

Neuromancer

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In 1984, *Neuromancer*, the debut novel of a largely unambitious American-Canadian named William Ford Gibson was published. Opening with the line, “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel,” Gibson unwittingly tapped into the emerging literary and artistic aesthetic known as cyberpunk, realized previously in the form of films such as *Blade Runner* and in the works of fellow science fiction writers such as Bruce Sterling.

In *Neuromancer*, a disgraced ex-hacker named Henry Dorsett Case, who has been literally drained of his talents after attempting to double-cross his last employer, is hired by a mysterious benefactor willing to restore his talents for the ultimate hacking job. Paired with a cybernetically enhanced street assassin named Molly, Case descends into the Byzantine world of black ops technology and must eventually confront a rogue artificial intelligence seeking to achieve digital transcendence.

Neuromancer depicted a more immediate future than those imagined by other science fiction authors by presenting a society transformed by various transhumanist technologies such as artificial intelligence, genetic engineering and virtual reality. It essentially represents one of the most consistent themes of Gibson’s work: the use of technology to extend the human condition in the form of mediated experiences and biomechanical augmentation. It is also famous for having coined the word “cyberspace,” which Gibson describes as “a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions,” and has since been used to refer to the Internet.

Gibson maintains that he got the inspiration for the term from watching stoned teenagers play videogames. In an interview with Dan Joseffson, Gibson contends that ‘cyberspace’ acts as a metaphor for the geography-free space in which many of our mediated interactions, such as telephone conversations and global financial transactions, take place. Although much of Gibson’s reputation as a writer is derived from his aesthetic and literary influence on science fiction, it is this fixation that is the overwhelming guide to his succeeding works particularly the novel *Idoru*, which focuses on celebrity in the digital age.

In it, a Sino-Irish Cantopop singer incites media gossip frenzy when he decides to marry a digital idol. The former is plagued by the anxiety of being largely a construct of fame, while the latter is arguably more real than any living musician. Much of Gibson’s personal obsession with mediated experiences stems from a formative period in his young adult life where he attempted to dodge the draft while seeking refuge with the burgeoning hippie culture in Canada, where he currently holds dual citizenship. There, he claims to have attempted to fulfill a life intention of sampling every mind-altering substance in existence.

It is most likely there where he also developed many of the observations which have framed his writings about people’s relationships with “consensual hallucination.” Gibson has never disavowed the science fiction genre, but maintains that he has always been a poor scientist, having never actually owned a personal computer or maintained an Internet habit until the turn of the 20th century. He even notes that he is “actually frightened” that his audience will “see through my thin skin of techie stuff,” though

subsequently opining that he finds greater comfort in attempting to prognosticate future trends when he knows less: I'm anything but an early adopter [...] In fact, I've never really been very interested in computers themselves.

I don't watch them; I watch how people behave around them. That's becoming more difficult ... because everything is "around them" If anything, Gibson's work reflects a different attitude towards technology, which he has epitomized in the catchphrase, "the street finds its own use for things." This belief emerges in his characters, who re-purpose technologies for intentions not originally envisioned by its creators.

As he himself opines: "We seldom legislate new technologies into being. They emerge, and we plunge with them into whatever vortices of change they generate. We legislate after the fact, in a perpetual game of catch-up, as best we can, while our new technologies redefine us - as surely and perhaps as terribly as we've been redefined by broadcast television." Furthermore, Gibson is fixated upon the ways in which technologies can spawn whole new cultures or states of being. Many of his characters experience the world in rather post-human ways.

The most mundane of this is Pattern Recognition's Cayce Pollard, who is psychologically attuned to marketing trends and cultural fads, while the most extreme is Angie Mitchell of Count Zero and Mona Lisa Overdrive, who can access cyberspace without the need of any technological interface.

Neuromancer's Case is probably the most extremely post-human character he has created, as he is so attuned to the matrix, that being rendered unable

to 'jack in' by his former employers has crippled with him a sense of loss that is akin to that of an amputee.

Gibson argues that media & technology have saturated human society in such a fashion as to make us new species. He does not mourn the loss of an old 'natural' world, but he does maintain that the modern human condition is so fraught with mediation and the extension and projection of the self with various technologies that any sense of 'natural' in its most classical sense has been displaced. Media and memory have become increasingly interchangeable, while our selves have been projected through time and space by way of MySpace pages and telephone conversations.

In one article for The Observer, Gibson notes "The Mobile Girl," a creature of contemporary Tokyo capable of "[converting] pad strokes to kanji faster than should be humanly possible, and rates her standing in her cellular community according to the amount of numbers in her phone's memory. "

Gibson notes that while the substance of these messages is probably trivial, "content is not the issue here, but rather the speed, the weird unconscious surety, with which the schoolgirls of Tokyo took up a secondary feature (text messaging) of a new version of the cellular telephone, and generated, almost overnight, a micro-culture. "The street finds its own use for things" is also a phrase which resonates largely with a 'grim meathook future' view of the world. Much of his work is characterized by dystopic urban settings in which technology has been allowed to run amuck for better or worse: vast multinational corporations wield massive influence over the global state of

affairs, while an underclass of individuals attempt to find their own way on the streets.

It is in effect, a grim meathook future of the world. Some clarification: The grim meathook future is a neologism coined by Joshua Ellis, who maintains that while technological developments are in no way less than significant, they are also subject to social and cultural forces. In effect, the future is not a linear progression, but one split along these lines. Vinay Gupta opines:

The history of politics since the invention of the nuclear bomb [...] is the history of technology ... The State is a wholly-owned subsidiary of science and technology, because all the big, life-or-death decisions are driven by the forces of research and discovery, which the State cannot ever hope to control [in any absolute sense]. A discovery made anywhere has ripples everywhere [...] Borders are meaningless when a college professor 8000 miles away can make a discovery which will be at your doorstep in 48 hours, and make an entire area of policy obsolete.

Much of this grim meathook future perspective culminates in his most recent works, in which he has largely abandoned visions of an undetermined could-be future in favor of envisioning the possibilities of now. Gibson maintains that part of the reason behind the shift in timeframe lies in the differences between the present and the time period in which his contemporaries and predecessors wrote many of the defining works of science fiction.

He opines that science fiction is a “ historical category,” which worked largely when ‘ the present’ was more stable. “ Previous practitioners, HP Lovecraft, say, or HG Wells, had these huge, leisurely “ here and nows” from <https://assignbuster.com/neuromancer/>

which to contemplate what might happen. " In effect, the future, as Josh Ellis puts it, lies " on the far side of an event horizon" which makes it difficult to predict. Therefore, Gibson's most recent novels are set largely in the grim meathook present, putting it on the opposite side of that event horizon.

In the case of the aptly titled Pattern Recognition, Gibson deals primarily with issues of information, meaning and patterns. In effect, Pattern Recognition is effectively about how we mediate our collective and individual experiences into memory and history. Gibson argues that science fiction is essentially about the time period in which it is written, noting that George Orwell's 1984 was spawned from the zeitgeist of the late 40s, just as Neuromancer " is about the Reagan ' 80s.

In effect, he has always been writing about the present condition, rather than speculating about the future. He opines that his writing process has always involved "[just looking] at the culture around me and at the people and what they are doing non-rationally. That's what I put into my novels; that's what tells me what is going on in the culture. I just reflect reality back to my readers disguised as science fiction. "