art of good quality that also reflects their own situation. It also brings with it, like a shadow, the possibility of the aestheticization of politics in the fascist style, leading inevitably, and willfully, to war (Benjamin 217-251).

Benjamin writes of the disappearance of aura as the disappearance of cultic distance. More recently, Jean Baudrillard has described the domain of the hyper-real, and hyper-real SF in particular, in terms of the disappearance of the distance between the real and the imaginary.

> There is no real and no imaginary, except at a certain distance. What happens when this distance, even the one separating the real from the imaginary, begins to disappear and to be absorbed by the model alone? Currently, from one order of simulacra to the next, we are witnessing the reduction and absorption of this distance, of this separation which permits a space for ideal or critical projection. ("simulacres et science fiction" 180)

With cybernetic production, it is not only the artwork's aura that disappears. The entire symbolic domain as a different universe of discourse goes as well, in Baudrillard's

account, and with it the sense of another, transcendent source of value from which auratic authority is felt to radiate. With the possibility of simulating almost any process and appearance through technosocial means, the once transcendental symbolic order is exteriorized ("made meat," the console jockeys would say), and the symbolic is replaced with the "experiential."[4]

Furthermore, the feedback of art into its social apparatus becomes so instantaneous and complete in telematic societies that it is already a part of the social process_barely distinguishable from publicity, from the commodification and marketing of experience. There is no special symbolic-informational domain from which the artist can justify the work of art from a moral, religious, or national perspective. High speed reproduction and dissemination make it difficult to distinguish between the appropriate and the indifferent, or indeed between the critical and the affirmative, the satirical and the indicative. There can be no better example of this than the case of Gibson's own cyberspace, which was almost instantly transformed from a dystopian fictional chronotope to the heart's desire of the purveyors of Virtual Reality (Porush, "The Matrix Made Meat").

Because this implosion squeezes out the symbolic order as a domain with special, auratic authority, artists scramble to find new combinations and historically adequate materials. N. Katherine Hayles has described some strategies in *The Cosmic Web* and *Chaos Bound*. David Porush, in *The Soft Machine*, has discerned ways that certain postmodern writers respond to the collapse by writing as if their works were subversive Artificial Intelligence apparatuses in their own right, undermining the objective transformations of reality from within by depicting the likely points of breakdown and artificial transcendence.

Gibson does not share the experimental and philosophical inclinations of the writers discussed by Hayles and Porush. His tendency has been to look for the solution in the realistic depiction of experimental art — and to represent the notion, inherited from the modernist avant-garde, of the artwork's capacity to break down the political-ideological domination of the experience of reality. As I hope to show in this essay, Gibson's strategy is dogged and complex, but it is fraught with problems, for the avant-garde itself is arguably partly responsible for the absorption of reality into the global cybernetic control models of hyper-real simulation. The avant-garde was, like Benjamin, committed to the destruction of the distance between elite art and everyday life. The gap that Benjamin spoke of as the mysterious/mystified distance required for the sense

of aura, was, for the avant-garde, the gap maintained to prop up bourgeois class domination of consciousness. The goal, articulated especially by the futurists, constructivists, and surrealists, was to dissolve the boundaries between art and life by aestheticizing political and everyday life, and by bringing the politics of everyday life to art (P. Bürger 47-54; Berman 34-35). It has been argued that the avant-garde's project was successful far beyond expectations in one respect: the aestheticization of power (a success greatly facilitated by the cybernetic technical apparatus of mass communications). The infusion of art with living critical politics had less success; the technocratic beneficiaries of the control apparatus had little desire or need to create a democracy of technology (Berman 41). Consequently, a whole range of social phenomena from the Nazi arts of simulation-propaganda to the postmodern destruction of boundaries between politics and advertising reflect the transformation of reality into an immense screen of kinetic images. With the collapse of the distance between formal, autonomous art and life, the imaginary distance of critical reflection disappears as well (C. Bürger 99; Berman 56). The artist is deprived of a reality that can be pointed to from an imaginary vantage point because that imaginary realm has itself been absorbed into the dimensionless, constantly mutating continuum of image and information. This spaceless condition affects the SF writer more than most because the imaginary concepts of utopia, the future, evolution, mythic science, and technological magic have defined the thematic contours of the genre. The destruction of the difference between reality and SF speculation necessarily presents a challenge to the SF writer to establish artistic distance out of materials that exert tremendous implosive pull to annihilate SF as a distinct way of conceiving, and even criticizing, the world.

Gibson is no cheerful booster of this condition. The lyricism, invocations of resignation and grief in his work, his implicit concern for the psychological histories of his characters, and his devotion to cause and effect all mark him as an interpreter of the human condition, one who assumes a desire, if not a capacity, on the part of human beings to view the world from a critical and ethical distance.

In a sense, Gibson is a novelist very much in the tradition described by Georg Lukács in *Theory of the Novel* (Part 11, Chapter 4). Faced with an overwhelming feeling of "transcendental homelessness," wandering like pilgrims in a world emptied of religious and communal presence, Gibson and his protagonists embark in story after story on quests to restore value and meaning. They have an advantage over the earlier inhabitants of modern fiction, in that the cybersphere promises that it may be possible artifically to construct transcendence. Because the cybersphere has already absorbed the affects and objects that in the past were associated with sacredness and value, Gibson's protagonists have no choice but to try out artificial transcendence.

Fiat Ars — Pereat Mundi. In *Neuromancer* the solution is global: art is all there is. Cybernetic technology has transformed the world into a perpetually mutating artifactual system. The technological order has been so successful in achieving its primary aim of converting the real into a traffic of information that the circulation itself has become the ground of reality. It has become a new nature, automatic, self-programming. Because no one in *Neuromancer*'s world produces anything out of previously unworked matter anymore, all human activity is taken up with using excess and excessive information for decoration, for self-supplementation, for pleasure. The universe has been transformed from the Dance of Shiv to the "dance of biz."

> What matters is the dance, Get just wasted enough, find yourself in some desperate but strangely arbitrary kind of trouble, and it was possible to see Ninsei as a field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialties. Then you could throw yourself into a highspeed drift and skid, totally engaged but set apart from it all, and all around you the dances of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market. (16)

Almost every character in *Neuromancer* is an artist of some kind, almost every object a technological artifact that is also a work of art. More important, because *Neuromancer* depicts a social sphere running at breakneck speed, unmoored from the meat-bodies' natural gravity, the ruling artifacts are kinetic, theatrical, dancelike.

Gibson insists that we conceive *Neuromancer*'s world as an art world. From the opening section heading, "Chiba City Blues" on, we hear Ratz (himself "heraldic" in his self-cultivated ugliness) identify Case as an "artiste of the slightly funny deal" (4). Sly allusions to contemporary art-rock — Screaming Fist, the Big Scientists — flatten art and violence into art fashions. Bodies are forever measured by art: Wage's mask; Molly's self-construction and her "muscles like a dancer's" (44); a Panther Modern "flowing [like] a mime pretending to be a jungle predator" (50); Lupus Yonderboy, "a state of the art gargoyle" (67); "Armitage, like a 'metal statue'" (29). There is the Panther Moderns' terror-theater for the hell of it — the narrator even identifies their school-affiliations, with their "penchant for surreal violence" (48). Riviera's "holographic cabarets" and free-form psychic rapes are conscious theatrical "entertainments." Freeside's hermetically enclosed magic theater is wired so that any object can be animated into dramatic life, from the Lado_Acheson sky's constellation of Linda Lee's

face to the homicidal gardener-unit. Villa Strayfght, the "Gothic folly" (172), unfolds in Mane's academic essay as an architectural wonder, a collection-point of obsolete *objets d'arts* so saturated with aura (from having been transported into orbit from Earth) that they seem to be organic matter in the vestibular viscera of the Straylight nautilus.

In this aesthetic profusion three grand-scale works of art dominate all the others: Marie-France Tessier-Ashpool's Artificial Intelligences, Wintermute's plot, and Case's visionary ballet mecanique with the Black Ice.

Marie-France's original design for the AI was simultaneously a program for the creation of a new reality and the dramaturgy of a cosmic agon, the drama of bringing synthetic birth to a god of cyberspace. Marie-France was the ultimate cybernetic artist, for her "work" of art had to feed back on the real to program its own completion — through the enlistment of Case, Molly, Armitage, and the others in its project. Its final object was not merely a new entity but a transformed state of reality.

The union of Wintermute and Neuromancer (the two separated AIs that, once fused, are to become the new consciousness of cyberspace) is both a work of art and a new version of the archetypal union of halves severed from an original whole (Marie-France's design), like the two halves of the self that seek each other in Aristophanes's contribution to *The Symposium*. The united Wintermute-Neuromancer uses all of reality as its raw material and, as a result, makes all of reality its transformed "work."

To attain this artifactualization of the world, Wintermute and Neuromancer write their plots, which take the ostensibly hard reality of human social life and invest it with theatrical plotting. Wintermute draws the human protagonists in by giving them the opportunity to practice their arts. Case, Molly, Riviera, even Maelcum, are given a stage on which to have the best performance of their lives. The irony is that their arts have become parts of Wintermute's operational program.

Neuromancer climaxes with Case as visionary pilot of the Kuang program against the Black Ice. This episode contains some of Gibson's most lyrical writing. It is informed by the strange premise that the consummation of Wintermute's and Neuromancer's psychocosmic union is a form of videogame Tai Chi Chuan — a synthesis of impossible drive and "an ancient dance . . . grace of the mind-body interface" (262). In that moment, Case becomes the supreme artiste of the cosmic video game and an initiate into a Tao of supernal machinery — the ultimate dancer. It is difficult to read *Neuromancer*'s conclusion as an affirmation, because each of the human achievements was essentially a subprogram of Wintermute's overriding plot and Marie-France's even

more comprehensive initial plan. The position of the external source of critical perspective is provided by a fourth but very different work of art: Zion cluster's dub. The Zion spaceships are rejectionist bricolages, resembling inner-city reggae discos, just as dub is a form of rejectionist joy, a form of "worship" in Babylon, in which beat is all, a "cube of music" from which all excess is "hacked away."[5]

The apocalyptic Rastas are obligated by their faith to facilitate the Great Transformation (though it's hardly obvious what Zion cluster gains with the unleashing of "Babylon"); they do this not mainly through Maelcum's skill as a bodyguard but through his art -- dub music-- a simulation of the beat of the "meat-heart" that draws the flatlined Case out of *Neuromancer*'s simulation-universe by offering persistent, unwavering, alternative sound that has a modest, distinct, integral identity in a world of artful noise.

Sentimental Futurism. Gibson's commentators often speak of the importance of art in his writing. Glenn Grant identifies Gibson's tactics as a form of *détournement*, the representation of technologies in a way that appropriates them for countercultural uses (Grant 43-44). Grant traces this method from the dadaists and surrealists to the situationist and 1980s' countercultural movements. With this genealogy, Grant follows Bruce Sterling's ("Preface" to *Mirrorshades* x-xi) well known formulation of cyberpunk as a social artist, a reservoir of alternative energies circulating in the techno-underground of the 1980s. To my mind, this is to read Gibson as Sterling, and to mistake what is essentially an artistic strategy for a social_political tactic. Gibson's cyberspace/Sprawl world is a panic epic (to invoke Arthur Kroker), a self-conscious and self-exposing literary artifact that depicts, in the collision between the personal signature of the artist and a cybernetically organized dynamic social system, the general problem of individuals' imaginative vision in a hyper-real world of signs.

It is not in dada, hiphop, and punk that one will find the direct lineage of Gibson's cyberpunk but in another, less fashionable current: futurism, Italian style.

> 1. We intend to glorify the love of danger, the habit of energy, the strength of daring.
> 2. The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity, and revolt.
> 3. Literature having up to now glorified pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber, we wish to exalt aggressive movement, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap.

4. We affirm that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty, the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes like serpents with explosive breath . . . a roaring car that seems to run on gunpowder is more beautiful than the Venus of Samothrace.

5. We will sing the praises of man at the wheel, who hurls the lance of his spirit across the Earth, along the circle of its orbit.

6. The poet must spend himself with ardor, splendor, and generosity, to swell the enthusiastic fervor of the primordial elements.

7. There is no more beauty except in struggle. There can be no masterpiece without the stamp of aggressiveness. Poetry Should be a violent assault on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man.

8. We stand on the last promontory of the ages! Why look back when we must break down the mysterious doors of The Impossible? Time and space died yesterday. We already live in the Absolute, for we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed.

9. We will glorify war -- the only true hygiene of the world -- militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the freedom-bringers, the beautiful Ideas which kill, and scorn for women.

10. We will destroy museums, libraries, academies of any kind, and fight against moralism, feminism, and all utilitarian cowardice.

11. We will sing of great crowds agitated by work, pleasure or revolt; we will sing the multicolored and polyphonic tides of revolution in modern capitals; the vibrant nocturnal fervor of arsenals and shipyards beneath their blazing electric moons; greedy railway stations devouring smoking serpents; factories hanging from the clouds by the crooked thread of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with the glitter of knives; adventurous steamers scenting the horizon; deep-chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks like the hooves of enormous steel horses bridled by tubing; and the sleek flight of planes whose propellers chatter in the wind and seem to cheer like enthusiastic crowds .b

There is an unnerving fit between Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* and Gibson's novel. It is not an exact fit, of course, but there are more similarities than many readers might wish to entertain.

Neuromancer is unquestionably saturated with the aesthetic of energy and audacity, of insomnia and aggression, the exaltation of the machine (with Gibson it's the ice-breaking console that substitutes for the race-car) and the virtual cyborg, like Case, part computer and part man, and Molly, part fighting machine, part woman. The action of the novel's Big Caper is simply a form of Marinetti's "violent attack on unknown forces" because the discovery and release of the magic that unifies the two AIs is a literal raid on the ineffable. *Neuromancer*'s climax could hardly be more adequately stated than by point 8: "We already live in the absolute, for we have created eternal, omnipresent speed." The uneasiness begins with point 9, for surely Gibson's novel is not militaristic, patriotic, and scornful of women. And yet the seductiveness of the novel's textures depends on a relentless aggressive heightening of violent emotions. Finally, it is explicitly hate, the hate Case feels for the AIs and for himself, and Molly's hate for Riviera, that drives the narrative toward the massacre in Villa Straylight and Case's video-game battle against Neuromancer's ice. Although the Third World War was a two-week affair (8283), it appears that its technology and ruthlessness live on at street level. We are expected to relish it. Case's Kuang program is an icebreaker of military origin, and Molly's arsenal of weapons includes some diabolical engines of biological warfare (like the tetrahydropyridene that she custom-ordered for Riviera's liquidation [253]). As for women, it is hard to assess the narrative's attitude because, among the women characters, only Molly acts with any independence (who else is there, other than the terminally passive Linda Lee?); and as a street-samurai, she represents no gender-based ethical alternative to the eternal war-sphere of an almost cosmically male world. (Consider that both Wintermute and Neuromancer embody themselves exclusively as males, never as females.) *Neuromancer*'s narrator and its surrogate, Case, are sentimental futurists. They are committed to the materialization of the futurist program in the world and yet also full of vague regrets for the affects and relations lost in the transformation. The material embodiment of the futurists' ideal in *Neuromancer*'s technosphere deprives the novel and its central character of any hope for transcendence; as in the traditional novel, the need to experience value is interiorized into subjectivity, which for Gibson occurs in the neuroculture of drugs, simstim, and biosofts. But here, as in the breakdown of subjective idealism that is the persistent theme of the traditional novel, according to Lukács, the technologies of exteriorized mind pursue the desire for transcendence right into the nervous system until consciousness, the last holdout against cybernetic control, is taken from within.

The idea of sentimental futurism is one way of conceiving the ambivalence that Gibson shows vis-a-vis cybertech transformations. The regrets are often moving and subtle.

> He'd watched her personality fragment, calving like an iceberg, splinters drifting away, and finally he'd seen the raw need, the hungry armature of addiction. He'd watched her track the next hit with a concentration that reminded him of the mantises they sold in stalls along Shiga, beside tanks of blue mutant carp and crickets caged in bamboo. (8)

But to become explicit, complaints or critiques or regrets require a space, a still point from which reflections might emerge. A "television tuned to a dead channel" (1) is, in information-theoretical terms, even more active than a "live" one. In *Neuromancer*, regret for the loss of nature (first and second) simply has no power to resist the energy of technology's transformation of the world into a field in which power is all there is, and art is merely the means of turning affects into power.

Indeed, regret for the loss of affect is only a foil in *Neuromancer*, putting up a mild resistance to enable power and violence to leave their imprints. The narrative construction of the novel thus affirms the futurist vision, even if without the naive enthusiasm of its proto-fascist devotees, their "puerile technological optimism" (Debord in Bukatman). Each of the major diegetic artworks—Marie-France's design, Wintermute's plot, Case's "run" — are, not surprisingly, doubled in the writing. Like Case, *Neuromancer* is a synthesis of thrills, quick-fading affects, and movement — graceful, quick, and intuitive, accepting of violence without reveling in it, accepting the genre gridwork of the matrix (of SF and the Big Caper) and dependent on a wonderful violent apparatus, the Kuang program/noir video-game, seeking a myth of transcendence into which it can disappear, and yet never really aware of the stakes of the game. The name of the game can only be learned outside the book -- in the same way that the secret name that fuses the AIs is not articulated in words but in birdsong.

Like Wintermute, Gibson sets up a plot in which his characters have no excessive reality; they have nothing that is not a functional part of the program. Their styles and voices, like their technical gifts, exist in order to serve the plot. Finally, like Marie-France, Gibson has written a myth in order to give value to a world emptied of affect and value. The novel concludes, if not in celebration, at least in affirmation of the futurist principle that value lies only in movement and the transformations of technology, that it is not a state or condition but a vector, a process that has no other purpose than the attainment of top speed.

Baudrillard's own version of sentimental futurism could serve as the novel's epigraph:

> Speed . . . is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself, since it moves more quickly than its own cause and obliterates that cause by outstripping it. Speed is the triumph of effect over cause, the triumph of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of surface and pure objectality over the profundity of desire. Speed creates a space of initiation, which may be lethal; its only rule is to leave no trace behind. Triumph of forgetting over memory, and uncultivated, amnesiac intoxication. (*America* 6-7)

Neuromancer emobodies all this in narrative, once we understand that Case's story leaves no significance outside its machine-mediation. In the end, violence is affirmed, not love, not transcendence. Of the protagonists, only the Dixie Flatline is not a killer. Molly and Case, if they ever truly loved each other, cease to share love after the end of the run. Case's story, we learn in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, is essentially over. (That Molly's is not, that she makes a return appearance in *MLO*, fourteen years later, is a mark of Gibson's unease with *Neuromancer*.) As for transcendence, when the new consciousness of the matrix appears to Case in Finn's form, Case asks, "So what's the score? How are things different? You running the world now? You God?" The answer: "Things aren't different. Things are things" (270).

No Time Outs. *Neuromancer*'s most seductive artistic devices are, arguably, not narrative but lyric. The velocity and density of the action and the introduction of new component information -- neologisms, technological innovations, pseudo-common knowledge of historical and cultural events, twists of plot, secret levels of hierarchy — actually obscure the narrative flow. Gibson is most often noted not for his storytelling but for his style.

Carol McGuirk considers this an inherent trait of what she calls "s-f noir." Stylized "noir" protagonists experience their sorrows as extrinsically caused and largely irreversible, so they can achieve neither the bitter end of the tragic hero nor the final triumph of the epic hero. And while the whiff of satire hangs in its night air, s-f noir cannot be called fully satiric, because it depicts wounded and impaired characters for reasons different from satire's. Social malaise functions largely as a metaphor for character malaise in s-f noir -- not, as in satire, vice-versa. In s-f noir, the final destination of the narrative is not satire, tragedy, epic or humanistic utopia/dystopia. It is, as in Poe, symbolic statement or (to resort to oxymoron) lyric narrative, defined as a

figuration employed to displace the literal world and put it to the uses of a private aesthetic vision, i.e., a style. Indeed, in many of these texts the only hero is style ("The New Romancers"). The most marked traits of Gibson's lyrical style link it again to Italian futurism, especially the futurist collage. William Seitz, a historian of collage, describes futurist assemblage in terms uncannily like *Neuromancer*'s cyberpunk language.

> At least in part, futurism was an extension of urban impressionism and neoimpressionism, rather than an opposition to them; and the emphasis on kinetic continuity and simultaneity led to repeated overlapping, and transparent images that interpenetrated and blended. Projecting "lines of force" were used to suggest speed, continuity, and the fusion of objects with their environments. A painter was enjoined not merely to paint the figure, but to "render the whole atmosphere," and the materiality of masses was intentionally dissolved in light and superimposition, by cultivating a vision "giving results analogous to those of x-rays." Stroboscopic multiplication of images led to blending rather than maintenance of interval. In their most sublime aspirations, the futurists proclaimed themselves "Lords of Light," who "drink from the live founts of the sun." Unlike cubists, their aims could not therefore lead to close-up examination of textures, materials, or objects; futurism's key words are "interpenetration," and "synthesis," rather than "interval" and "juxtaposition" (*The Art of Assemblage* 26).

It is the transformation of space into speed, of objects into vectors that engenders futurism's interpenetrations: "a tendency to transform the spatial relations between objects into . . . a violent and reckless motion in which the human body penetrates and is penetrated by its environment" (Lydenberg 273).

Thus the futurists, unlike the cubist and surrealist assembleurs, cultivated the ecstatic breakdown of experience in action, rather than the contemplative disarray of incongruity. "The Futurists refuse to 'correct' their perception with an acquired knowledge of reality. Instead, they employ optical effects in which a flattened field of perception produces a hallucination of vast inner spaces where objects sensuously engulf and invade each other" (The Art of Assemblage 26).

The similarities with Gibson's cyberpunk are striking. In a well-known statement, Gibson attributes the birth of his concept of cyberspace to the sensation video-game players have that there is a real space behind the screen (Greenland 7) — exactly the

futurists' "hallucination of vast inner spaces where objects sensuously engulf and invade each other." It could be argued that futurism actually provides the appropriate realistic descriptive language for a world of experience in which the futuristic visions of ecstatic velocity have been exteriorized into the world, through the technologies of high-speed simulation.

Neuromancer's technosphere is a neofuturist collage in its own right, dominated by technologies of superimposition and interpenetration of experience, stroboscopic doubling, high-speed sensation, and the cyborg synaesthesia of previously alien realms, now converging in a technotopia of artificial transcendence, and culminating in "the bodiless exultation of cyberspace" (6). Each of these technologies invites the language of interpenetration, of high-speed traffic between zones, of bodies and minds constantly in the process of becoming obsolete, and needing upgrades, to make them sleeker, quicker, less inert. Gibson captures this in his technique of compression and ellipsis. Large blocks of context are packed inside taut descriptions of events: Case flipped to cyberspace and sent a command pulsing down the crimson thread that pierced the library ice. Five separate alarm systems were convinced that they were still operative. The three elaborate locks deactivated, but considered themselves to have remained locked. The library's central bank suffered a minute shift in its permanent memory; the construct had been removed, per executive order, a month before. Checking for the authorization to remove the construct, a librarian would find the records erased (66). So much for explanations of the techniques of "ice-breaking." Even the centerpiece of the novel's Big Caper, the Straylight Run, unfolds without preliminary explanations. The context comes into view at the moment that it is penetrated by the action, and not a moment before. This technique of narrative is sometimes considered characteristic of SF; Samuel Delany considers it a defining trait of its linguistic protocol (Delany 33-34). But Gibson goes far beyond the usual SF use of futuristic "assumed knowledge." For *Neuromancer*'s prose appears simply not to have the time for realistic exposition. There are no time-outs. Similarly, the narrative continually places characters — Case above all — within the enveloping experience of another consciousness. Through Simstim, Case can experience the sensations of Molly's body; through cyberspace, he discovers himself in Neuromancer's simulations. Gibson's style is most characteristic when he captures this velocity and transmutation of sensation on the level of the sentence. *Neuromancer* is extremely rich in verbal techniques, but two particular ones are, I believe, so much Gibson's own that it is difficult to imagine anyone imitating them. They appear in passages depicting heightened ecstasy and heightened renunciation: the moods most characteristic of futurism and its sentimental critique. In his ecstatic descriptions, when

Case experiences drugs, orgasm, or jacking into the cyberspace matrix, Gibson writes a consummate futuristic collage-lyric.

> She rode him that way, impaling herself, slipping down on him again and again, until they both had come, his orgasm flaring blue in a timeless space, a vastness like the matrix, where the faces were shredded and blown away down hurricane corridors . . . (33)
>
> Things were launching themselves from the ornate sunburst spines, glittering leeches made of shifting planes of light. There were hundreds of them rising in a whirl, their movements random as windblown paper down dawn streets. "Glitch systems," the voice said. (261)
>
> The drug hit him like an express train, a white-hot column of light mounting his spine from the region of his prostate, illuminated 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 of his skull, generating waves of high thin static that broke behind his eyes, spheres of purest crystal, expanding .... (154)
>
> His eyes were eggs of unstable crystal, vibrating with a frequency whose name was rain and the sound of trains, suddenly sprouting a humming forest of hair-fine glass spines. The spines split, bisected, split again, exponential growth under the dome of Tessier-Ashpool ice. The roof of his mouth cleaved painlessly, admitting rootlets that whipped around his tongue, hungry for the taste of blue, to feed the crystal forests of his eyes, forests that pressed against the green dome, pressed and were hindered, and spread, growing down, filling the universe of T-A, down into the waiting, hapless suburbs of the city that was the mind of Tessier-Ashpool S.A. . . . The Kuang program spurted from tarnished cloud, Case's consciousness divided like beads of mercury, arcing above an endless beach the color of the dark silver clouds. His vision was spherical, as though a single retina lined the inner surface of a globe that contained all things, if all things could be counted. (257-58)

Each of these passages (others could be cited) describes Case's consciousness in a moment when he has moved outside his body in ecstasy: his orgasm with Molly; his

"run" against the T-A ice; his betaphenethylamine rush in Freeside; and his victorious fusion with the jeweled ceremonial terminal at the end of his Straylight run. Each passage — each ecstatic state has certain things in common with the others. There are the characteristic futurist categories: velocity, lines of force, interpenetrations and superimpositions. Strikingly, there are no high-tech terms or analogies in these visions, except for the comparison of Case's orgasm to the matrix. This is understandable because it is the futurists' ultimate intention for the hightech apparatus to somehow "mechano-mystically" induce these hallucinatory states of consciousness. Ecstasy, for Case, always involves violent weather, which seems to occur incongruously in domesticated space: "hurricane corridors," glitch systems rising in a "whirl, as windblown paper down dawn streets," sandstorms scouring the floor of his skull, the icebreaker program storming down on "the city that was the mind of Tessier-Ashpool S.A." Flesh breaks apart or is transformed into energy: Case becomes a "flare," "faces were shredded and blown away," "the hazy envelope of flesh" conceals chromed and polished, robotized joints, eyes become crystals, consciousness divides like "beads of mercury." And in each case, the world comes to be constituted of rapidly moving geometrical figures of light in a metaphorical transformation of solids: faces become paper-like fragments blown down a vast, timeless corridor; the glitch systems are spires made of "shifting planes of light"; a "white hot column of light"; the crystal forest.

The Receding Real. In *Neuromancer*, technology is convergence and fusion. It absorbs human aspirations and skills into its self-programming techno-evolution. It embodies both eros and thanatos: eros in the profusion of technics of immortality and ecstasy, and in the world-engendering cybernetic coupling that climaxes in Case's orgasmic penetration of the Black Ice protecting Neuromancer's core — and with it the "birth" of a new god in the "matrix" (i.e., the artificial womb or a world); it is also thanatos, in that "Case can pursue his enlightening conversations with Wintermute only by going braindead" (McGuirk). There are no alternative techs, no ideal pastoral parks or dreams; there are no spaces cleared of technology by technology itself; the narrative of technohistory has blown past all reveries of utopian rest and reflection. Neuromancer is, on the one hand, the myth of the futurist Happy Fall, as if the futurists' vision of the machine absorbing everyday life and art transforming the machine, ad infinitum, had defeated all other possible political and social conceptions of technology and become embodied in the world. It is also — ironically? necessarily? — the myth of futurist redemption, the Grand Converging Machine transcending the world that it was constructed in and ascending to artificial divinity. Scott Bukatman links this vision with the cyberpunks' mythology of "terminal culture," derived from surrealism.

The cyberpunk narrations . . . speak with the voices of repressed desire and repressed anxiety about terminal culture. Cyberpunk negotiates a complex and delicate trajectory between the forces of instrumental reason and the abandon of sacrificial excess. Through their construction of cultural politics inscribed by the forces of technological reason, and through their resistance to the constraints of that reason, the texts promise and even produce a transcendence of the human condition which is also always a surrender ("Postcards from the Posthuman Solar System").

Or as David Porush puts it: "You get to cyberspace by killing some obsolete part of your humanity and redeeming another" ("Frothing the Synaptic Bath"). Like Donna Haraway's cyborg existence, there is no going back to affectations of prelapsarian innocence. The only way out is through the belly of the beast — if there is a way out, for us (Haraway 149-181). Gibson is not Haraway, however. The latter's vision of the cyborg condition is constructed explicitly in opposition to mythic-narrative paradigms of fall and apocalypse; Haraway's cyborg obviates the need for transcendence. Where there are no essential distinctions between human and machine, male and female, there can be no ascent from the inherently impaired to the synthetically sovereign. But Gibson's most pronounced lyrical moods are the ecstasy appropriate for apocalypse and a "muted but distinct undercurrent of elegy" (McGuirk) for the loss of the historical "human."

> He'd come out of the warm rain that sizzled across the Ninsei pavement and somehow she'd been singled out for him, one face out of the dozens who stood at the consoles, lost in the game she played. The expression on her face, then, had been the one he'd seen, hours later, on her sleeping face in a portside coffin, her upper lip like the line children draw to represent a bird in flight. (8)

> It took a month for the gestalt for drugs and tension he moved through to turn those perpetually startled eyes into wells of reflexive need. He'd watched her personality fragment, calving like an iceberg, splinters drifting away, and finally he'd seen the raw need, the armature of addiction. He'd watched her track the next hit with a concentration that reminded him of the mantises they sold in stalls along Shiga, beside tanks of mutant blue carp and crickets caged in bamboo. (18)

> Somewhere down in the Sprawl's ferro-concrete roots, a train drove a column of stale air through a tunnel. The train itself was silent, gliding over its induction cushion, but displaced air made the tunnel sing, bass

> down into subsonics. Vibration reached the room where he lay and caused the dust to rise from the cracks in the dessicated parquet floor. (43-44)

Neon forest, rain sizzling across hot pavement. The smell of frying food. A girl's hands locked across the small of his back, in the sweating darkness of the portside coffin. But all of this receding, as the cityscape recedes: city as Chiba, as the ranked data of Tessier-Ashpool S.A., as the roads and crossroads scribed on the face of a microchip, the sweat-stained pattern on a folded, knotted scarf.

These passages (again, others could be cited) preserve the regret that alone retards the movement of the novel's action toward apocalyptic implosion. Whereas the moments of ecstasy involve casting off the "obsolete" body in order to travel in the dimensionless and timeless regions of cyberspace and drug visions, at the speed dictated by the irresistible pull of the great fusion, these passages insist on memorializing the vanishing connections of the pre-technological human world. The memories are painful, even grieving; and they are quick. Remember, there are no time-outs. The prose does name high-tech objects here; and it does so in order to place in relief the natural objects that pass through Case's consciousness and fade away in it. They appear in cyborg juxtapositions: Linda's face at the video-screen, and her mouth like a child's drawing of a bird in flight; her "armature" of addiction (recalling the chromed and polished armature of Case's skeleton in his beta-high) and the caged mantises and crickets; the silent rapid trains in their ferro-concrete tunnels and the "dessicated parquet floor"; the arrayed circuits of the T-A core, Chiba City, and a microchip, next to Linda's sweat-stained scarf. In each of these juxtapositions, there is an object saturated with experience and technology and another saturated with the aura of innocence and nature. There is not much question which ones are on the way out. In the same way, the panic convergence of the ecstatic passages is opposed in these elegiac paragraphs by a pattern of slow receding and breaking apart of elements — whereas the techno-ecstasy inhabits cyberstorms and erotic penetration, the narrative of elegy lingers in quiet contemplation, savoring the fading object from a distance, as if gathering a last look. Flesh here does not dissolve into artifice; it returns to meat and dust. In each paragraph, the narratives depict the process in which autonomous technology of the futurist future severs the links with the historical past. In each, Case's thoughts move from the technopresent to insignias of historical memory. The child's drawing of a bird in flight inscribed in Linda's lip is a moving image — doubly moving, in that *Neuromancer*'s world includes neither birds nor skies. Case may well be recalling a vanished age of personal life as well as historical life and an art that has little place in the fiction's grand

conjuncture (unless, with a paranoid sensibility, one reads the phrase "somehow she'd been singled out for him" as an indication that Wintermute is already setting Case up at this early stage; in which case the recollection of the child's picture may be another tool in the AI's toolbox of infiltration). As Linda's newly drug-addicted personality breaks into fragments, like an iceberg ("calving" is marvelously apt here, as a synapse between the animals and the iceberg), and reveals the "armature" of mechanical need, Case remembers the caged mantises and crickets — traditional good-luck pets in East Asia and perhaps invoking the extinguished beasts of Dick's *Do Androids Dream?* and the crowded street of vendors of artificial animals in *Blade Runner*. In the third paragraph, the silent train, on "induction cushions" in the "roots" of the city, displaces air, which then "sings"; it is this song, "bass down to subsonics," that vibrates in Case's archaic room, stirring up the dust of entropy from the once painstakingly crafted parquet. The unsilenceable air's song prefigures Zion cluster's dub, which will later save Case from brain death by returning him to memory of his heartbeat.

Finally, in the last paragraph, which concludes the Straylight Run, Case is presented not with private reveries but with literal, exteriorized simulations of his associations, resting finally on the sweat-stained patterned scarf that the simulation-Linda was wearing on Neuromancer's beach. The final resting point is not the scarf itself, or its microchip-like pattern, but the stain of sweat: a natural pattern caused by the sweat of the body of a dead loved woman. Sweat of the body, the sweat of work to which the castouts of Eden were condemned, the sweat of lovemaking, the dignity of the "meat," — now made obsolete by the apotheosis of Artificial Intelligence in the matrix. *Fiat ars — pereat mundi*. Let there be art — and let the world perish.

Notes

1. For the clearest formulation of the hard SF aesthetic, see Gregory Benford's "Is There a Technological Fix for the Human Condition" 82-83. It is worth noting that elsewhere, when Gibson is not under discussion, Benford treats style as a legitimate approach in SF ("Effing the Ineffable" 54-55).

2. Baudrillard's "The Year 2000" 39-40; "The Implosion of Meaning" 143; "simulacra et science fiction;" and just about everything in *Simulation*s.

3. Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," *Studies on Child Language and Aphasia*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 69-73.

4. A recent self_description of the "Activities of the Human Interface Technology Laboratory" (HITL) of the Washington Technology Center associated with the University of Washington is explicit on this point. "The objective of the Human Interface Technology Laboratory is to develop natural interface techniques, hardware and software designed for experiential rather than symbolic interaction . . ." that will be "responsive to natural human physiology and cognition, systems that emphasize spatial interaction rather than symbolic processing." My thanks to Rob Kelley for bringing the HITL program to my attention.

5. "The condition of the reggae composer is like that of a sculptor . . . ." Five or six musicians play; they are well isolated from one another. Then the thing they played, which can be regarded as a kind of cube of music, is hacked away at — things are taken out, for long periods" (Brian Eno in Tamm 35-36). 6. F. T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" (1909). The translation is a combination of the anonymous first translation, supervised by Marinetti, which appeared in Poesia (1909), and that of R. W. Flint in Appolonio 21-22.

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