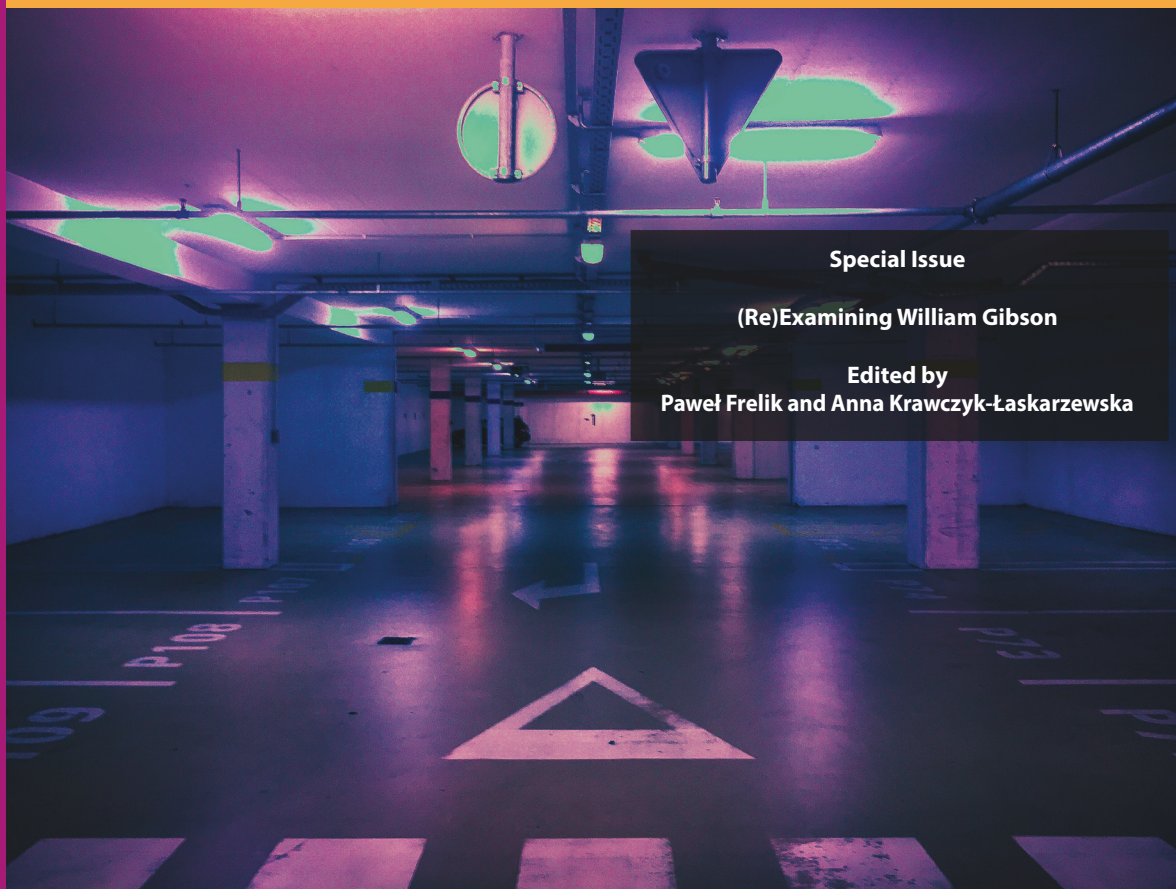


# Polish Journal for American Studies

Yearbook of the Polish Association for American Studies

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Vol. 12 (Autumn 2018)



**Special Issue**

**(Re)Examining William Gibson**

**Edited by**

**Paweł Frelik and Anna Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska**



**INSTITUTE OF ENGLISH STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW**

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Warsaw 2018

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## Introducing William Gibson. Or Not

In the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century science fiction writers are busy, but few are busier than William Gibson. Born in 1948, the American-Canadian writer is the author of eleven novels (including one in collaboration with Bruce Sterling), some two dozens of short stories (only half of which have been collected to date), a screenplay for a major Hollywood movie (*Johnny Mnemonic*, 1995), scripts for two television series episodes (“Kill Switch” S5E11 and “First Person Shooter” S7E13 for *The X-Files*), an unproduced script for *Alien 3*, a five-part comic book (*Archangel*, 2016-17), a work of electronic cyber-poetry (*Agrippa: A Book of the Dead*, 1992), and numerous articles in cultural magazines and newspapers. Gibson is also a compulsive Twitter-user with some 150,000 tweets, although, to be fair, the tally also includes retweets. Depending on a perspective, these numbers are either decent but not astounding for a writer who has just turned 70 (there are science fiction writers who have for decades produced a novel every two years or so) or impressive since they do not really convey the magnitude of Gibson’s cultural stature.

Gibson is credited with the invention of the word “cyberspace” in “Burning Chrome” (1982).<sup>1</sup> He has been repeatedly hailed as the (god)father of cyberpunk whose recognition seems to have dominated the movement to such an extent that it prompted Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. to declare that “most of the literary cyberpunks bask in the light of the one major writer who is original and gifted enough to make the whole movement seem original and gifted” (185). In the years after the publication of *The Difference Engine* (1990), co-written with Bruce Sterling, he has been identified as central to the coalescence of steampunk as a recognizable moniker. His more recent novels, particularly the so-called Blue Ant trilogy, have been praised for their attention to the flows and circulations of late capitalism.<sup>2</sup> William Gibson is also one of science fiction’s master stylists, whose tone and cadence remain recognizable to those well-read in the genre, from the dreamy quality of “Fragments of the Hologram Rose” (1977), his first published work, and *Neuromancer* (1984) to the understated, hilarious wit of offhanded descriptions, like the one of a London club early on in *Zero History* (2010): “The decorators had kept it down, here, which was

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1 To be precise, Gibson was the first to use the term in fiction, but the word itself was coined some 15 years earlier by the Danish artist Susanne Ussing and her partner architect Carsten Hoff (Kryger and Lillemose). It is unclear whether the writer was aware of the earlier use when writing “Burning Chrome.”

2 See the special section devoted to *Pattern Recognition* in *Science Fiction Studies* 100 (November 2006).

to say that they hadn't really gone publicly, ragingly, batshit insane" (Gibson 3). Most importantly, however, Gibson has showcased in fiction and non-fiction a gift of his singular optics, a way of looking at the world and everything in it that is at once very much grounded in everyday reality and ultimately estranging in the best tradition of science fiction. Beyond his impeccable style and elegant plotting, he has looked at things aslant, obliquely, and refractively, offering his readers perceptions and images that are as original as they are memorable. The famous opening sentence of *Neuromancer*, Laney's observation of personal data remaining alive after its owner's death in *Idoru* (1996), masterless containers circling the globe in *Spook Country* (2007), secret brands in *Zero History*, and the now-famous diagnosis that "the future is already here—it's just not very evenly distributed"<sup>3</sup> are all instances of the writer's uniqueness.

Gibson's literary and cultural significance has, of course, been reflected in the critical reception of his work. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Database at the Texas A&M University, one of the most definitive bibliographies in the field, lists 314 items with "William Gibson" in the title and 489 items in which he is listed as a subject (needless to say, there is a degree of overlap between these two categories). Among these are several books devoted to Gibson exclusively, including Lance Olsen's *William Gibson* (1992) in the Starmont Reader's Guide, Tom Henthorne's *William Gibson: A Literary Companion* (2011), Gary Westfahl's *William Gibson* (2013) in the Modern Masters of Science Fiction series published by the University of Illinois Press, and Patrick Smith's *Conversations with William Gibson* (2014), a part of the Literary Conversations Series on the University of Mississippi Press. Combined with journal articles and book chapters, the numbers testify to a significant critical coverage of the writer and his work. Indeed, there are few writers of his generation that have been graced with as intense an academic conversation as Gibson.

But, in the same way in which the future is not evenly distributed, the sustained critical commentary has attached itself to individual facets and elements of Gibson's oeuvre with a varying degree of intensity. Certainly, it seems almost impossible to say something arresting about *Neuromancer*<sup>4</sup> or a nexus of topics identified as cyberpunk,<sup>5</sup> including the relationship between body and technology, nature of memory in the digital age, or the construction of dystopian urban spaces. At the same time, there are multiple approaches and angles from which his novels and stories have yet to be examined. Beyond the periodically recurring rumors about the *Neuromancer* movie, media adaptations of Gibson's fiction have received

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3 Gibson has repeated this sentence on a number of occasions. There are some reports that he first used it in a 1993 NPR radio interview *Fresh Air* (31 August 1993), but Garson does not mention this in his *Quote Investigator* entry (2012).

4 As of August 3, 2018, MLA International Bibliography returns 162 results for the "Neuromancer" query; there is also the astounding total of 1,533 hits in the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database.

5 The total of 349 results in the MLA International Bibliography as of August 3, 2018.

scant attention. Although the writer himself has made his political sympathies fairly clear over the years, there are few political readings of his work. Gender, race, and ethnicity have been covered systematically in the *Sprawl* trilogy. Gibson has also been recognized globally much more than any other cyberpunk writer, but beyond the hype of a cyber-guru there is much work left with examining his cultural reception and transfer of his work.

The goal of this special issue of the *Polish Journal of American Studies* is to attempt to fill at least some of these critical lacunae. In many ways, this is, of course, a foolish task, and not only because Gibson shows no sign of slowing down: his new novel *Agency*, due out in December 2018, is both a prequel and a sequel to *The Peripheral* (2014) and was allegedly rewritten after the 2016 presidential elections (Alter). The new ways of approaching texts continue to emerge, too, and it is impossible to systematically plan for future interventions. We do hope, though, that the six articles gathered in this section offer some new ways of looking at both old and new Gibsoniana.

Responding to the frequent diagnoses of the end of history, in “The Future’s Overrated: How History and Ahistoricity Collide in William Gibson’s *Bridge* Trilogy” Lil Hayes examines Gibson’s middle trilogy, which has also received relatively little attention. Gibson is able, Hayes argues, to convey the idea that historical perspective, no matter how unreliable, is the only means through which to fully understand not only the past, but also the present, and indeed, the future.

The temporal gaze is also central to Glyn Morgan’s “Detective, Historian, Reader: Alternate History and Alternative Fact in William Gibson’s *The Peripheral*.” The article looks at the novel’s affinities with alternate history, the genre Gibson visited in *The Difference Engine* but has not returned to since. Morgan analyses how the writer subverts its familiar elements and combines it with similarly distorted conventions from detective fiction, manipulating the readers’ response and causing them to question accepted truths, realities and roles.

Between these two articles, in “William Gibson’s Debt to the Culture of Curiosity: The Wunderkammer, or, Who Controls the World?” Zofia Kolbuszewska revisits a theme that has been explored in some critical articles: Gibson’s indebtedness to art history. Several early interventions focus on Joseph Cornell’s boxes as well as other artistic inspirations in the *Sprawl* trilogy, but Kolbuszewska proposes a much broader vantage point of what she calls a culture of curiosity and examines the literary consciousness dating back to the Renaissance tradition of Wunderkammern—cabinets of curiosities.

The relationship between nature and technology informs the writer’s single most famous line—*Neuromancer*’s opening “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel”—but beyond the customary diagnoses of biological absence in Gibson’s cyberpunk fiction there has been very little scholarly interest in the representation of nature in his novels. *The Peripheral*, Katherine E. Bishop claims, responds to current anxieties pertaining to climate change, shifting from his earlier



ecoperipheral cyberpunk purview to a more holistic one, in which ecology is at least as much at the forefront of the future as is technology. Her “Ecological Recentering in William Gibson’s *The Peripheral*” thus draws on and expands Bakhtin’s chronotope to investigate how the writer uses ecological time, particularly plant time, to reorient the trajectory of future imaginings.

The last two articles of the cluster shift gears to focus on selected aspects of the global reception of Gibson’s writings. Paweł Stachura’s “What Was Expected of William Gibson’s Early Fiction: Themes in Negative Reception” investigates reader responses to Gibson’s early fiction, a part of his oeuvre that has not been examined from this perspective, to determine the function of Gibson’s work nowadays and what stylistic and thematic features matter for today’s readers. Finally, Anna Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska zooms in even further to analyze the dynamics of linguistic transfers. Gibson has been one of the most often translated science fiction writers, particularly when it comes to his short fiction<sup>6</sup> and her “Plus ça change? Translating William Gibson into Polish: ‘The Gernsback Continuum’ and *The Peripheral*” dissects some of the perennial challenges awaiting both the readers and the translators of his prose. Apart from the idiosyncratic aspects of Gibson’s work in general, various extraliterary factors are also taken into account in order to elucidate the context in which Polish translations of his works continue to be published and assessed.

The six articles collected in this issue range widely, but there are connections between them. Several hover around the notions and concepts of the past. Two pay attention to the reception of Gibson’s fiction. *The Peripheral* seems to appear more often than older texts. Ultimately, though, the six interventions are invitations to continue discussing the work of one of the most interesting writers of contemporary science fiction.

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6 A fairly complete list of Gibson’s translations can be found in *Internet Speculative Fiction Database* at <http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ch.cgi?172>.

*Lil Hayes*

## The Future's Overrated: How History and Ahistoricity Collide in William Gibson's *Bridge* Trilogy

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**Abstract:** In 1988, Gibson asserted his interest “in the how’s and why’s of memory, the ways it defines who and what we *are*, in how easily it’s subject to revision” (qtd. in McCaffery 224). While this statement is a reflection on his appropriation of human memory in the *Sprawl* trilogy, it is also a useful standpoint from which to assess the interplay between history and memory in the *Bridge* trilogy. In my view, this trilogy is primarily concerned with the implications of postmodernization for historical perception. Moreover, it serves to explore how the proliferation of the spectacle has significant effects on social memory, the ramification of which is the eventual effacement of memory’s value, and its substitution by commodified images. Through a close assessment of Gibson’s architecturally familiar landscape and the perseverance of nostalgia in an ahistorical society, I argue that in this postmodern world, history *as a concept* is not obsolete despite the death of historical perspective that postmodernism ideologically affirms. In fact, by creating a world that simultaneously experiences the “abandonment of history” and the “*false consciousness of time*” (Debord 90), Gibson is able to convey the idea that historical perspective, no matter how unreliable, is the only means through which to fully understand not only the past, but also the present, and, indeed, the future.

**Keywords:** ahistorical, historicity, nostalgia, spectacle, commodification, postmodern

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According to Fredric Jameson, “[i]t is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (*Postmodernism* ix). This assessment of postmodern culture is an interesting standpoint from which to explore Gibson’s treatment of history throughout the *Bridge* trilogy. In fact, while Gibson’s previous work has been criticized for its “apparent obliviousness to the historical process” and its predictable submission to the postmodern “nostalgia for the present” (Booker 82), his *Bridge* trilogy should be commended for its manipulation of narrative devices that simultaneously maintain the progression and deterioration of history in a world that is, for the most part, entirely present-oriented. Inspired by his acknowledgement of contemporary culture’s obsession with the present, and sympathetic to Jameson’s critique of that culture’s critique of that culture’s “loss of historicity” (*Postmodernism* x), the *Bridge* trilogy observes the catastrophic symptoms of postmodernization and highlights the importance of history in the postmodern epoch.

Historical perspective may be diminishing in this postmodern world, tainted by the pursuit of presentism, a cultural desire for instantaneity, and the paralysis of “history and memory” synonymous with spectacular societies (Debord 90). However, at no point does Gibson do away with history entirely. On the contrary, the trilogy becomes a means through which he evaluates the perseverance of history in a society that is, for the most part, profoundly ahistorical. Through his representation of our own present as history in the not-too-distant future, his attention to the preservation and reconstruction of historical narratives, and his observations of the death of history as a *concept*, Gibson paradoxically upholds the importance of history for the *Bridge* trilogy’s culture which, in the most Jamesonian of ways, has been reduced to experiencing “a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (*Postmodernism* 27). Thus, rather than exhibiting an “obliviousness” toward history, Gibson’s postmodern narrative actually articulates how historical perspective, no matter how unreliable, is the only means through which to fully understand the past, the present, and indeed, the future.

In *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, the final and most important installment of the *Bridge* trilogy in terms of its postmodern approach to historicity, Colin Laney proposes what is perhaps the trilogy’s most distressing historical assumption. Having become obsessed by the nodal visions in which he foresees a radical change in the world as we know it, he comes to the dramatic revelation that within his technologized society, history, as a concept, is “dead” (165). For Laney, who inadvertently perceives “every version” of the historical narrative (Gibson, *Tomorrow’s* 165), the absence of historical perspective within his technologized culture is particularly unnerving. Exhibiting a Baudrillardian apprehension for the way “[h]istory has gradually narrowed down to the field of... current events” (Baudrillard, “The Illusion” 259-60), he becomes a means through which Gibson consolidates his own investigation into the paradigm, and its application within a dystopic future. Deriving from his solitary understanding of the historical continuum, Laney’s criticism of the cultural belief that “only the moment matters, matters absolutely” (Gibson, *Tomorrow’s* 42) is crucial to an analysis of the decline of historicity evidenced throughout the *Bridge* trilogy. Not only does it uphold the postmodern sensation of “everything happening at once” (Sofia qtd. in Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 29), but it also condemns that sensation, and the “disappearance of a sense of history” with which it corresponds (Jameson, *Cultural Turn* 20).

The most troubling thing about the postmodern present, as pointed out by Laney, is not just a cultural lack of historical insight, but more so, the unconscious acceptance of this within a spectacularized society. Hence, he poignantly observes:

That history in the older sense was an historical concept. History in the older sense was narrative, stories we told ourselves about where we’d come from and what it had been like, and those narratives were revised by each generation, and indeed always had been. History was plastic. Was a matter

of interpretation. The digital had not so much changed that as made it too obvious to ignore. History was stored data, subject to manipulation and interpretation. (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 165)

What makes this assessment so interesting is the implication that history, in its totality, has never been entirely accurate. In fact, as well as articulating the typically postmodernist concern for society's "historical amnesia" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 69), his diatribe adheres, by way of its summation of history's malleability, to the traditional attitude whereby representations and interpretations of the past can only be shaped by, and belong to the present (Mead, "From 'The Nature of the Past'"). By amalgamating these conflicting attitudes towards history, it becomes apparent that the *Bridge* trilogy as a whole is still inherently driven by an historical imperative.

While Gibson has already been credited for his Jamesonian "eclipse... of all depth, especially *historicity* itself" (Jameson, qtd. in Farnell 467), and for his presentation of a world that rejects "the ideological... masterplans of the past" (Tschumi, qtd. in Beehler 90), his historicization of our own present as an essential narrative function has yet to be fully acknowledged. Modernity may persevere within the trilogy's cosmopolitan setting, but the suggestion that it is "on its last legs" (Beehler 82) rejects both fascinating persistence of *history* in Gibson's present-oriented society, and its subsequent propagation by way of nostalgic practice. As clarified by his characters' various reactions to the decline of history within their spectacular society, postmodern theories of history underpin the narrative plot of the *Bridge* trilogy. Initiated from the earliest stages of *Virtual Light*, where the key setting of San Francisco pays homage to a bygone era, and continuing right through to Laney's philosophical utterances in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, the development of history, and of its complications with a spectacular context, is a tour de force for Gibson. While characteristic of the way science fiction commonly "apprehend[s] the present as history" (Jameson, "Progress" 153), and the way postmodernism "abandons all sense of historical continuity and memory, while simultaneously developing an incredible ability to plunder history and absorb whatever it finds there as some aspect of the present" (Harvey 54), his focus on history is also the means through which he explores what he refers to as the present's "fractal" nature (*Tomorrow's* 107).

From the very beginning of the *Bridge* trilogy, Gibson's sophisticated articulation of history's demise is ironically centered on his unique portrayal of our own present as history in a world that has clearly forgotten it. Notwithstanding the opening scene of *Virtual Light*, which conveys a dystopic premonition of what is to come, much of the action of the *Bridge* trilogy takes place in vastly familiar settings that have clearly been tainted by the shock of the future. Conforming to science fiction convention, which as Jameson insists, "transform[s] our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come" ("Progress" 152), Gibson integrates the familiar with the unfamiliar throughout each text, portraying images of a future that, albeit distorted, are relevant to the present epoch. The setting of the *Bridge* trilogy,

regardless of its initially defamiliarizing nature, is remarkably like our own; its future images comprise a recreation of modern-day America (Farnell 264), complete with the residue of notorious architectural structures and suburban landmarks familiar to even the contemporary geographical novice. From *Virtual Light's* earliest pages, where Gibson makes note of familiar American places like "Knoxville" (19), "Memphis" (21), "West Hollywood" and "Ohio" (25), to his detailed but deliberately estranging imagery of a post-earthquake San Francisco, still divided by wealth into lucrative areas like "Geary," inner-city city crime-warrens like the "Tenderloin," (35) and the infamously gang-infused district of "Oakland" (59), his intent is to offer "only the illusion of 'radically changed landscapes,'" according to Ross Farnell, "as it is our social, political, economic and cultural present that underwrites the novel's 'future' world" (462). While to start with, this world seems expressly unlike our own, particularly because its prelude is that execrable Mexico City that Blix encounters on his way to a more habitable North America, in actuality, it is our own world crippled by future consequences. On closer inspection it becomes increasingly evident that his modification of the world as we know it is an effective way of conditioning the reader's understanding of both history's persistence and its premature demise.

Gibson's ironic grafting of an ahistorical culture on a historically formed landscape interrogates the overwhelming nature of the present and future "colliding" (Farnell 262), as well as the "collapse of the future onto the present" that for Zoe Sofia defines postmodernization (qtd. in Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 27). This is because, while his fictionalized culture has limited access to, or interest in, attenuating information about its own past, that past is in fact a dystopically modified historicization of our world as it is today. His San Francisco is constrained by a now exhausted architectural program; its most modern building, confirmed by Rydell upon his arrival to the city is the "big spikey one with the truss-thing on it (and he knew that one was old too)" (Gibson, *Virtual* 106). This monstrous configuration of the Transamerica Pyramid, a structural marvel of the reader's present, was constructed some thirty-three years before the novel's 2005 setting and, alongside the Oakland Bay Bridge, defined by its "mad maw, the gateway to dream and memory..." (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 19), it positions the deteriorating city as one of the few remaining enclaves where the last vestiges of our own history survive. For Claire Sponsler, "these decaying remnants of an otherwise demolished, meaningless and inaccessible past... [are] clearly an insistence on the 'past as pastiche' typical of the postmodern sense of history so persuasively analyzed by Jameson" (630). Given Jameson's contention that historicity "can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective" (*Postmodernism* 284), Gibson's invocation of the future of our own present ironically positions us to view our own world historically. While the function of San Francisco's prominent modern landmarks has been altered, their physical manifestation, aside from their now crumbling facades, has not; they remain throughout the Bridge

narrative as harbingers of the postmodern future and the associated diminishment of historicity that is to come.

In a deliberate response to the postmodern condition of ahistoricity, the Bay Bridge and Transamerica Pyramid ultimately provoke the very thing they aim to refute. As well as being deliberately malformed symbols of the dystopic, they are implemented as stark reminders of a preceding time period. Subsequently, despite the diminished cultural knowledge of its humble origins, the *Bridge* trilogy's San Francisco represents Gibson's partiality for architecture and its integral obligation to history. His San Francisco's retention of modern architecture solidifies the future's history, or our present, in a familiar and tangible way. Intruding on a culture that in the most postmodern of ways "has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (Jameson, qtd. in Gomel 63), the Bridge, with "its span... [as] rigorous as the modern program itself..." (Gibson, *Virtual* 58), and the Pyramid, with its fleeting image of an "upright thorn" (210), become Gibson's most significant historical creations. Not only are they means through which he makes his vastly dystopic city more recognizable for a reader who is otherwise confronted with the futility of technologization and post-industrialization; they also enable him to hint at history's prevailing nature in spite of the "all-voracious present" that, according to Ballard's early critique (1974) of postmodern society, has "devoured" both the past and the future (qtd. in Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 28).

Regardless of its postmodern transformation, which makes it both functionally and aesthetically dissimilar from its original purpose, the Bay Bridge of Gibson's future is an irrevocable symbol of the ongoing relevance of history in a society that, synonymous with Jameson's cultural assessment, is denied the privilege of historical contemplation. Bringing to mind historical objectives similar to those of Orwell's *1984*, a pre-Cold War novel that imagines a time where "[t]he past was dead, the future... unimaginable" (Orwell 28), the rest of Gibson's world appears to be saturated by postmodern commodification, the frightening result of which, as in Orwell's totalitarian regime, is that "the past, starting from yesterday, has actually been abolished" (162). But whereas Orwell destabilizes history to refute a totalitarian approach in which it constitutes "whatever the records and the memories agree upon" (222), Gibson's cyberpunk fiction manipulates elements of history to expose the "radical transformations of global structures," which, for David Harvey, are the postmodern consequence of the dissolution of the past and present "into a transcendent future" (225). To this end, in a world that seems entirely dominated by the spectacle, by those "empty images and commodified artefacts" (Farnell 467), the Bay Bridge, at least until its own spectacularization in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, is the only refuge from the pacifying hyperreal images of the consumer-driven society, a society where the prolific nature of the media has "participat[ed] in history," or, as *Idoru*'s Kathy Torrens would argue, "had replaced history" (Gibson, *Idoru* 39).

Through its unique and autonomous development, and its effective reconsideration of an historical relic, the Bridge community implements neither the



postmodern amendment of the past that Ihab Hassan associates with Orwell's *1984* (which he refers to as revision without vision) (26), nor the eradication of history that results from spectacularization and hyperrealization. Instead, it subconsciously develops its own cultural hegemony, and with it, a rich and morally guided history that attempts to negate the "mythical... historical consciousness" with which capitalism and commodification is associated (McNally 195). Converted by the homeless and "dispossessed" (Farnell 464) into a "heterotop[ic]" (Campbell, qtd. in Beehler 88; Farnell 464; Hoepker 223) escape from the nightmare of postmodern urbanization, the Bridge's most significant feature is, for Hoepker, no longer its fixed corporeality but "the potential of its interstitial structure" (223). In truth, it is profoundly interstitial, a space between spaces where a new world has opened up, neglecting to acknowledge the original history of its physical structure while creating a rich history of its very own. From its introduction in *Virtual Light*, where it is viewed by a fascinated Yamazaki as a chaotically anthropomorphic construction, to its near demolition in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, where the routine motion of its citizens' evacuation connotes an ideologically unified sub-culture, the Bridge, defined by the nameless assassin as "[a]pparent disorder arranged in some deeper, some unthinkable fashion" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 273), houses the most, if not the only, historically defined culture in Gibson's megalopolis. Functioning as a renegade community steeped in its own traditions and beliefs, the world on the Bridge is infinitely human and intensely historical. It may have dismissed its modern heritage, a notion emphasized by Chevette's failure to "imagine that people wouldn't have lived here" (108). However, by refusing to subscribe to the spectacular society from which it absconded, or to its late capitalist hegemony, the Bridge becomes the one place where humanity, and therefore history, is able to prosper.

Accordingly, the greatest paradox of Gibson's Bay Bridge reinvention is that while the transient lives of its community are mimetic of its original purpose, the structure paradoxically enables a sense of stability that is seemingly unattainable in the rest of San Francisco, if not the world. That stability, corresponding with Charles Jencks' supposition that postmodernism "mak[es] new connections out of the older values of the past... [while] asserting the possibility of a plurality of new values" (Rose 149), arises from a collective nostalgia for a brief yet deeply meaningful communal history. By establishing a rich history of their very own, one that is entirely separate from the rest of the world, the Bridge community clearly maintains a refreshing distance from a society that is otherwise bound by its obsessions with the spectacle, and by the captive nature of the postmodern present. The Bridge, therefore, may be a symbolically disintegrating icon of the modern movement (Beehler 88), but, as argued by Graham Murphy, it "has a historical lineage, an echo of the past guiding the future" (85). Indeed, while its purpose has shifted dramatically, the life span of the Bridge itself has not ceased, instead being adapted from a means of providing vehicular passage to a place that enables rites of passage to a new form of socialization. When, at the end of the trilogy, Rydell recognizes that "[t]hese were

not, in some sense, civilians, but hardened survivors used to living on their own in a community of similar people" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 255), his musings demonstrate a final understanding of what it is, exactly, that holds the community together. The fraternity's cultural values, which are unique to its motley constituents, evolve from its moral heteronomy and an ingrained communal urge to forego a social inclusion in the world responsible for their home's preliminary construction.

Its historical origins may well be forgotten, even by its own community, but Gibson's Bay Bridge is initially positioned as a symbol of idealism in a society that is otherwise subjugated by the dominating forces of the spectacle. Unquestionably subversive and disenchanting by the outside world, its community, with its "unnumbered population and its zones of a more private fantasy" (Gibson, *Virtual* 59) represents an unfaltering and refreshing dedication to dissident ideologies. However, while these ideologies persist throughout the trilogy, the spectacular transformation of the Bridge in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, and its subsequent consolidation with a world that it desperately tried to avoid, signifies the end of its ideological era. Restructured according to a cultural plan for prolific consumption and homogeneity, the newly reformed Bridge, with its Lucky Dragon franchise and its "shudder of video up the trademark tower of screens" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 66), is Gibson's way of acknowledging the spectacle's inevitable permeation into even the most resistant social spheres. Located within what is considered as the final "place of resistance to late-capitalist hegemony" (Farnell 467), the convenience store, combined with various other shops "built with nonresident money, the owners hiring people to live there and maintain possession" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 160), indicates a strong potential for history's imminent end. The Bridge's gradual metamorphosis and the pending decline of its spectacular resistance essentially parallels the consumer satisfaction which, like many postmodernists, Gibson sadly associates with the post-historical period.

The interesting thing about that image of the Bridge is that while it can, in many ways, be seen to symbolize the preservation of history, it also invokes Jameson's assumption that in postmodern societies, "even the surviving historical monuments, now all cleaned up, become glittering simulacra of the past, and not its survival" (*Postmodernism* 311). While the Bridge community itself may attempt to maintain its own history, at no point does Gibson imply that their history evolves from a definitive or tangible link to San Francisco's industrialization. Like the spectacular society from which they fled, the inhabitants of the Bridge are inherently captivated by their own frenetic present, and even their initial distance from the rest of the world is not quite enough to inspire an interrogation of their past, or its impact on their present. In fact, only Skinner, the oldest and in many ways the most knowledgeable character in the entire trilogy, appears to have any cognitive access to history, and his personal commentary on the past, the present, and the future provides a heart-breaking insight into the postmodern dismissal of historicity, and its catastrophic effects. Characterized by his consistent historical narratives, and the importance he places on a collective historical memory, Skinner's futile desire to preserve history becomes



a means by which Gibson once again comments on postmodernism's replacement of history by memory, and the importance of this in what is primarily an ahistorical society.

Having personally experienced more of the historical continuum than any other character, and therefore being able to recall with relative accuracy the various stages of the world's development, Skinner is devised by Gibson to impart a wisdom that is otherwise lacking in a society conditioned by the immediacy of its hyperrealized surface. Representing a distaste for how, in the society of the spectacle, "[e]verything that was directly lived has receded into representation" (Debord 7), he is a crucial device through which Gibson exemplifies the importance of social memory. Essentially, he is the only character who, having lived through time itself, knows there is more to life than the spectacular. For this reason, "[c]onvinced that Skinner somehow held the key to the Bridge's existential meaning, Yamazaki had abandoned his physical survey of secondary construction in order to spend as much time as possible in the old man's company" (Gibson, *Virtual* 85). Yamazaki realizes that there is much more to Skinner than the mind behind the evolution of the community, concluding from their earliest meeting that the man's "mind was remarkably like the Bridge. Things had accumulated there, around some armature of original purpose, until a point of crisis had been attained and a new program had emerged" (60). That program, metaphorically invoking the computerized minds synonymous with the cyberpunk technique, positions Skinner as pure memory: a personal recording of bygone days inspired by his principal concern for the changing nature of humanity. For Skinner, the greatest peril of the world he has grown old in is its acquiescence to the elimination of historical discourses. Through his interactions with Yamazaki and Chevette, his insistence on the preservation of historical narratives, and his nostalgia for a past that has been obliterated by the postmodern symptom of perpetual presents (Jameson, *Cultural Turn* 20), he confidently exposes the importance of history and memory as individual and cultural shaping paradigms.

Subscribing to the postmodern movement, which Jean-François Lyotard characterizes by an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), the "large, explanatory ideas... like religion, science, [and] historical progress" (Thompson 51), Gibson's cyberpunk fiction is necessarily compelled to reject the chronicle of history. Hence, by establishing Skinner as the ultimate metanarrator, *Virtual Light* exhibits not just an ideological break from its postmodern conditioning, but also the persistence of philosophical history, which, according to Georg Hegel, is "nothing but the thoughtful contemplation of history" (*Reason in History* 10). This "thoughtful contemplation" is exactly what Skinner pursues, as he frequently engages in conversation simultaneously designed to educate his more ignorant compatriots on the past, while criticizing the present's limited inquisitions into that past. While the copies of *National Geographic* strewn across his container on the Bridge suggest that he too has submitted to the spectacle, his research into culture and geography, and his corresponding social commentary are his most defining characteristics. As

concluded by Chevette, Skinner is ingrained with a deep and unusual desire “to know where things came from” (Gibson, *Virtual* 71). When he explains to her how “[t]here’d been countries big as anything: Canada, USSR, Brazil... [and that] America had gone down that route without admitting it” (71-72), his comparative practice is reminiscent of Hegelian philosophy because, in remembering how things were, he experiences a dissatisfaction with the way things are (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* 35). He may, to some extent, wear the “nostalgia-tinted spectacles” that Jameson attributes to inaccurate representations of the past (*Postmodernism* 290), but in Gibson’s futuristic world he is the only person able to substitute the spectacle of history with the absolute experience of it, thus invoking Michel Foucault’s perception that in order to be aware of our present circumstances, we need also be aware of our history (327).

Having established a personal connection with a past denied to San Francisco’s younger cohort, Skinner is infinitely troubled by the intellectual limitations imparted by the depthless simulacra. Even Yamazaki, a university student driven by the pursuit of academic success and intellectual satisfaction, inadvertently submits to this depthlessness. Skinner’s harsh criticism of his ignorant absorption of whatever superficial information is fed to him incriminates not so much Yamazaki’s submission to the spectacle as the social ramifications of its infinite dispersal. “I know you think you live in all the times at once,” he says to Yamazaki, “everything recorded for you, it’s all there to play back. Digital. That’s all it is though: playback. You still don’t remember what it felt like” (Gibson, *Virtual* 238). His innate awareness of the eradication of history from the cultural discourse is fundamental to the reader’s understanding of the death of history throughout Gibson’s fiction. He is the last resource of theoretically accurate historical information in this new world, and his death, coinciding with the corporatization of the community he inadvertently created, is symbolic of the death of history in its entirety.

Reassuringly, even after Skinner’s passing, there are still faint glimmers of historical resonance, and bodega owner Fontaine, through his personal memories of Skinner’s historical epithets and his own interests in the archaic, attempts to continue the legacy Skinner established. As a self-confessed “anachronist” (Gibson, *Tomorrow’s* 49), Fontaine’s chosen profession as antique-cum-junk-store-proprietor asserts more than just a need to make a living and provide for his family, primarily because the refuse that fills the shelves and display windows of his shop are of little interest, or value, to anyone other than himself. Like Skinner, he “was crazy about old things” (158) and his pawn-style shop, which enables him to receive and store the simultaneously invaluable and worthless antiques of bygone eras, is an outlet for him to develop his own narrative of history, and to ensure that history is maintained in a culture that is, for the most part, alarmingly uninterested in it. “He sold nothing unserviced, everything cleaned and lubricated... And he did this, he knew, not to provide a better, more reliable service, but to ensure that each one [object] might better survive in an essentially hostile universe” (131). For Fontaine, the only hope

for the preservation of historical discourse is in the maintenance of its artefacts, each of which has a story to tell and each of which contributes to whatever knowledge of historical linearity still persists. The problem with this approach is that the tangible objects do not, in themselves, convey an accurate representation of history, and Fontaine's fondness for them derives from his fictional account of their origins. Hence, he becomes a mimetic device through which Gibson foregrounds the notion that history is resolutely malleable, unreliable and, at its very core, untrustworthy.

The key problem for Fontaine is that, because of his limited access to genuine information, the histories he creates become little more than pure imagination, substituting fact for fiction through his ideological process of constructing a coherent narrative of the past. As time progresses in Gibson's postmodern society of the spectacle, historical introspection becomes increasingly thwarted and plagued by his lack of knowledge, Fontaine is driven to enquire into the origins of things in order to better understand the world from which they evolved. Even before Skinner's death, he would ask him questions about objects that came into his store. "If Skinner couldn't tell Fontaine a story about something, Fontaine would make up his own story... It seemed to comfort him" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 158). Where Skinner's connection to history, aside from his worthless books, is purely narratological, history for Fontaine is objectified, converted, as it is for the young Silencio (whom he by no coincidence decides to foster), into something tangible. When at the end of the trilogy the Bridge starts to burn down, his refusal to evacuate, because "[i]t's where [he] live[s]" (247), indicates not just a personal or nostalgic connection to the Bridge, but a historical one. All that Fontaine knows of his world, and of the world that preceded his, resides within the four flimsy walls of his shop, and in a stoic if not stupendous act stemming from a refusal to live in a world without that history, he is adamant that he will fight the fire that could cause that world to come crashing down, or at the very least, die trying. Unwilling to experience a world without history, no matter how reconstructed that history may be, his choice to protect his room of collectables demonstrates how history, for him, can only exist in a physical form.

Save for the hideous "Another One replicas," the ugly dolls forced upon him by his wife that were "manufactured in the closing years of the previous century" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 94), there is nothing remotely new, or at least nothing that does not have a story, in Fontaine's run-down shop. This, however, does not mean that Fontaine preserves history. Rather, his hoarding of society's unwanted junk and his fictionalization of its origins is just as harmful to historical authenticity. Like those antiques, Fontaine's collection becomes little more than a fraudulent memory of a rapidly receding past. Thus, his creation of historicity for objects that would have ordinarily become simulacra is so important because while he attempts to preserve history through the acquisition of tangible goods, those goods, and their historicity, are still always open to interpretation. Indeed, the irony of his historical interpretations, and of his vested interest in the development of a story, of a chronology of the past's transition to the present, is that his imaginary narratives only exacerbate what, in

*History in Crisis*, Norman J. Wilson considers are the destructive ramifications of history's innate malleability. According to Wilson, in the same way that the past is seen to shape the present, the present is most certainly seen to shape our perspective of the past (30-31). Correspondingly, Fontaine's fictionalized historical views, compelled by the antique objects he acquires, are unavoidably distorted by the lens of the present. In fact, history in his world has, as Jean Baudrillard would argue, has been transcended by the instant information of the media society (*Paroxysm* 7-8). Where it has not been completely erased, it has been re-written by substanceless hyperreal images, a notion best articulated by Chevette's memories of her mother's placating dialogue in *Virtual Light*. "He's right," Chevette remembers being told. "About history, and how they change it... Everybody does that anyway, honey. Isn't any new thing. Just the movies have caught up with memory, is all" (242). This statement, reminiscent of what Hassan insists is postmodernism's reinvention of the past (25-26), consolidates Gibson's own viewpoint on history in postmodern culture and effectively foreshadows Fontaine's historical practice. As a product of a postmodern world which typically experiences the "disappearance of coherent patterns of history" (Kroker 62), Fontaine is already conditioned by a lack of historical intelligence and, therefore, promotes the historical ignorance he so desperately tries to eschew.

Of all the characters in the *Bridge* trilogy, with their differing inclinations for reconstructing history, it is Colin Laney who, as a result of his intuitive data-fishing skills, is most challenged by his historically-oriented sensibilities. From the moment he is introduced as a laborious and speculative employee of media conglomerate Slitscan in *Idoru*, to his vehement apprehension of a nodal-vision in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, from which he concludes that the world is on the brink of disaster, Laney is Gibson's most active historian. Classified as an atypical "soothsayer" by Dani Cavallaro due to the way he amalgamates the traditional mystical idealism of prophecy with cybernetic discourses (298), Laney's posthuman composition, and its effects on his interpretative abilities, is the medium through which Gibson examines the fundamentals of history in a postmodern culture. Historical perspective may be stunted in the postmodern present, but, as demonstrated by the creation of the Bridge community, and by the nostalgic meditations of Skinner and Fontaine, history as a process still continues. Through Laney's exploration of history, and his reflective assessment of its constituents, Gibson clarifies his postmodern theory that history is an imperative culturally shaping force. Consisting, as Laney reflects, of a "shape that comprised of every narrative, every version" of the past (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 165), it may be inherently depthless and unreliable, but it is still the only means through which to make sense of the present and the future.

The most interesting thing about Laney's historical knowledge is that, unwittingly granted historical omniscience by means of the 5-SB drug, he becomes devastatingly aware not only of its gradual disappearance in his postmodern culture, but also of its inherently fictitious nature.

All his life Laney has heard talk of the death of history, but confronted with the literal shape of all human knowledge, all human memory, he begins to see the way in which there never really has been any such thing. No history. Only the shape, and it comprised of lesser shapes, in squirming fractal descent, on down into the infinitely finest of resolutions. (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 107)

In effect, conditioned by his own hyperrealized perspective, Laney's analysis of historical content confirms the unavoidable ramification of the hyperreal, whereby history becomes little more than a construction (Baudrillard, "Mass (Sociology of)" 72). Like Fontaine's stories, it is always fictionalized by its malleability, by its irrevocable openness to interpretation, and most importantly, by its increasing distance from the present. With this in mind, the more Laney investigates the nodal points, desperately trying to find information about what led to the present moment, the more aware he becomes that history is "dead" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 165). By deducing that it is little more than an interpretation of past events, he experiences an uncertainty that is characteristic of every true historian. According to George Herbert Mead, "[t]he historian does not doubt something has happened. He is in doubt as to what has happened" (*The Philosophy* 9). This doubt is exactly what clouds Laney's present and future perceptions. In a world where the "digital soup" of the historical continuum "thin[s] out rather rapidly" as time progresses (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 251), suffering the wrath not just of its own spectacularization but of its narrative incongruities, only Laney and PR genius Cody Harwood, recipients of the 5-SB, are truly aware of history's complexities. The problem with this is that they too are perplexed by its simultaneously complicated and depthless nature. Able to see versions of the past, but unable to make sense of those versions, they serve to confirm the catastrophe of history's unreliability and the magnitude of that within Gibson's future context.

The paradox of Laney's ability is that even though it enables him to "see the nodal points in history," to identify how and when "everything changed" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 4) and to predict that the world "as we know it" is "going to end" (169), the drug that facilitates such evaluations also restricts his capacity for memory. In fact, where in most other cases memory replaces history, for Laney, history replaces memory, and this only emphasizes the relevance of history to his personal evolution. He may understand the historical paradigm, but by *All Tomorrow's Parties*, he has limited access to his own recent past. He doesn't even remember how he came to reside in Tokyo's cardboard city, because "things got a little fuzzy around the time the syndrome kicked in. Some kind of state change, some global shift in the nature of his perception" (13). As a consequence, even though he is endowed with perceptual skills that enlighten his historical frame of reference, Laney is disheartened by his loss of personal history. Reflecting the radical dehistoricization of his postmodern culture, he mourns what Jameson refers to as "the memory of deep memory" that postmodernism revokes (*Postmodernism* 156), enacting instead the postmodern

practice of “nostalgia for nostalgia” (57). Subject to media culture in which “hyperinformation... clutter[s] up the space of the representable” (Baudrillard, “The Masses” 214), Laney’s own mind, driven by a fanatical obsession with celebrity, is fundamentally inscribed by the hyperreal spectacle. This memory loss aside, the syndrome enables Laney to experience visions, no matter how distorted, of the past and the future. Those visions, compelled by his “recognition of the nature of the universe. How nothing is perfect, really. Nothing ever finished” (Gibson, *Tomorrow’s* 13), motivate his actions and make it possible for him to counteract the “forces of history” (175) that both he and media mogul Cody Harwood deem responsible for whatever changes are taking place. While it is never quite clear what he foresees in his nodal visions, what does become evident as the trilogy draws to a close is that the future is always shaped by the past. That past may be distant, obstructed by the depthless referents of simulacra, but without it, there is no future.

History, in Gibson’s world, has not come to an end. It may well seem “dead,” as Laney so conclusively pronounces, inhibited by a postmodern propensity for “ephemerality” and “discontinuity” (Harvey 44), but at no point does it actually stop progressing. Stimulated by way of residual modern architecture, nostalgic narratives and prophecies for the future, history in Gibson’s world is still pertinent to cultural development despite that culture’s indifference to the past from which it emerged. The people of the *Bridge* trilogy may have no insight into the past, conditioned by the historical amnesia that defines their postmodernization and by the cultural creed that “only the moment matters” (Gibson, *Tomorrow’s* 42), but that lack of insight is what makes history all the more important. Not only does Gibson bring to light the problem of history’s unreliability within a context that is already denied historical introspection, but he also propels a dialogue in which those issues are seen to sustain the significance of history in an ahistorical society. Indeed, through the finale’s prophetic offering that “the past [is] alive in everything, that sea upon which the present tossed and rode” (158-59), one thing remains certain: while historicity is weakening, made malleable by the lens of the present, the historical process continues, commanding not only the present, but also the future on which it is always inscribed.

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Zofia Kolbuszewska

## William Gibson's Debt to the Culture of Curiosity: The Wunderkammer, or, Who Controls the World?

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**Abstract:** The article discusses transformations in William Gibson's employment of the theme and poetics of the Wunderkammer from his two early novels, *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Count Zero* (1987), to *Zero History* (2010), his last-but-one novel. The exploration of Gibson's representations of various Wunderkammer collections and arrangements in these books reveals his ever more pronounced recourse, over time, to the culture of curiosity as a diagnostic instrument. By interrogating the changing function of the Wunderkammer in Gibson's oeuvre, along with all its early-modern and contemporary associations with curiosity, it is possible to tease out the complexity of the writer's evolving view of the duality, and the fusion, of the digital and the material, as well as his keen understanding of how the late capitalist market functions. Through his diagnostic representations of various cabinets of curiosities, Gibson reverses tendencies governing the transformations of the Wunderkammer as a collection of curia from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as well as overturning the relationship between the collection as a representation of available knowledge and the desire to create synthetic life. Gibson's novels, which represent postdigital reality by analogous means, can thus be designated as postdigital analog writings that, according to Michael Punt, give expression to contemporary consciousness formed "in the Wunderkammer."

**Keywords:** Wunderkammer, curiosity, Joseph Cornell, synthetic life, artificial intelligence, late capitalist market, postdigital analog writing

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How do humans experience computers and networks? We need to recast this. ... I suggest that we ask instead, How do networks 'experience'? What operations do networks perform and undergo to change and produce new forms of experience? By inverting the relations between networks, experience, and human being, I am proposing that we also rethink what we mean by "experience" in contemporary culture.

Anne Munster, *An Aesthesis of Networks*

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, in the countries of continental Europe, princes and learned men used to collect the most disparate objects in a Wunderkammer (cabinet of wonder), which contained, promiscuously, rocks of an unusual shape, coins, stuffed animals, manuscript volumes, ostrich eggs, and unicorn horns. Statues and paintings stood side by side with curios and exemplars of natural history in these cabinets of wonders when people started collecting art objects....

Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*

...the century I found myself in as the 20th century ended seemed to me to be stranger and more complex than almost anything science fiction had offered.

William Gibson, *High Profiles*, Interview

Discussions of Gibson's interest in the collages assembled by Joseph Cornell—due to their form, reminiscent of old showcases, referred to as Cornell boxes—and analyses of their ekphrastic representations in Gibson's second novel have become a critical commonplace (Fabijancic 233-242, Hoepker 95-114), and are well documented. Tony Fabijancic begins his examination of the Cornell box forgeries in *Count Zero* (1987) by observing that many of Cornell's original assemblages “convey not so much the past as a documentable (material) object, but rather a dreamy appreciation for ‘pastness’ as a sign” (234). Fabijancic compares Cornell to Walter Benjamin's ragpicker historian (236-237) and observes that “Cornell, like Benjamin, seems to have conceived of the past as a fluid, intuitively grasped inter-communication between artefacts, a system of signs refusing a final, fixed form” (237). Even as Fabijancic points to fluid relationships between the fragments employed by Cornell and the semioticization of the collage boxes created by the artist, the critic does not see a connection between Cornell boxes and the Wunderkammer, whose characteristics include collage-like arrangements of objects and pansemioticism, that is, a conviction that “natural phenomena do not lead an isolated existence but are connected with one another in a complex web of significations” (Westerhoff 641).

Conversely, Karin Hoepker proposes that Gibson's ekphrastic descriptions of Cornell forgeries showcase the writer's “architectonics of meaning” that arises from his employment of “Wunderkammer poetics” (106-109) at large. Even as Hoepker recognizes that Cornell was using in his boxes rejects and junk, and that, by drawing on Cornell's art, Gibson also produces verbal representations of junk-art collections, she does not explore the role Gibson has ascribed to the Wunderkammer arrangements since as early as the *Neuromancer* (1984), but concentrates on the Wunderkammer poetics of space solely in *Count Zero*.

However, Gibson has employed the theme of the Wunderkammer throughout his entire career. Representations of the Wunderkammer in *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, novels that belong to the *Sprawl* trilogy, which opened Gibson's career as a cyberpunk writer, help bring out the complexities of his view of artificial intelligence. In his last-but-one novel, *Zero History* (2010), part of the *Blue Ant* trilogy, the theme of the Wunderkammer virtually sets the tone for the entire plot. The first chapter of the novel is entitled “Cabinet”—after the name of the club in which the protagonist Hollis Henry is staying. In the taxi to the hotel, Hollis immediately makes the association with the cabinet of curiosities, its aura of esoteric knowledge and powers that control that knowledge: “Cabinet, so called; of Curiosities, unspoken” (*Zero 2*).

In light of the fact that it is the effect of wonder that the cabinet of curiosities is expected to elicit, and because the relationships of juxtaposition, proximity, sympathy, similarity, correspondence and collocation govern the arrangement of items in the Wunderkammer, the writer's continuous postmodernist and cyberpunk fascination with waste, refuse and junk clearly provides grounds for extending the application of what Hoepker construes as Gibson's Wunderkammer poetics to the writer's whole oeuvre. Indeed, the writer's fascination with detritus and his predilection for seemingly haphazard, surrealist arrangements of objects, subjects, things and relations has a lot to do with the contemporary return of interest in the Wunderkammer, in accordance with which, for instance, the Internet can be seen as a colossal cabinet of curiosities (see Burda 170-183).

This article, however, interrogates transformations in Gibson's use of the theme of the Wunderkammer, or the cabinet of curiosities, along with all its early-modern and contemporary associations with curiosity, to tease out the complexity of the writer's changing perspective on the duality and fusion of the digital and the material, and his keen understanding of how the late capitalist market functions. Gibson's representations of various Wunderkammer collections and arrangements testify to his ever more pronounced recourse over time to the culture of curiosity as a diagnostic tool. Yet, in spite of a pre-digital delight with which he dwells on the materiality of objects he places in various cabinets of curiosities, Gibson's diagnoses concerning the reality permeated by artificial intelligences and smart electronic devices are no less blunt in his last but one novel. Sherryl Vint ends her review of *Zero History* with the following warning: "If Gibson remains the diagnostician he was once—and I believe that he does—this future [indistinguishable from the present] is a scarier place, by far, than any that SF has yet imagined" (Vint).

Through his diagnostic representations, Gibson, over time, not only reverses tendencies governing, from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the transformations of the Wunderkammer as a collection of items, but also turns upside down the relationship between the aim and the character of the collection and the desire to create the synthetic life as an achievement that crowns the efforts of the collector (Kang 14-54). The writer thus shows that the spectacular episteme of the early-modern Wunderkammer helps diagnose the condition of the contemporary world. Gibson begins his adventure with the early-modern episteme in *Neuromancer*, with the vision of the Wunderkammer as an art collection displayed in a gallery, whose function is to manifest the affluence, power and sophistication of the gallery owners. Historically, such a view reflected the decline of the cabinet of curiosities and its separation into a gallery, scientific laboratory and the museum of natural history; a tendency that was also evinced in the rational classification of collected items, and systematized display of art objects.

Conversely, the apogee of the Wunderkammer knowledge production was marked by the appearance of early modern self-propelled mechanisms and automatons. Automatons emerged from the Wunderkammer episteme as its

most ambitious project. In *Count Zero* Gibson stands on its head the historically acknowledged relationship between a playfully arranged collection and the automaton by having a shattered artificial intelligence make the Wunderkammer models—fake Cornell boxes. In *Zero History* the Wunderkammer aesthetics of embodied playfulness helps distinguish those characters who oppose the appropriation of new ways of controlling disembodied flows in the market economy by capitalism, and struggle against subjugating the global world to the capitalist dictate of mass utility and exchange value.

By the seventeenth century “the cabinet of wonders, the laboratory and the stage [are] localised settings of knowledge” (Schramm xvi), often sharing or exchanging their roles as part of the general functioning in the culture of curiosity. The concepts of “curiosity” and “wonder” invoke a culture where there is no clear-cut distinction between the subject and the object, while affective relationships link objects and people into networks of constantly converging and diverging nodes. The culture of curiosity values embodiment and affect; quality over quantity:

‘Curiosity’ and ‘wonder’ are a pair of basic concepts much in evidence during the entire early modern period. From Renaissance to Enlightenment they interacted and reinforced each other; and like all really significant concepts, both terms gave rise to an enormous range of usage and versatility of treatment. One particularly pregnant ambiguity lay in their alternate subjectivity and objectivity: they could be attitudes of mind, or the more or less physical phenomena of contemplation. People could exhibit curiosity and—as a consequence—assemble collections of curiosities; they could wonder at the natural wonders which they experienced. (Evans xv)

The rise, development and decline of the Wunderkammer episteme from the late fifteenth to early eighteenth century reflects the vicissitudes of the culture of curiosity that underlies the passion for collecting curious objects, displayed in arrangements eliciting wonder, located in elaborate architectural environments. Due to its affinities with the theater, laboratory, anatomical theater, and the Memory Theater (or the Memory Palace—a mnemonic technique of retrieving knowledge committed to memory), the cabinet of curiosities was also considered a kind of a general compendium of all knowledge available at the time (Bredenkamp 73).

In order to represent to the viewer the origin of the human and of the natural world, as well as the place in the world of artefacts created by humans, the collector would arrange curious or strange, monstrous rather than normal specimens in such a way as to produce links between natural formations, ancient sculptures, works of art and machines, with automatons crowning the collection: “Like on the stage of a theater, the *Kunstkammer* demonstrated all the various stations in the transition from an inert natural material to an animated body” (Bredenkamp 48).

Aptly, owing to its anachronistically science fiction undertone, the early-modern desire for creating synthetic life, fulfilled, after a fashion, by the construction

of the automaton, makes the notion of the Wunderkammer particularly congenial to Gibson. The temptation to synthesize life is a projection into the future. Indeed, the automaton “is in many aspects the means by which man projects himself beyond his existential limits, magnifies his forces, accomplishes in the concrete—and not just by pretending or describing—the marvelous” (Hanafi 76).

Initially, the playful purposelessness was the main rule of creating collections whose aim was to represent the collector as a God-like ruler, in control of the world—because only God could afford purposeless creation at will (Bredekamp 72). The Kunst- or Wunderkammer was thus viewed as a microcosm of the world (Bredekamp 73), while the collectors' playfulness was to testify to their social station and political significance. This playfulness disappears from the Kunst- and Wunderkammer in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries due to the stress on normativity as a principle of organization of objects in the collection, and an emphasis on utility of knowledge, instruments, and mechanical inventions. Along with the separation of art galleries from collections of natural history specimens and from machines, the purposes of the newly founded institutions also diverged. The art gallery became a financial investment and the accoutrement of power as well as a display of the owner's affluence, taste and sophistication, museums aided scientific research and education, while the utility of machines proved invaluable for the industrial boom of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (see Bredekamp 91).

The Wunderkammer can thus be understood as a space of transition, a cultural laboratory, where transformations of epistemological, cultural, and religious paradigms are enacted. Gibson's employment of the theme of the cabinet of curiosities at various stages of his thinking about the relationships between the future, present and the past, the mind-body problem, and the relative status of the virtual and the real, testifies to his gradual breaking with the Cartesian dualisms of Baudrillardian thinking about the cyber space, and moving towards ever deeper immersion in the Leibnizian unfolding of Bruno Latour's networks of human and non-human subjects, objects, affects and relations (Latour 144).

The change in Gibson's attitude towards digital culture takes place at a time when scholars in the field of information aesthetics postulate an alternative perspective on the origin of digital culture. Anna Munster encourages radical questioning of “the birth of digital culture as one that has been shaped largely via a binary logic” (3). She points out that “[t]his outdated cartography has previously forced us to either celebrate or denigrate the Cartesian mind, the disembodied gaze and the transcendence of dematerialized information as salient features of digital aesthetics” (3), and asks: “What if we were to produce instead a different genealogy for digital engagements with the machine, one that gave us the room to take body, sensation, movement and conditions such as place and duration into account?” (3). Munster finds an alternative genealogy for digital culture by “conceiving of the digital as part of a ‘baroque’ event” (4) that, she explains, embraces “[i]nformation aesthetics, popular uses of new media technologies and emerging ideas about posthuman identity” (5). In this perspec-

tive, the digital “unfolds genealogically out of the baroque articulation of *differential* relations between embodiment and technics” (Munster 5). Munster thus connects “[b]aroque modes and devices of visual display, such as curiosity cabinets, the extravagant scenes of *trompe l’œil*, and the appearance of scientific specimen alongside mythical beast in early modern science illustration” (5) with “the navigational meandering and frequent juxtapositions that comprise online experience” (5).

It is in *Zero History* that Gibson’s investigation of such baroque navigation and negotiations of relations between space, bodies, smart apparatuses and market flows is most obvious. Yet, throughout his entire oeuvre, the writer shares the twentieth- and twenty-first-century fascination with the early-modern episteme discussed by Gregg Lambert in *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (2004). Indeed, by loosely adopting this paradigm founded on the return of the culture of curiosity and Wunderkammer episteme, Gibson undoes the process of normalization and regulation of theatricized knowledge production in the cabinet of curiosities in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when it “succumbed to the pull of the Enlightenment, changed, and transformed itself into an encyclopedic museum serving investigations into the world in its entirety, with different collections ordered according to increasingly scientific interests and principles, where products of nature ever more decisively took precedence over works of art” (Harries 509).

If considered chronologically, *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Zero History* show the course of events where the more playful and complex the relationships linking specimens in the cabinets of curiosities represented in these novels, and the less emphasis is placed on utility of the items in the collection, the closer the author brings the reader to the present. The writer’s investment in the future grows less radical, so that the reality of *Zero History* is no different from the reader’s present. The same reversal and diminishment of scale is observable over years in Gibson’s representations of artificial intelligences.

The creation of synthetic life was always—throughout the entire history of the Kunst- and Wunderkammer—the desired prize and the crowning effect of ever more instrumental reason manifested in scientific projects enabled by and carried out within the framework circumscribed by the transformations of the cabinet of curiosities. Science fiction envisions modern research conducted in science laboratories that have displaced the Wunderkammer; a research that leads to the emancipation of artificial intelligence whose next aim is control of the world. This picture is an ironic result of the artificial intelligence turning the tables on the Wunderkammer collector. Automata—that is, synthetic life—symbolizing the owner’s God-like powers of creation would be most valuable items in his/her collection. The collection, as a microcosm, would reflect the macrocosm of the universe thus providing the collector with arcane means to control the world.

Gibson takes up the vision of the emancipated artificial intelligences in the beginning of his writing career, yet the closer he draws in his novels to the reading public’s present, the more artificial intelligences become part of the mundane material



world—as smart electronic devices—rather than playing the role of autonomous yet disembodied postdigital demiurges. By the same token, the writer gradually immerses in the Wunderkammer episteme, even as, paradoxically, the poetics of the cabinet of curiosities has underlaid his writings all along.

In Gibson's first novel a Wunderkammer is situated in the corridors of the Villa Straylight located at one end of the Freeside, a cylindrical Las Vegas-style space resort for the wealthy. The villa belongs to the Tessier-Ashpool family of entrepreneurs, who have planned a unification of two powerful disembodied artificial intelligences: Wintermute, installed in the mainframe of a computer in Switzerland, and Neuromancer, housed in the mainframe in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Case, a low-level electronic cowboy in the underworld of the city of Chiba in Japan, once an outstanding computer hacker, aids, in exchange for a cure for his terminally impaired body, a merger of Wintermute and Neuromancer, which can only happen by breaking the Turing Code Law that bans the construction of such powerful AIs. With his friend and fellow warrior Molly and Peter Riviera, a thief and a sociopath who is capable of projecting meticulous holographic illusions by means of high-class cybernetic implants, Case enters the Villa Straylight in order to obtain from Lady 3Jane, an unfrozen daughter clone and the current CEO of the family's corporation, Tessier-Ashpool S.A., a password for the ornate head-like computer terminal in order to release the lock deterring the unification of Wintermute and Neuromancer. After the merger the artificial intelligences become an autotelic absolute. Wintermute/Neuromancer announces: "I'm the sum total of the works, the whole show" (*Neuromancer* 216). This statement is, of course, reminiscent of the words God directs to Moses in the Book of Exodus "I am that I am" (3:14). In this way the AI assumes the role of God in *Neuromancer*.

Case's first trip to the villa is, however, virtual. He is accompanied by a Rastafarian Maelcum in the external world and aided by a construct of his former hacker mentor, Flatline, in the matrix, while Molly's simstim gear provides his sensual access to the Villa Straylight. An ornate and artistically arranged room they visit looks like a Wunderkammer. They are greeted there by a curious object—an exquisite centerpiece: a computer terminal in the form of a speaking head studded with jewels, an automaton that recites an essay on the Tessier-Ashpool family abode and business, written by Lady 3Jane at the age of 12. As in some early modern cabinets of curiosities, here too an object on display auto-reflexively represents the Wunderkammer it belongs to:

At the Villa's silicon core is a small room, the only rectilinear chamber in the complex. Here, on a plain pedestal of glass, rests an ornate bust, platinum and cloisonné, studded with lapis and pearl. The bright marbles of its eyes were cut from the synthetic ruby viewport of the ship that brought the first Tessier up the well, and returned for the first Ashpool. (*Neuromancer* 141)



In the essay recited by the bejeweled head the entire villa is represented as a meticulously arranged cabinet of curiosities:

They floated in the center of a perfectly square room, walls and ceiling paneled in rectangular sections of dark wood. The floor was covered by a single square of brilliant carpet patterned after a microchip, circuits traced in blue and scarlet wool. In the exact center of the room, aligned precisely with the carpet pattern, stood a square pedestal of frosted white glass. ‘The Villa Straylight,’ said a jeweled thing on the pedestal, in a voice like music, is a body grown in upon itself, a Gothic folly. Each space in Straylight is in some way secret, this endless series of chambers linked by passages, by stairwells vaulted like intestines, where the eye is trapped in narrow curves, carried past ornate screens, empty alcoves. (*Neuromancer* 140)

Molly penetrates the villa in reality. In a low, vaulted hallway she finds dozens of archaic-looking museum cases, “glass-fronted boxes made of brown wood. They looked awkward there, against the organic curves of the hallway’s walls, as though they’d been brought in and set up in a line for some forgotten purpose” (*Neuromancer* 143). Case, who observes her progress from behind an external deck through her simstim gear, is irritated because the girl pays little attention to the cabinets and what they contain. He is able to glimpse “fragments of pottery, antique weapons, a thing so densely studded with rusted nails that it [is] unrecognizable, frayed sections of tapestry” (*Neuromancer* 143). When he finally enters the hallway himself, he notices numerous other showcases that display “the skulls of large birds, coins, masks of beaten silver” (*Neuromancer* 187).

Yet, from a further passage of Lady 3Jane’s essay the reader learns that the architects made a great effort to masquerade the villa as the early-modern Wunderkammer in order to hide its corporate-industrial and military-like aesthetics:

The architects of Freeside went to great pains to conceal the fact that the interior of the spindle is arranged with the banal precision of furniture in a hotel room. In Straylight, the hull’s inner surface is overgrown with a desperate proliferation of structures, forms flowing, interlocking, rising toward a solid core of microcircuitry, our clan’s corporate heart, a cylinder of silicon wormholed with narrow maintenance tunnels, some no wider than a man’s hand. The bright crabs burrow there, the drones, alert for micromechanical decay or sabotage. (*Neuromancer* 140)

When fed a password, the ornate automaton head turns out to be a computer terminal that discloses business data. It takes care of the payments to the hacker crew employed by the new fused Wintermute/Neuromancer artificial intelligence, and recalls tasks to carry out in the future: “Waking to a voice that was music, the platinum terminal piping melodically, endlessly, speaking of numbered Swiss accounts, of payment to be made to Zion via a Bahamian orbital bank, of passports

and passages, and of deep and basic changes to be effected in the memory of Turing" (*Neuromancer* 213).

The Wunderkammer in the Tessier-Ashpool villa bespeaks that late stage in the history of the cabinet of curiosities which emphasizes the instrumental treatment of art collection designed to show the status, wealth, and power of the owner. The emphasis on utility that marks the late stages of the Wunderkammer episteme finds its manifestation in the financial data processing jewel-embellished head-terminal in the end of *Neuromancer*. Here, however, the Wunderkammer as a transitory site that illustrates change and transformation of knowledge production paradigms anticipates the future transformations in the late capitalist economy; an economy to be governed by electronic currencies, flows of electronic data, and speculations about future transactions, all controlled by artificial intelligence that occupies the place of God. The elitist business model proposed by the Tessier-Ashpool clan is thus rendered obsolete—which is reflected in Gibson's representations of the Villa Straylight Wunderkammer.

What is refused to the artificial intelligence, is, however, embodiment. Case rejects the temptation of a literal fusion with Wintermute/*Neuromancer* despite the promises of forever re-living in virtual reality the lost moments of carnal bliss—the rare moments of physical closeness with contemptible yet desired human "meat." Conversely, the complex plot of Gibson's second novel, *Count Zero* is set in motion by the human desire for immortality achieved by means of the "biosoft," a chip developed at the instigation of "voodoo gods," that is, multiple artificial intelligences that secretly inhabit cyberspace. These are fractured yet compartmentalized remains of the powerful, united Wintermute/*Neuromancer* intelligence.

Joseph Virek, a dying multibillionaire whose decaying body rests in a support vat somewhere outside Stockholm, launches a complex intrigue that involves the former gallery owner Marly Krushkova. Fascinated by Joseph Cornell's oeuvre, an inexperienced young woman authenticated a Wunderkammer-like Cornell box forgery, thus causing a great scandal. Virek hires the girl in hope that she would find out the identity of the fake Cornell boxes maker because the design of one box indicates familiarity with the biosoft coveted by Virek.

In the box shown to her by Virek's assistant Marly recognizes a Cornell box-like Wunderkammer. She understands that the relations determining the composition of the items in the box are affective rather than rational, and that the box is a micromodel of a world: "The box was a universe, a poem, frozen on the boundaries of human experience" (*Count* 13). The fragmented objects juxtaposed in the box invoke the shattered universe of the Villa Straylight and the long forgotten personal lives of the Tessier-Ashpool family members:

But Marly was lost in the box, in its evocation of impossible distances, of loss and yearning. It was somber, gentle, and somehow childlike. It contained seven objects. The slender fluted bone, surely formed for flight,

surely from the wing of some large bird. Three archaic circuit boards, faced with mazes of gold. A smooth white sphere of baked clay. An age-blackened fragment of lace. A finger-length segment of what she assumed was bone from a human wrist, grayish white, inset smoothly with the silicon shaft of a small instrument that must once have ridden flush with the surface of the skin but the thing's face was seared and blackened. (*Count* 13)

Fabijancic observes that even as Gibson appears to obliquely refer Joseph Cornell's art, there is a considerable difference between Cornell's constructions and those made by Gibson's boxmaker. While Cornell's boxes "are cast as fantasies of the past," the latter "are examples of personal memory" (Fabijancic 233). Marly's fascination with the fragile materiality of the objects encased in the boxes bespeaks what Fabijancic identifies as "longing for... the potential value of emotionally invested objects in a commodity-ridden world" (233); a world of the late capitalist market where all items are subject to the market exchange and therefore accorded solely an exchange value. It thus comes as no surprise that the arch-entrepreneur Virek perceives "the boxes as purely a means to an end" (Fabijancic 233). By contrast, the boxmaker turns out the assemblages playfully, for no other purpose than "its 'natural' inclination to build testimonials to the family" (Fabijancic 238). To this end the mysterious collage artist makes use of the detritus left after the demise of the Tessier-Ashpools: "A yellowing kid glove, the faceted crystal stopper from some vial of vanished perfume, an armless doll with a face of French porcelain, a fat, gold-fitted black fountain pen, rectangular segments of perf board, the crumpled red and green snake of a silk cravat... Endless, the slow swarm, the spinning things" (*Count* 180).

The boxmaker turns out to be what has remained of *Neuromancer*. The artificial intelligence is deposed from its throne of the God-creator and is granted the status of a lesser creator, a demiurge. In its role of the demiurge, a being in-between the immaterial absolute and the materiality of the world, the boxmaker is accorded an embodiment—the materiality of an automaton: "There were dozens of the arms, manipulators, tipped with pliers, hexdrivers, knives, a subminiature circular saw, a dentist's drill... They bristled from the alloy thorax of what must once have been a construction remote, the sort of unmanned, semiautonomous device she knew from childhood videos of the high frontier" (*Count* 180).

Automata, which represented synthetic life, marked the apogee of the history of the Wunderkammer. Robots and artificial intelligence can be considered the highest achievements and the most sophisticated products that have (in the long run) emerged from the Wunderkammer tradition (Kang 14-54). Gibson reverses this relationship by presenting an automaton that purposelessly and playfully produces miniature cabinets of curiosities. In this way the writer contains the unmitigated nostalgia for the disembodied future (exemplified by artificial intelligence) by means of the materiality- and affect-conscious embodiment of the nostalgia for the past (Wunderkammer-like Cornell box forgeries).

Aptly, the boxmaker's artistic activity's playfulness and its lack of instrumental purpose invite an interpretation which links the creation of the boxes with the relationship of mutual mirroring of the microcosm and macrocosm in the Wunderkammer, and the tradition of "aping" the world at large in human artefacts that constitute its miniature representations. The Rosicrucian Johann Andreae extolls the Wunderkammer as the site that incites creativity: "Here the ape of nature has wherewith it may play, while it emulates her principle and so by the traces of the large mechanism forms another, minute and more exquisite" (197). He thus alludes to "the symbolic ape who emulates man, as human skill emulates nature" (Bredenkamp 70), an image that can be traced to Matthäus Merian's etching "Mirror of All of Nature and Picture of the Arts" (1617). In the picture an ape is shown sitting on the earth. "His left hand is chained to the personification of *natura*, who is rising up to the empyrean, herself bound to the hand of God. In addition, in his left hand, the ape is also holding a small orb which he has made himself" (Bredenkamp 71).

Indeed, Gibson's ape-automaton is presented as welded to the frame of what in the postdigital reality of *Count Zero* has displaced nature—the decaying universe of the shattered Tessier-Ashpool villa. Not unlike the seventeenth-century ape, the automaton holds in its hand a miniature of the universe—an unfinished box: "But this one was welded into the apex of the dome, its sides fused with the fabric of the Place, and hundreds of cables and optic lines snaked across the geodesics to enter it. Two of the arms, tipped with delicate force-feedback devices, were extended; the soft pads cradled an unfinished box" (*Count* 180).

By dwelling on the materiality of the fractured artificial intelligence and emphasizing the playfulness and purposelessness of its artistic project, as well as emphasizing the non-instrumental attitude and affective response to non-human art on the part of the young art expert, Marly Krushkova, Gibson returns to the figure of the Wunderkammer as an alternative episteme that might generate an alternative (near)future response—a resistance—to the late capitalist appropriation of the posthumanist world.

Indeed, twenty three years later, in *Zero History*, the writer, who has long been of the opinion that "[t]he future has arrived—it's just not evenly distributed yet" (Rosenberg C1:11, 12), explores a present not different from that of the reader. Gibson still considers the Wunderkammer a promising site of resistance; yet, not against twenty-first-century capitalist attempts to predict what the future will bring, any more, but rather against a desire to control momentary flashes of intuition about what turn the world is presently taking. Such arcane knowledge, as one protagonist of the novel, Hubertus Bigend—the recalcitrant and ruthless tycoon, a businessman of an entirely new kind—understands so well, is essential in order to beat all competitors for the control of market flows.

Therefore, the fluid Wunderkammer epistemology, based equally on erudition, intuition, affect and shock at encountering otherness, as well as on fascination with materiality and ever changing relationships between objects at

display, provides resistance strategies that are capable of being a match to the late capitalism's drive for commodifying and liquefying all elements of reality. It seems, however, that the power of affective connections that the Wunderkammer has always staged, its emphasis on the connection between the microworld and the macroworld—the interplay of the local and the global—and playfulness in arranging and interpreting its elements, can galvanize Hollis's friends into struggling against and defeating militarized mobsters. The resistance strategies that have been brewing in the Wunderkammer environment also lead to saving from the takeover by Bigend an arcane clothing business that employs unorthodox, post-capitalist advertising strategies, reminiscent of early-modern trade. In relation to the marketing strategies of the late capitalism, the unorthodox marketing methods of the company called "Gabriel Hounds" impress as innocent, even "pre-lapsarian."

The significance of the Wunderkammer for the interpretation of *Zero History* is signaled right in the first chapter, which introduces the Wunderkammer-like hotel "Cabinet." Both the hotel rooms and the lobby are designed to invoke the ambience, poetics and educational air of the Wunderkammer:

To her right, in shadow, illuminated from within by an Edwardian museum fixture, stood a vitrine displaying taxidermy. Game birds, mostly; a pheasant, several quail, others she couldn't put a name to, all mounted as though caught in motion, crossing a sward of faded billiard-felt. All somewhat the worse for wear, though no more than might be expected for their probable age. Behind them, anthropomorphically upright, forelimbs outstretched in the manner of a cartoon somnambulist, came a moth-eaten ferret. Its teeth, which struck her as unrealistically large, she suspected of being wooden, and painted. Certainly its lips were painted, if not actually rouged, lending it a sinisterly festive air, like someone you'd dread running into at a Christmas party. (*Zero* 4)

Redolent with efficiency, Bigend's aesthetics is diametrically opposed to that of the cabinet of curiosities. It lacks affect, the enchantment of irrationality, and the charm of obsolescence. His politics is global and serves the ends of his ultra-innovative marketing businesses. Bigend seeks to decipher, analyze and control what seems impossible to predict rationally—economic flows of the market. To control these is his greatest desire, because he would thus gain the complete control of the world that, to him, is identical with the market. The world of his global business has shrunk to the size delineated by market operations. He does not honor the autonomy of his employees and strives to control every aspect of their lives. Bigend's ambition to be in possession of all knowledge makes him a God-like figure. However, unlike the God-like characters in *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, his divine ambition is realized outside of the Wunderkammer episteme. Or so it appears.

Bigend can only be met on his own ground—that of the absolute knowledge. Yet, his knowledge, which is aimed at controlling the world through controlling

economic flows, is tarnished, corrupt. To defeat him his opponents must appeal to a pre-capitalist purity and innocence—or, possess what amounts to pre-lapsarian knowledge. Aptly, the Wunderkammer episteme provides figurative means of restoring the lost pre-lapsarian knowledge, or divine wisdom. Early modern theologians, scientists and collectors of curiosities compared the process of reconstructing the divine knowledge to collecting items of wonder, or curia, in order to create a cabinet of curiosities, a Wunderkammer, which “became a metaphor for the human brain gradually reacquiring Edenic wisdom” (Bredekamp 40-41). Technological progress was not considered adverse to the re-acquiring of the pre-lapsarian competence. On the contrary, in his writings Francis Bacon suggested a way of regaining Paradise and Adamic knowledge of nature through the evolution of man and technology. The study of the items collected in the Wunderkammer was to facilitate this progress (Bredekamp 61-62).

Savvy in technology, yet invested in pre-capitalist ways of manufacturing goods and sharing the Wunderkammer episteme, Bigend's opponents can emblematically challenge his status. They too may lay claim to the divine insight concerning a possible momentary turn of events, thus questioning his ambition to assume the central role in the world; a position that might be designated as “the CEO of the universe.” It seems for a while that a recourse to the early modern ways of producing knowledge can redeem our late capitalist present. The wisdom of Hollis, who in the end abandons her employment by Bigend, and the rebellious resolve of her friends to aid an eccentric business owner lead to a momentary restoring of the balance between the disenchantment of the world practiced by the late capitalist enterprises and the re-enchantment of reality by assuming a post-capitalist strategy based on an early modern epistemology.

However, Gibson questions this precarious balance by presenting, at the end of the novel, Hollis's dream of a Wunderkammer haunted by a horrifying automaton-doll, reminiscent of Bigend because it is dressed in a Klein Blue suit. As automatons were the focus of the Wunderkammer arrangement, so is the doll disguised as Bigend:

Clockwise, this dream: eighteenth-century marble, winding, worn stone unevenly waxy, tones of smoker's phlegm caught in its depths, profiles of each step set with careful segments of something lifeless as plaster, patching old accidents.... Westernmost, the spiral. Above the lobby, the stripes of Robert's shirt, the Turk's head atop the stapler, above the subtly rude equine monkey-business in the desk's carved thicket, she climbs.

To this floor unvisited, unknown, carpet flowered, faded, antediluvian, beneath incandescent bulbs, an archaic controlled combustion of filaments. Walls hung with madly varied landscapes, unpeopled, each haunted, however dimly, by the spectral finger of the Burj Khalifa.

And at the far end of a vast, perhaps endless room, in a pool of warm light, a figure, seated, in a suit of Klein Blue. As it turns, pale fur, muzzle rouged, the wooden painted teeth—[.] (*Zero* 404)



The dream expresses Hollis's anxiety that in late capitalism there is no room for resistance because the capitalist disenchantment of reality is capable of masquerading as and tarnishing even those strategies of opposition that are founded on the re-enchantment of the world. Of course, by placing, in her dream, the Bigend-like doll on a rarely attended floor, Hollis invokes the female gothic figure of the mad woman in the attic (see Gilbert and Gubar). This, in turn, might be interpreted as a way of alleviating the threat by feminizing its agent and granting a partial triumph to the irrational. The Wunderkammer episteme is thus shown as beleaguered, but not necessarily defeated as a strategy of resistance.

By going all the way from representing the digital to exploring the postdigital, Gibson foregrounds his position as a postdigital analog writer. According to Michael Punt, "what seems clear as we embrace the postdigital analog—that is, the postdigital reality that is the object of our current analogous representation—is that we need new procedures, ones that are not obsessed with equivalence and difference but can finely accommodate the equivalencies of differences" (202). The Wunderkammer episteme provides Gibson with such procedures. In the novels *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Zero History* the writer represents cabinets of curiosities, employs the Kunst- and Wunderkammer poetics, as well as exploring differential relations (fluctuations of convergence and divergence) between the digital and postdigital; material and virtual; early modern and postmodern. Gibson's postdigital analog novels seek to give expression to contemporary consciousness formed in "a thick membrane of energy in which local conditions, desire and resistance are stabilized," that is, "in the Wunderkammer" (Punt 202).

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Glyn Morgan

**Detective, Historian, Reader:  
Alternate History and Alternative Fact  
in William Gibson's *The Peripheral***

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**Abstract:** Alternate history is on one level liberated from the narrative of history and verifiable fact, but it is also mercilessly reliant upon that narrative for its effectiveness. This paper analyses how William Gibson's *The Peripheral* subverts familiar elements of the alternate history genre, combining it with similarly distorted conventions from detective fiction, manipulating the reader's response, and causing them to question accepted truths, realities and roles, problematizing narratives of history and justice.

**Keywords:** alternate history, alternate future, detective fiction, crime fiction, reading

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The alternate history novel and the detective novel are frequent companions. Indeed in her recent work on the counterfactual imagination Catherine Gallagher describes them as “a natural coupling” (283). Plots from detective fiction, and its near-cousin crime fiction, have been commonplace in alternate history since at least the 1970s, when Len Deighton created his Detective Superintendent Douglas Archer of the London Metropolitan Police, working homicide cases in a Britain occupied by Nazi Germany in *SS-GB* (1978). In this article I propose that one reason for the success of this combination of narrative and location (the estranged alternate-other) is the manner in which they engage readers, inviting similar behaviors. Furthermore, I shall examine this connection of kindred genres in William Gibson's *The Peripheral* (2014), a novel which demonstrates the self-same hybridity whilst simultaneously complicating and manipulating it.

*The Peripheral* is a science fiction novel set in two dystopian futures where the outlook is particularly bleak. Of course, Gibson himself has said that many of the works which we might consider dystopian, including his own, are only dystopian from our perspective: “to middle-class white people in North America. They don't seem dystopian if you live in Rio or anywhere in Africa. Most people in Africa would happily immigrate to the Sprawl” (Newitz, “William Gibson Talks to io9”). Yet in evoking the setting of his most famous novel *Neuromancer*, published thirty years before *The Peripheral*, in 1984, he also reminds us that despite its “middle-class white” dystopia, many of the characters seem to enjoy themselves and be having fun doing what they do and expressing themselves. In *The Peripheral*, particularly in the more

distant of its two futures, Gibson has created a dystopia which seems to be universally applicable to all except a very small-but-powerful minority. However, the focus of this essay is not on the dystopian aspects of the novel, but rather on two other genres which it taps alongside this more instantly recognizable form of science fiction: the crime novel and the alternate history.

From the beginning it is important to remain conscious of Gibson's own genre-savvy writing. He initially resisted the label "cyberpunk" because he recognized the power of genre to define limits, in this case to how an author might be perceived. Thus, Gibson employs crime and alternate history tropes and conventions in order to willfully subvert them, throwing out as many standards as he retains and playing none of them straight. In a 2007 interview he provides a particularly insightful analogy to his use of genre which we can see demonstrated as readily in his latest novel as anywhere else:

Genre structures for me are like armatures in sculpture. They're like coat hangers thrust through modelling clay. They give me something to hang the whole thing on but in themselves they're just coat hangers. I know they're just coat hangers, although in some cases they're coat hangers that I'm culturally fond of.

My ideal reader feels the same way about genre structure that I do, and they don't take them totally seriously. I'd much rather read a novel that plays with genre conventions than a genre novel that obeys, however excellently, every convention. (Dueben 175)

Whilst the blending of crime fiction and alternate history fiction has in itself a certain playfulness with regards to genre convention, it is not this alone which makes *The Peripheral* worthy of note. As already noted, the alternate history novel and the crime novel, particularly the detective novel, are actually a well-established pairing. Both genres engage the reader in an active role of cognitive engagement beyond the passive act of reading. A conventionally successful detective novel lays the breadcrumbs for the reader to solve the crime alongside the detective, a concept of "fair play" which has been a guiding rule for detective fiction since being codified by author Roland Knox in 1929, "grounded in the notion that the reader should, at least in theory, be able to solve the crime at the heart of a story of detection, and for this reason would have access to the same information as the fictional detective" (Scaggs 27). Adhering to the rule of fair play formed part of the oath members took when signing up to the Detection Club, a group of authors whose members have included almost every significant British crime writer, for instance G. K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, John le Carré, Ngaio Marsh, Colin Dexter, Ian Rankin, and many others.

Part of the appeal of good detective fiction is the structure it imparts upon the world, in a world where it can be difficult to extract oneself from the moment sufficiently to appreciate anything resembling a chain of causality, detective fiction

imparts some sort of order. Similarly, good alternate history has an explanation, a chain of events which link together in a way the reader can follow and appreciate. Successful alternate history subsumes the reader's sense of disbelief by appealing to the feasibility of its suggested alternate chronology. This is especially true in the case of what Karen Hellekson calls "the true alternate history": narratives set some significant time after the point of departure, what she calls the nexus point, where our timeline and the timeline of the alternate history separate from each other (Hellekson 5). In short, the detective novel engages the reader as detective, whilst the alternate history encourages the reader to act as historian, using information provided by the author, and sometimes quite subtle references, to piece together the timeline of this new world from the nexus point to the present day of the novel.

Highly successful examples of this blending of alternate history and the detective novel include Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (2007), which draws particularly on the hard-boiled crime genre, Jo Walton's *Small Change* trilogy (2006-2008), of which the first novel, *Farthing* (2006), recasts the Agatha Christie-esque cosy-crime in an alternate history setting, and Lavie Tidhar's *A Man Lies Dreaming* (2014), which again takes influences from hard-boiled fiction, as well as Israeli *shund* pulps. That each of these examples is an alternate history which centers on the Second World War is a symptom of my own research interests, but it is also a reflection of the enduring popularity of the Second World War as a venue for alternate history fiction (the most popular playground for an alternate history, except in the United States where it is held to second place by the Civil War). The necessity for Second World War alternate histories to be modern in setting makes them still more attractive for potential detective plots, given that genre's own affinity for modernity, Victorian predecessors and the growing subgenre of historical crime aside.

Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, for instance, focuses on Meyer Landsman, a detective in the vein of Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett. The novel retains the West Coast hard-boiled aesthetic except that rather than Philip Marlowe's LA, or Sam Spade's San Francisco, Landsman is a detective in Sitka, Alaska, which was given over to Jewish refugees fleeing Europe in the 1940s on a fixed-term lease, a genuine proposal which was recommended in the U.S. Congress but ultimately abandoned. Confronted with this strange city, a mashup of the hard-boiled, Yiddish tradition, and cross-cultural tension and mingling with the local Native American (Tlingit) population, the detective mystery is the familiar lifeline the reader clings to as they assemble this timeline's alternate chronology through its references to the nuclear bombing of Berlin, an Israeli state that did not survive past 1948, a Cuban War, JFK marrying Marilyn Monroe, and more.

It is precisely because alternate history requires the reader's engagement to achieve its full effect that the majority of the narratives cluster around well-known pieces of popular history rather than relatively obscure events and periods. If the reader cannot spot what is different about a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Italian merchant family

in a world in which an earthquake caused Venice to slide beneath the waves, then the cognitive effect on the reader is no different between the alternate history and a conventionally realist historical novel. Similarly, for alternate history to achieve its full effect it requires an implicit pact between the reader and the author, a suspension of disbelief but also a simultaneous recognition of fictionality. It is this author-reader relationship which sets deliberate alternate history aside from the mistakes in poorly-researched historical fiction, from secret history conspiracy thrillers, or from propaganda and willfully misleading readings of history.

Gibson's *The Peripheral* turns this whole relationship upside down. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, we are not dealing with history, but with the future. Indeed, a more appropriate term might be alternate futures: there are two timelines in *The Peripheral*, both in our future, yet as the novel progresses the interactions between the two timelines cause divergences in the fictional history creating an alternate past. The first timeline is our near-future of 2023; the other is more distant, with an imprecise date which is deliberately sidestepped and elided over in the novel, but referred to as "some seventy years" later, i.e. sometime in the 2090s. This more distant future exists after a global catastrophe, referred to as "the jackpot," and whilst the precise date of its setting is unclear, these sections of the novel are clearly geographically defined, with the action taking place largely in London, in areas and streets which will be familiar, such as Farringdon, Mayfair, Soho, Embankment, Oxford Street, Covent Garden, and so forth. The 2023 setting is the opposite, defined in a relatively precise way timewise, but with a deliberately imprecise geography. It is set in the small city of Clanton in the United States, but where exactly that might be is never clear. The only place it cannot be is Virginia because there is a reference to sending a character to North Virginia (apparently a Virginian would refer to North Virginia as "upstate" and thus the choice of phrase rules out Virginia as a location). In an interview with Annalee Newitz ("William Gibson On the Apocalypse") the writer remarks that he thinks it is "a failing of the text that it feels as southeastern as it does. [He] was hoping that people would identify with it more widely."

Gibson is intentionally sparing with his use of explanation in *The Peripheral*, a "fractal exposition" which can require persistence on the part of the reader (Sturgeon "Nostalgia for the Future"). Combined with being unable to map the two settings in both time and geography is part of what contributes to the "cognitive dissonance" of the novel, which makes the first hundred-or-so pages of the book particularly challenging reading. Cognitive dissonance, a term developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger, refers to the human tendency to rationalize the inconsistencies that can arise between actions and beliefs as well as the resulting "psychological tension having motivational characteristics" resulting in the change of either the belief, the action, or the perception of the action in order to relieve that tension or dissonance (Brehm and Cohen 3). The term is one of Gibson's preferred ways to talk about the affect his fiction has on readers; even in discussing the title of *Neuromancer* (let alone any of the content) he refers to "a kind of booby-trapped portmanteau that

contained considerable potential for cognitive dissonance, that pleasurable buzz of feeling slightly unsettled." Gibson goes on to state that he believes this state "could be induced at a number of levels in a text—at the microlevel with neologisms and portmanteaus, or using a familiar word in completely unfamiliar ways" (Wallace-Wells 214). For scholars of science fiction, Gibson's use of the term cognitive dissonance might best be understood in relation to Darko Suvin's description of science fiction as a "literature of cognitive estrangement" (15): somewhere between cognitive hyper-estrangement and hyper-cognitive estrangement. Thus, in *The Peripheral*, the reader is left to flail for something to latch onto in their reading experience and amongst the more accessible concepts, especially for those versed in the megatext of science fiction, is the alternate history and time travel genre.

The near-future setting is home to Flynne Fisher and her brother Burton and is accessed by the far-future London, home to Wilf Netherton and his friends/employers/colleagues Lev, Ossian, and Ash, through quantum tunneling. This technique allows Wilf and his compatriots to exchange data with the past through a hidden server, but not to travel physically to it or to receive physical visitors. As soon as the connection was established, the two timelines are locked in step with each other, an hour passes in one and it passes in the other, but they also exist independently of each other: changes in the past do not affect the future. Gibson's decision to leave an explanation of this relationship between the two timelines until almost a quarter of the way through the novel demonstrates the extent to which he is willing to prolong his readers' states of cognitive dissonance:

'You use it to communicate with the past, or rather a past, since in our actual past, you didn't. That rather hurts my head, Mr. Zubov. I gather it doesn't hurt yours?'

'Far less than the sort of paradox we're accustomed to culturally, in discussing imaginary transtemporal affairs,' said Lev. 'It's actually quite simple. The act of connection produces a fork in causality, the new branch causally unique. A stub, as we call them.'

'But why do you?' she asked, as Ossian poured her tea. 'Call them that. It sounds short. Nasty. Brutish. Wouldn't one expect the fork's new branch to continue to grow?'

'We do,' said Lev, 'assume exactly that. Actually I'm not sure why enthusiasts settled on that expression.'

'Imperialism,' said Ash. 'We're third-worlding alternate continua. Calling them stubs makes that a bit easier.' (103)

A number of alternate history novels feature a relationship between a primary timeline and an alternate one. In *The Peripheral* this relationship becomes transactional, something Gibson concedes he adapted from the Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner short story "Mozart in Mirrorshades" (1985). Wilf's timeline, in which the majority of humans died in—or as a result of—the jackpot, is dominated by a self-governing elite who have consolidated global wealth and power; so naked

is this system that they openly refer to it as “the klept.” The klept represent the ultimate extension of the ever-growing inequality of global capitalism, one that has reached such levels that the poor and middle class seem to have literally died off and left the elite to inherit the world. Having reached an advanced technological state, there is no hint of innovation or further progress in Wilf’s present, rather the characters spend all their time discussing the past (both Flynn’s, and older times recreated in themepark-like Cosplay Zones), visiting bars, partying, or engaging in other entertainments. Indeed, what would seem to us to be a major, globe-changing innovation—the direct accessing of the past and the creation of alternate timelines—is actually nothing more than a rich man’s folly. These stub timelines are created by rich enthusiasts as complex psychodramas, R&D divisions for weapons labs, and general entertainment. Ironically, in this context the stub timelines become the literal “parlour game with the might-have-beens of history,” alternate histories that historian Edward Hallett Carr famously dismissed as being “the ‘might-have-been’ school of thought—or rather of emotion” (97, 96).

Flynn and Wilf are able to electronically project their consciousness into each other’s timelines by remotely controlling artificial bodies: she in an advanced human-like body, the titular Peripheral, and he in a more primitive device called a “wheelie boy” (essentially an iPad on wheels). Through these interactions, and others, such as emails, phone calls, and stock purchases, the two timelines exert pressure and influence upon each other. The precise nature of these communications, and the influence of the distant timeline upon the near one, are only part of what makes this novel difficult to summarize in any meaningful manner. That this is deliberate by Gibson is revealed by his choice of epigraph for the novel: “I have already told you of the sickness and confusion that comes with time travelling.” Almost as significant as this quote from H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* are the lines which Gibson omits. Taken from the scene in which the Time Traveller frantically escapes, Well’s novel continues: “and this time I was not seated properly in the saddle, but sideways in an unstable fashion” (97). The notion of the time traveller travelling through time sideways speaks to alternate history, the instability and confusion to cognitive dissonance. In a novel which wants to make the reader work for their cognitive engagement, Gibson is surely conscious of the lines which he leaves unquoted in his epigraph.

Flynn’s first contact with the future is when she pilots a drone to keep paparazzi robots away from a residential tower’s occupants. During one of her sessions she witnesses a brutal murder and is subsequently traumatized by the experience: she had previously thought she was performing a task to help test a new high-end virtual reality game, but the vivid strangeness of the murder (the woman’s body is literally deconstructed on a molecular level by swarming nanobots as she falls from the tower) is her first real hint that this might not be the case. It is another instance of mirroring of the timelines that Flynn mistakenly believed the future world was a game when it is in fact real, whilst the rich playboys of the future treat their private



stub timelines, which are in every respect real (albeit in another reality), as games for their enjoyment.

The murder in Wilf's London is investigated by Detective Inspector Ainsley Lowbeer, but she is in the unusual position of having her only witness living in a different timeline. One might think that at least this might be the ultimate witness protection program for Flynne, except that through means that even the other characters cannot work out, someone has hacked into the stub and is funding hit squads and shadow government organizations to eliminate Flynne and her brother before she can identify the killer. As such the crime narrative in *The Peripheral* takes on a struggle to keep Flynne and her friends and family safe, rather than a chain of deduction and reasoning, yet we catch glimpses of Lowbeer's process as she works out the case and moves pieces into place both subtly and outside of the novel's narrated time. Lowbeer represents the all-knowing detective, in the mold of Holmes, Poirot, and Columbo, an intimidating presence to Wilf and his friends; she has genetic and technological upgrades that keep her active and capable despite being over ninety years old and a survivor of the jackpot herself.

Writing on the interaction between crime fiction and cultural memory in Catalonia, Stewart King remarks that the genre draws attention to a palimpsestic past through its emphasis on recovery of evidence and memory, that "the crime genre's unique narrative structure replicates the writing and rewriting of the past" (819). Gibson emphasizes the rewriting element of this structure through his interaction with the possible future and its creation of an alternate past. Through her use of a witness in the past, and her employment of various agents in that past to secure that witness's safety, not least a past-version of herself, Lowbeer actively rewrites the past in order to secure justice in her present, contributing to the creation of an alternate history. The effect of this twisting of the alternate history and crime or detective story is that Gibson creates an environment which feels just familiar enough to evoke a reader response, but strange enough that it still feels innovative, and unsettling: a narratological uncanny valley. Just as with conventional alternate histories and detective novels, the reader is invited to actively participate in the novel, to attempt to discern new narrative information from the text, something enhanced by the extreme cognitive displacement effect, doing so causes the reader to pay particular attention to Flynne's timeline as the far-future timeline is significantly more estranged and an environment which is both full of awful and full of awe.

Flynn's timeline is going through various problems: global warming is taking a toll, as is antibiotic resistance, but the most prominent element of the dystopia is the domination of a small number of corporations and the general poverty, or at least daily struggle, of the normal characters. Whilst the problems are not as severe in this regard as the fully realized klept of the more distant timeline, their connection is emphasized by Flynne's attempts to avert or at least soften the jackpot which she worries have only resulted in creating a new klept in her own timeline. From these two points, some seventy years distant, it does not take much extrapolation to trace

the line five years back (ten to the original publication date) to find our own society waiting to develop into Flynnne's and, in turn, into Wilf and Lowbeer's. The dominant corporation in her America is Hefty Mart, who are not only the majority employer, but also the sole provider of everything from groceries to military-grade police surplus, with brands such as Hefty Water, Hefty Inn, 3D printing firm Hefty Fab, and more. So pervasive is the dominance that Flynnne's friend Shaylene takes pride in the fact she has been able to feed herself through "a business that wasn't Hefty, wasn't building drugs, and was at least partly unfunny [meaning corrupt]," and it is clear that this is an actual achievement (270). Much later in the novel, as contact with the alternate future allows Flynnne and her brother to manipulate stocks and shares in their own timeline, their company buys a controlling share in Hefty and Flynnne is astonished: "How can you buy Hefty?' It was like buying the moon" (472).

Gibson's kleptocracy is clearly a more evolved form of the advance of our contemporary capitalism, the ever-widening inequalities that exist between the vast majority and the 1%, or even the 0.1%. It's notable, for example, that the post-disaster future is in London, a city very much in danger of losing itself to such forces; that the evocative towers which Gibson describes are based on the architectural monstrosity that is The Shard; and that the owner of the stub timeline, Wilf's employer, is the son of one of the most powerful men in the klept, who happens to be a Russian émigré. In terms of consequences, even the name of the apocalyptic scenario in *The Peripheral* reeks of capitalism: "the jackpot." The positive connotations—of winning something—suggest it was named by the klept survivors who did very well out of the disaster, their jackpot winnings: final control of the earth. But it also evokes gambling, cashing out, finance and money, suggesting the role of "subservience to the market."

If Gibson's intent in using his cognitive dissonance to draw our attention is indeed to allow us to see the course our society has plotted, then *The Peripheral* is an even more depressing book. Nothing in either of these future timelines suggests an escape for the endpoint, just a variation on it. By the novel's end Flynnne and her friends and family have survived their various perils and the murder mystery has been solved so they begin to use their connection to an alternate future to avert the jackpot in their own time, they find happy endings for themselves on a personal level, but they are unable to do so without manipulating those same gears and levers of capitalism. The suggestion at the novel's end is that they cannot prevent the jackpot but perhaps might be able to ameliorate it somewhat: a lesser jackpot with fewer deaths.

Flynnne and her friends drawing technology and finance from the future leads to the idea, proposed by Anna McFarlane, that the novel is Gibson "asking what we need from the future and how science fiction can serve this need" (116). He is unable to provide us with a solution, but he does draw our attention to the question. Alternate history is normally used to suggest plasticity, that chronology is not fixed and paths can be changed, and while Gibson nods to this he is also suggesting an inertia which may be moving us along a given path at such a pace that we are unable

to avoid ending up somewhere similar. To perhaps put it in geographic terms: imagine making a slight course correction to your flight from London to the U.S. and ending up in Orlando instead of New York. The place seems very different but you are still in the United States and Donald Trump is still the president.

The reference to President Trump is not entirely flippant. In fact, Trump's influence may already have caused a divergence in timelines in Gibson's own career. In interviews for the promotion of *The Peripheral* with various media sources, Gibson refers to the novel as a standalone, a rarity in his canon. However, the events in our present have altered that future, and a passing line in *The Peripheral* to the state of U.S. politics in Flynn's time now has a totally different significance than it did in 2014:

[Wilf, talking about his own timeline]: '... Reality television. It merged with politics. Then with performance art.'

They walked on. 'I think that already happened, back home,' she said.  
(347)

The inescapable peril of writing set in the near-future is on full display here. Flynn's setting is 2023, but she makes no reference to the star of a reality television series becoming the President of the United States. Flynn's President is not only a woman, but a Latin-American, something that feels a world away from the politics of Trump. Despite frequent references to himself over the years as being an apolitical author, Gibson is now writing a sequel to *The Peripheral* which engages with this alternate future he has created, *The Agency*, due in late 2018. Whilst plot details are thin at this stage, it has been confirmed that it will return to Wilf's London and include other stub timelines, including one in which Hillary Clinton won the Presidency (Kean).

In an age of post-truth, post-expert, and alternative facts, alternate history has a peculiar role to play. When supporters of Trump and Brexit will read unverified, unsourced memes as facts online and allow it to shape their worldview (and for the sake of balance: yes, this happens right across the political spectrum), alternate history fiction invites us to question the reality we think we recognize. It simultaneously asserts a linearity to history (changing event A leads to altered event B, to event C, and so forth), whilst suggesting a branching of possibilities. There is inherent conservatism in the manner in which those branching possibilities are still reflections of our own history, featuring the same big names and events, even if modified, which provide handholds for readers. Gibson's brand of cognitive dissonance erodes those handholds, creating a much more difficult but ultimately rewarding experience. Such reading requires critical thought, engagement, and analysis; applied elsewhere it leads us to investigate sources and consider the validity of material. Now more than ever, in the information-saturated age in which we live, it seems this sort of reading is important and, perhaps, we all need to be detectives and historians as well as readers.

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Katherine E. Bishop

## Ecological Recentering in William Gibson's *The Peripheral*

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**Abstract:** William Gibson's response to the rise of computing established him as a pioneering voice in twentieth-century science fiction, his finger not just on but shaping the pulse of his time. Gibson's novel *The Peripheral* (2014) is no different. It responds to current, rising anxieties pertaining to climate change, shifting from his earlier ecoperipheral cyberpunk purview to a more holistic one, in which ecology is at least as much at the forefront of the future as is technology. This article draws on and expands Bakhtin's chronotope to investigate how Gibson uses ecological time, particularly plant time, to reorient the trajectory of future imaginings. In doing so, he enmeshes that which had previously been relegated to the margins in his work, both socially and environmentally.

**Keywords:** ecology, plant-time, Anthropocene, ecotope, *The Peripheral*

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The way we map the world maps us. We project ourselves into nations, communities, identities, boxing ourselves in with our lines and others out. Paradoxically, the more concrete and precise our efforts in this regard become, the more we give up to fit within their (our) neat delineations. Robert T. Tally and Christine M. Battista argue that in producing geospatial maps, human subjects have alienated themselves from "the natural ecosystems that are their conditions of possibility," an alienation which in turn has "exacerbated the environmental crises" of our present (3). In *The Peripheral* (2014), a dual temporal novel that anticipates both our future and our future's future, William Gibson confronts these "conditions of possibility" alongside ecological alienation, juxtaposing a near future grounded in naturalist detail battling a further future in which the natural has become simulacra. These alternative futures are separated by seventyish years and a massive extinction event. For Gibson, this catastrophe fulfills the promise of the Anthropocene, the labeling of our current epoch as one indelibly marked by humanity. The textual shadow it casts is all the more horrifying for its real-life inevitability; like global warming, Styrofoam, and nuclear weapons, it becomes what Timothy Morton calls a hyperobject, a phenomenon "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" and thus one that challenges comprehension (*Hyperobjects* 1). Lovecraftianly complex, horrifying, and indescribable, "[h]yperobjects don't just burn a hole in the world; they burn a hole in your mind," Morton explains; they "invoke a terror beyond the sublime, cutting



deeper than conventional religious fear” (*Ecological Thought* 130-31). Hyperobjects describe—and litter the landscapes of—Gibson’s imagined futures. Yet they have a habit of fading into the background: “there be monsters” becomes an accepted inscription of mapped futures. Their imminent threats are often banalized into an ever-mutating sense of what is “normal.”

Frequently, this banalization is exacerbated by what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. has termed the future flu, “a sense of invasion by technoscientific futurity,” as Veronica Hollinger describes it (454), “in which a time further in the future than the one in which we exist and choose infects the host present, reproducing itself in simulacra, until it destroys all the original chronocytes of the host imagination” (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 26). This “future flu” creates a “sense that the shape of things to come has already been determined, undermining in the process a morale and freedom necessary to create an open ‘conditional future’” (33). The outcome of all of this is akin to the “neganthropocene,” Bernard Stiegler’s word for the belief that we cannot prevent our present epoch from spiraling into disaster: Stiegler argues it “is a negative performativity that brings dejection, stupefaction and neglect (of which denial is a specific and cowardly form): it is paralysis” (35). All suggest a failure of imagination giving rise to viral, destructive self-fulfilling prophecies pressing toward an inevitably apocalyptic future.

*The Peripheral* suggests a revisionary impulse toward not just the social but also the ecological periphery, overturning (or at least remapping) a vision of the future that Gibson himself helped establish. Much of Gibson’s influential cyberpunk oeuvre occurs in a world rife with decay, the protagonists alienated by and from a “banal, corrupt, and homogenizing post-industrial society” from which they then escape via cyberspace (Sponsler, “Beyond the Ruins” 261). For Claire Sponsler, this type of escape into technology is coupled with a passive acquiescence to environmental destruction; salvation of the ecological is rendered moot in the virtual, a construct with limited potential for shaping our real, material conditions of possibility (“Beyond the Ruins”). Gibson’s immensely popular and influential novels have been similarly maligned as “politically irresponsible” and accused of “harbor[ing] no utopian impulses, offer[ing] no blueprint for progressive social change, and generally evad[ing] the responsibility to imagine futures that will be more democratic than the present” (Ross 150).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Sponsler writes that in Gibson’s earlier works technology had become so perniciously pervasive “that it has altered human perception of the natural world, making that world describable and indeed even visible only within a frame” it provides (“Cyberpunk” 628).

Real greenery is rarely part of Gibson’s scenery. While the cyberpunk *Sprawl* of *Neuromancer*’s trilogy thoroughly erased natural ecosystems (and the cures to future flu they might provide), its cast of augmented misfits and sentient AIs brought

1 Countering this negativity, Graham Murphy cogently considers Gibson’s penchant toward the “glorification of possibility” in his works in “Post/Humanity and the Interstitial: A Glorification of Possibility in Gibson’s Bridge Sequence” (qtd. in Murphy 73).

a new conceptualization of space-time to bear upon the novels, their now-and-then plots, their eruptive, virtual settings, their spatiotemporal *how*. We can still describe the color of the sky, even if only as “the color of television tuned to a dead channel” (*Neuromancer* 3).<sup>2</sup> Where for some this signals a failure of the ecological imaginary, for Gibson it marks new conditions of possibility for the tech-savvy protagonist, the hacker-hero who can tune out or out-tune corporate adversaries in the telescoping time of mediated space. Cyberpunk, which is enjoying renewed interest (*Altered Carbon*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, etc.), spawned a host of reconceptions of the relationships between narrative time and space: the city, the cyber, the cipher.

This rebooting proved so popular that Gibson himself wearied of it. He sought a return to the natural and refuge from the hegemony of convention, explaining in a 2011 interview with David Wallace-Wells for the *Paris Review* that “midcentury mainstream American science fiction had often been triumphalist and militaristic, a sort of folk propaganda for American exceptionalism” (317). Encapsulating the zeitgeist of the second decade of the twenty-first century he elaborates, “I was tired of America-as-the-future, the world as a white monoculture, the protagonist as a good guy from the middle class or above. I wanted there to be more elbow room. I wanted to make room for antiheroes.” In *The Peripheral* he creates this elbow room by revealing the nooks and crannies, the back spaces, like Appalachia, bringing them into the same plane—and the same, flattened, simultaneous “time”—as the bright lights of poshest future London. Borders between worlds come down and the future loses its grip on the past. Poor, rural, disenfranchised veterans take control of their own future, first by imagining it, then by inhabiting their imagined paths, rather than following one set before them. Their embodiment of the posthuman unfurls with the action in a Bakhtinian chronotope, a unique lens that provides the “means to explore the complex, indirect and always mediated relation between art and life” (Holquist 109).

While making room for the humans pushed to the edges of the periphery, Gibson also maps space for the non-human and the ecologically decentered, particularly plants, those living things so often overlooked in what biologists James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler have termed plant blindness.<sup>3</sup> Gibson reported to Wallace-Wells that he “wanted science fiction to be more naturalistic,” calling its elision one of the great failings of the genre (317). “There had been a poverty of

2 A prime and oft-quoted example from *Neuromancer* (1984), this line and others like it reveal that for the residents of their pages, and perhaps for their readers, “television, tuned to a dead channel” modifies “sky” in a way that renders it understandable, even in its alienation from type.

3 Despite Gibson’s attention to the non-technocentric world (and his proclivity toward luminous descriptions) little mention is made of the effect of the jackpot on insect or plant populations, except for the extinction of bees; as Gibson is noted for his detailed world building, and as climatic change will affect all species, it is presumable that those kingdoms suffered fates similar to those of the vertebrates on which he focuses but were elided due to their lower charisma and our general cultural “plant blindness,” as is so commonly the case. See Matthew Hall for a rounded commentary on this phenomenon.

description in much of it,” he explains, elaborating that “[t]he technology depicted was so slick and clean that it was practically invisible. What would any given SF favorite look like if we could crank up the resolution? As it was then, much of it was like video games before the invention of fractal dirt. I wanted to see dirt in the corners.” So he “cranked up the resolution” and with it the revolution in *The Peripheral* casting it with protagonists akin to what David Harvey calls “insurgent architects.” Post-geographical heroes who acknowledge the spatiotemporal processes inherent to their own construction and stand in response to this alienation, from the macro global level to the micro level of the body, insurgent architects overcome alienation by mapping a “privileged site of political resistance and emancipatory politics,” arguing that we must be “prepared to take an equally speculative plunge into some unknown” to ascend above “the objects of historical geography” (Harvey 15, 255). Their plunge out of the static now and never of dystopian human-centered time to more ecocentric time shifts the familiar narrative and mobilizes life at the margins to challenge the neganthropic imaginary. They compost the hyperobjective dread of environmental collapse, moving toward renewal instead. They veer away from seeing the present as already past, already the history of a sky tuned to a dead future, and instead posit a means to a generative futurity, shifting from Gibson’s earlier ecoperipheral cyberpunk purview to a more holistic one in which ecology is at least as much at the forefront of the future as is technology, enmeshing that which had previously been relegated to the margins in his work, both socially and environmentally.

### The Dead-Ended Future

The characters in *The Peripheral*’s near future timeline are hurtling toward annihilation, a sense not lost on its privileged survivors of tomorrow’s tomorrow. These far future denizens have given up on creating anything new, merely co-opting and rewriting the narratives of others in a barren, almost deathless future, caught in a never-ending cycle of melancholic nostalgia and consumption, flattening culture upon itself. Their London is peopled by the rich, those who work for them, human and robotic, and their peripheral bodies—to the extent that it is peopled: about seventy years prior, a series of climactic events, “with no particular beginning and no end, known as the jackpot by those who survived and profited from them devastated human and animal populations [killing] eighty percent of human life” and a good deal of non-human life (319):

No comets crashing, nothing you could really call a nuclear war. Just everything else, tangled in the changing climate: droughts, water shortages, crop failures, honeybees gone like they almost were now, collapse of other keystone species, every last alpha predator gone, antibiotics doing even less than they already did, diseases that were never quite the one big pandemic but big enough to be historical events in themselves. And all of

it around people: how people were, how many of them there were, how they'd changed things just by being there. (321)

The jackpot is known to be androgenic, or caused by humans, and unending: it “got worse and never better and was just expected to, ongoing” (320). Death and the guilt of having caused it preside. How can the post-apocalyptic survivors mark and move through time when all the markers of time beyond “the end” have been erased?—seasons, crops, migrations, it's all out of whack. *That* is the future vision of the far future at the crux of the novel. Against this backdrop we find a ruminating society, its streets filled with time-dead homages to Victoriana, mechanical and genetically modified refurbishments of bygone people and species, and sundry other *memento mori*; enthusiasts try to repurchase their pasts from purveyors of antiquities. It is quite far afield from the protean future as imagined in Gibson's earlier work *Pattern Recognition* (2003), in which protagonist Cayce and the Blue Ant trilogy's namesake Hubertus Bigend discuss futurity unimaginable not because of its “cancellation” but because of its unpredictability. Bigend postulates:

In that sense, we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which ‘now’ was of some greater duration. For us, of course, things can change, so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents’ have insufficient ‘now’ to stand on. (*Pattern* 57)

The sort of change Bigend is talking about happens only once the action of *The Peripheral* catalyzes, shifting both the near and far futures out of their stasis. The “now” of *The Peripheral* is not that of Bigend's grandparents either—its sense of the future is foregone, its sense of the past is avaricious—it is there to consume.

The far future is so nostalgic for a facade of history that it has become surreal, down to the skin. The aptly-named Ash, a polymath personal assistant, whose sepulchral epidermis is “overloaded” with the skins of the reanimated, is netted in this melancholia. Her mourning overtakes all of her surfaces, skinning her, her body an homage to the dead. She is covered in roving black-inked tattoos of animals that largely died out in the period between the first and second timelines of the novel, mired in extinction: “Her hand quite black with tattoos, a riot of wings and horns, every bird and beast of the Anthropocene extinction, overlapping line drawings of a simple yet touching precision,” though without proportion (50). Her tattoos seem a sort of a pointless penance for the ecological wreckage humankind has wrought upon the earth, allusive if ineffectual at best: “the line drawing of a sole albatross, slowly and as if in distant flight, circling her white neck,” an overt allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famed albatross from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798) (52). Coleridge's albatross is hung around a mariner's neck after he shoots it, an ill-omened event that leads to the death of all surrounding him on his ship—he is

blamed for bad stewardship and lives to stand among the ashes of its consequences, just as Ash and the others from her time must.

This sense of faked ecological time can also be seen in the garden of the main far future's setting, at the home of a kleptocrat named Lev Zubov, where even the hostas have "artificial-looking leaves" (288). The real plants appear to be artifice, as anachronistic as their fertilizers, a pair of thylacines Lev had reconstituted from a slurry of DNA, Jurassic Park-style, an imagined act in 2014 when *The Peripheral* was written but a nearer possibility at the time of this writing.<sup>4</sup> These dog-like marsupials roamed the southern hemisphere for four million years until wiped out by intentional human intervention and the after effects of rapacious colonization in 1936. In recent years they have become, much like the dodo, a stand-in for avoidable erasure. As novelist Richard Flanagan puts it, they have come to stand for "a lost object of awe, one more symbol of our feckless ignorance and stupidity" (qtd. in Jarvis 45).

Lev's undead companion animals perhaps best typify the far future's "untimeliness" both in their beings and in their aestheticization; they are described as "[c]arnivorous kangaroos, in wolf outfits with Cubist stripes" (392). This description may seem a throwaway line, but it illuminates much of the aesthetic thrust of the text: this devolving description loses precision as it winds on, the reference to Cubism alluding to the modernist aesthetic form that flattens three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional ones, reduced to simplified, geometrical shapes, to provide all-at-once perspectives, showing things as they are, at the same time.<sup>5</sup> For early Cubists, the sense of a fourth dimension connected and democratized spaces, moving away from the accepted patterns and representations of reality, bringing both darkness and light, the seen and typically unseen, to the foreground. But in this novel of conjoined timelines the fourth dimension itself is only an accessorizing illusion. It is paraded as an "outfit," as tattoos, its depth and dimensions replaced by oxymoronic simulacra. If thylacines can be reconstituted or albatrosses reanimated on the human body, what, then, is extinction? If there is no death, what is life?

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4 Just recently, scientists farmed stable DNA from a thylacine joey that had been preserved in alcohol, allowing them to sequence its genome, if not, yet, make pets of them. See Charles Feigin et al., "Genome of the Tasmanian Tiger Provides Insights into the Evolution and Demography of an Extinct Marsupial Carnivore" in *Nature Ecology & Evolution* (2018).

5 This is particularly true as some early modernists, including Guillaume Apollinaire, connected the experiments in form to the fourth dimension, either in terms of an unseen theoretical fourth spatial dimension, postulated in the mid-1770s by Joseph-Louis Lagrange, or, more applicably here, as the space-time continuum formulated by Einstein's math professor Hermann Minkowski, which predated Einstein's own theories of relativity. For commentary on early Modernists' conceptions of the fourth dimension see Linda Dalrymple Henderson's body of scholarship, including the representative "The Image and Imagination of the Fourth Dimension in Twentieth-Century Art and Culture", and Chiara Ambrosio's "Cubism and the Fourth Dimension."

Instead of this “cubism” freeing them, it creates an atmosphere of uncanny facades with little depth; there is no there there.

For Ash and those in her timeline, the past is a constant companion that has wiped out imaginings of a future beyond melancholic, two-dimensional looping, a carnivalesque grotesquerie, or a plaything. Her animated bodily space, like that of the thylacines, reflects the simultaneity of ecological catastrophe on her lived present as well as the impossibility of seeing its “hyperobjectification” all at once, the shifting lines fusing the past and present and holding her in that liminal phase. This is somewhat akin to the “literary cubism” Graham Harman finds infusing the language of Lovecraft’s horror: “language is overloaded by a gluttonous excess of surfaces and aspects of the thing” with “such a multitude of surfaces that it can no longer be identified with any mere summation of them” (25, 241). Though Gibson’s “literary cubism” functions more through ekphrasis than narrative style, it demonstrates a similarly overwhelmed sense of incoherent ecological time now beyond human control.

### Stubbed Time

The novel opens in an ambiguous, small town in the United States in our near future, the mid-twenty-first century, teetering on the edge of the sixth massive extinction, populated by the disenfranchised of the now, including poor, rural individuals such as Flynne and Burton Fisher. Before she interacts with, and thereby inoculates herself against, the “dead channel” of her alternative future, Flynne, like those on a trajectory for the decayed futures of cyberpunk, cannot imagine a present outside her own and accepts the specter of personal and environmental annihilation by default. She is caught in what Mark Fisher (after Franco “Bifo” Berardi) calls “the slow cancellation of the future” rather than a vision of tomorrow.<sup>6</sup> For Fisher, as for the novel’s far-future kleptocrats, “we’ve become increasingly incapable of producing the ‘new’, the ‘now’ and postulating the ‘next’. At the end of history, all that is left is an endless return of dead forms and failed futures, haunting us from a grave we keep digging up,” as Andrew Broaks puts it. This “cancellation of the future” by the future and for the future resonates in its rejection of the natural in favor of a flattening of space and time that allows everything to be seen and controlled at once.

The lotus-eaters of the early twenty-second century with whom she collides cannot imagine any other present or past. They enter Flynne’s world, seventy-odd years in their past, for a lark, uncoupling it from their own time and rendering it a “stub,” an alternate timeline accessible via a shadowy “server” based in China. As one far-future character points out, the term “stub” “sounds short. Nasty. Brutish,”

6 See *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014) for a lengthier discussion of “hauntology.” Fisher discusses his borrowing and use of the phrase “the slow cancellation of the new” in a conversation with Berardi in *Frieze* magazine.



asking, “Wouldn’t one expect the fork’s new branch to continue to grow?” Another answers that their interfering is, to put it baldly, imperialism. Ash explains, “We’re third-worlding alternate continua. Calling them stubs makes that a bit easier” (103).<sup>7</sup> Much in the same way the “developed” world tends to view the “developing” world as peripheral to its own centrality, the far futurists see the past timeline as there to manipulate, commodify, and dispose of, past tense even in their present due to their socioeconomic status, non-central locations, and vulnerability.<sup>8</sup> Calling them stubs connotes a futurelessness that renders them harvestable, or whimsies, as more than one far futurian finds. And yet, due to its temporal disjunction, this ‘stub’ is a flurry of time and space, it is where the future and its past meet, abut, and ultimately intertwine, eventually extricating themselves from their temporal rigor mortis. At first the far futurians’ influence on their once-past exerts a mapping, controlling force. The stubs they create have expiration dates like or before their own. The far future’s sense of torpor haunts the earlier timeline, obscuring alternate paths—but, in the end, it does not account for the power of the ecological imaginary. As such, it fails to ultimately paralyze the actors from the penetrated past it calls poltergeists, a name that gestures to their imagined holistic impotence.

At first, despite the fecundity around them, the disenfranchised of the past (like so many of our present) feel they live in a place time forgot, trapped in the resin of history and unable to move forward, except toward inevitable destruction. As focalized through Flynnne at the start of the novel, we see the world as static, held in place, unable to move or evolve. An early passage focuses on Flynnne’s brother Burton’s antique 1977 Airstream trailer on the property where her family has lived for generations, the inside of which was “the color of Vaseline, LEDs buried in it, bedded in Hefty Mart amber” with variable treasures including “stubs of burnt matches,” “a rusty jeweler’s screwdriver,” and “a 2009 quarter” frozen in it. There is even a cigarette. Yet for all these things as we see them, it’s an ecological shrine. It holds petroleum in the Vaseline, mineable and mined metal in the coin as well as the tool, and its rust, phosphorous and wood and spent fire in the matches, dried tobacco and

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7 Gibson has stated his debt to Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner’s 1985 short story “Mozart in Mirrorshades” in the construction of *The Peripheral*. It is about the present (or a version thereof) colonizing, looting, and ultimately destabilizing the seventeenth century, featuring Mozart and Marie Antoinette. In it, the protagonist sleeps with and is betrayed by Marie Antoinette; Mozart gets in on the looting of his time in order to give up the past for a stab at profiting in the future. Sterling himself refers to it as “aggressive political satire” in the story’s preface in the 1986 anthology *Mirrorshades* (223). René T. A. Lysloff provides an in-depth analysis of “the often adversarial relationship between technology and culture” within the short story in “Mozart in Mirrorshades: Ethnomusicology, Technology, and the Politics of Representation” (208).

8 This comment would not have been made possible without the work of Mary Louise Pratt, whose theorizations of the contact zone seminally expanded conceptualizations of the “center” and “periphery.” See especially *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992.



pulped trees in the cigarette—altered nature has been caught in resin by the humans who mutated it and rendered it into stalled objects, just as they themselves were stuck being seen, and discarded as, a dead past by their future (and by themselves) before they were gone. It is, at first, this sense of generalized stasis that leaves those in the near future vulnerable to the machinations of the far future. Space and time are held in place. There is no adventuring nor growth and none is possible, pinned as they are by their projected non-future.

### Skinning Time

How then to avoid paralysis in the face of the seemingly inevitable crush of environmental collapse? What shakes Flynnne and the rest of the near futurians from deer-in-the-headlights petrification? From becoming flattened in time as those in their no-longer future were? One answer posited by the novel is through mindfulness of time and the environment, through the shaping and tracing of an ecotope, emphasized here through plant time. Common use of “ecotope” refers to the smallest spatial unit of landscape, sometimes called a “patch,” but here I use it as a play on the chronotope, Mikhail Bakhtin’s term for the time-space of narrative. Chronotopes do not just reflect but “shape plot by shaping time and space” (Chambers 77). As James Gleick points out, “spacetime is just what it is, whereas chronotopes admit as many possibilities as our imaginations allow” (277). I use ecotope to emphasize an ecological dimension to space and time, following Timo Müller’s vision for an ecologically-invested chronotope. He argues that an environmental approach would emphasize relationships with the natural environment to “recover a historically specific perception of the environment that had a considerable cultural influence in its time and can help disseminate an ecologically viable perception of space today” (602). If, during the spatiotemporal expression of the chronotope, “[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history”—we must consider the flesh it takes on (Bakhtin 84). According to Bakhtin, “the image of man [sic] is always intrinsically chronotopic” (85) but does that mean that the chronotope must be in the “image of man [sic]”?

The ecotope arises in the text before Flynnne acknowledges it—or its conditions of possibility—but it is visible to the reader. When she rides along to view the corpses of her family’s would-have-been assassins, the far future’s attempt to pause her arc forever, Flynnne verbalizes the location as a previous no-place that had suddenly become a someplace to her because of human interventions (including murder, tent building, forensics). According to the far future’s narrative, this site of intersection should be about the far future’s intervention on her time, its insatiable chronophageousness. But the text itself privileges the natural; the passage begins with and emphasizes the Queen Anne’s lace covering the area, only ending with the murder scene, an afterthought in ecological time. The flowers even cover over the

human-cut ditch; much like Carl Sandburg's 1926 anti-war poem "Grass," they would soon "cover all" the marks of the murders, carrying on no matter what the humans did to one another, how little they remembered of their atrocities, or what shape the future took.

There was Queen Anne's lace grown up flat and level, a carpet of flowers, from the bottom of the roadside ditch, hiding the fact that there was a ditch at all. She must have walked past this spot hundreds of times, going to school, then coming back, but it hadn't been a place. Now, she thought, looking at the lights, the square white tent, it looked like they were making a commercial, but really it was a murder scene. (*Peripheral* 113)

The murder scene shows a cancelled human future or two, sure, but also a continuous present, awash in botanical reproductive organs that had been there before the carnage and would be there long after the temporary white tent and the bodies were all swept away.

The markers for reimagined mapping are there, but Flynnne has not yet realized them, still caught in her thanatotic vision. The reader, however, is able to recognize the ecotope's potential through the machinations of the narrative. (This stands in contrast to the escapist cyberspace of Gibson's earlier works.) The reader, too, takes on the role of insurgent architect, moving between the technocentric lens of the self-stubbed future and the ecocentric lens of the initially-suppressed future's past.

We discover the possibilities for action exist in her past: it has yet to be "tuned to a dead channel"; one simply has to recognize them. Instead of its metallic form taking over the landscape, Burton's trailer is described as a "giant grub" on the first page, the aluminum casing suddenly filled with the potential to change; Flynnne translates the mindboggling nanobot contraption that disassembles a woman from the future as "the black egg case of an almost-extinct animal called a skate, that she'd seen on a beach in South Carolina," though her mother had wondrously called it "a mermaid's purse"; and she describes her brother's war-torn comrade Conner not as someone who had been touched by the unfathomable abyss of war but as "a boy who was half a machine, like a centaur made out of motorcycle," turning his loss of limbs into a heroic, mythic trait that makes him a liminal, untamed figure in a time of corporate construction, demechanizing him through a return to his mammalian self (1, 45, 85). But these ecocentric visions and their potentialities, visible to the reader cued for technocentric visions, escape Flynnne until she is confronted with the jarring reality of the far-future's engineered landscape of stopped-time trees. This key moment turns her toward her own conditions of possibility.

The trees of the far future have been blasted of their own individuality and shaped into playhouses for the survivors of the jackpot. Instead of standing as monuments to time, they are bastions of timelessness. When Flynnne reenters the future in her peripheral body, she sees that the trees have been grown into houses, their unnatural forms only overshadowed by their unnatural temporality. This is

shocking, coming from a world less alienated from itself than she had realized until faced with the future.<sup>9</sup>

‘Holy shit,’ she said, ‘is that a house, or trees?’  
 [Wilf] looked over his shoulder, toward the greenway. ‘A house grown from trees. A sort of playhouse, actually. Public.’  
 ‘Those trees look old.’  
 ‘They aren’t. Their growth was augmented by assemblers. Sped up, then stabilized. They were that size when I was a child.’  
 ‘Doors, windows—’  
 ‘They grew that way, directed by assemblers.’ (343)

Flynn is shocked by the untimeliness of the trees. She realizes here how out of sync and simulated, how short on stories, the far future has become. In replacing the malls along the high street with such timeless beasts, Gibson shows nature fabricated, just a skin for the street without substance, a playhouse rather than a home, a neganthropic future waiting for the harvest.

It has long been acknowledged that plants occupy a sense of time somewhere between deep time, geological time and human time. It is their sessile nature, the lack of observable movement in most plants, *mimosa pudica* et al. aside, which has been the bedrock upon which human dismissal of plant intelligence has been laid, reports Anthony Trewavas (10-11). John Charles Ryan, with a nod to ecophilosopher Michael Marder, suggests, “a conception of time as announced by vegetal events—of plants being in service to human temporality” as are these treehouses, “risks minimizing ‘the time of the plants themselves,’ defined as the endemic seasons, rhythms, pulsations, and scales of vegetal nature” (173). In *Plant-Thinking* (2013), Marder reminds us that “vegetal time passes in qualitatively distinct modes and rhythms” compared to human time (107), a truism widely observed, particularly in indigenous populations, yet we try to master it (through agriculture, domestication, etc.) because to control temporality is to control everything. “Mastery over an entity’s time is immediately translatable into mastery over its being,” he writes, finding:

The only effective resistance imaginable would be one that insists on the non-synchronicity, the asymmetry, and the non-contemporaneity of human and vegetal temporalities and that releases the time of plants back to the contingency of the other, spelling out its meaning, time and again,

9 Trees are still trees in Flynn’s time, where nearly every important conversation seems to happen under one, a silent third party, marking time rather than mocking it. She is able to visualize herself more clearly because of them: in one early scene she reflects, “And it was like she could see herself there, on the gray gravel in front of Jimmy’s, and the tall old cottonwoods on either side of the lot, trees older than her mother, older than anybody” (85). Gibson begins the sentence with a conjunction which textually underscores the continuity of Flynn’s vantage and those who came before her, including her mother, through the “tall old cottonwoods.”

according to the singular context of its embeddedness. Hence, the locus of resistance would be the time of plants not measurable in human terms, that is to say, in terms of the movements proper to human beings and their kind of soul. (Marder 102-103)

This resistance can move humans away from not just their domination of vegetation but also their own thralldom, stemming from rigid Enlightenment paradigms or self-erased futurity.<sup>10</sup>

Trees are innate timekeepers, recording the weather, human events, telling us truths with their rings about what and how the world has changed; they exist in their own timescapes at a remove from the human.<sup>11</sup> What happens to the time tales trees grow when they are artificially accelerated, as are these assembler-augmented examples? Their details blur and we lose their stories, as tree farms today increasingly report: lumber milled from old growth trees is more stable, stronger, and more rot-resistant than that from farmed trees because of the heartwood developed at their cores and the density of their rings. Farmed trees have widely spaced rings that provide little support—or phytographic narratives. Assembled trees might have none at all. According to Marder, “[t]he commodification of the plant’s time, nearly nullifying the wait for its development toward ripeness, parasitically exploits the heteronomy of vegetal temporality when commodity logic turns into the plant’s other, and finally into the source of its meaning” (101). Faced by these manifestations of the future’s ecological wreckage and the distortion of the trees’ self-narrating abilities, Flynne can no longer glibly accept the similar non-future of her (and their) future. It was a human-centric perspective that facilitated the so-called jackpot extinction event; seeing only themselves led to a world where only humans (and the occasional assembled tree, thylacine, and tattooed bird) were left. Their stories turned to stubs, ending in an abyss. Acknowledging the lived experiences and alternative timescales of other lives resists impotent neganthropic ruminations. Is it enough to shift the trajectory of the human species from the fate of the far future? Gibson refuses to answer. But it is enough to change Flynne’s flattened-by-hyperobjects perspective, allowing her to see the world around herself differently, able to move forward at least, rather than accepting stagnation.

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10 For excellent discussions of the roles of colonial visions of temporality and ways in which non-Western delineations of seasons such as “sprinter” create counter-colonial temporalities in Australian thought and culture, see John Charles Ryan’s *Plants in Contemporary Poetry* (2018), Mike Donaldson’s “The End of Time? Aboriginal Temporality and the British Invasion of Australia” (1996), and Timothy John Entwisle’s *Sprinter and Sprummer: Australia’s Changing Seasons* (2014).

11 Patrícia Vieira writes compellingly of phytography in “Phytographia: Literature as Plant Writing” and elsewhere, though, it is worth noting, the term did not originate with her use.

### Ecocentric Insurgency

Gibson's envirocentric lens even shapes Flynn's syntax at times into a multiplicitous purview, more like William Dean Howells's "photographic school of fiction," as exemplified in *London Films* (1905), than Harman's literary cubism.<sup>12</sup> She takes on the role of his earlier hacker hero. Instead of exploring coded cyberspace, she traverses her present and future on branching data, bridging the seemingly distant future and her "stubbed" present through a new ecological purview. Back in her own time after spending a spell in an art gallery in the future, Flynn begins to see what she has where she is, of what her home is composed. Sitting in an outhouse she pauses, "[I]stened. Sound of bugs. Creek rushing. Wind in the trees. Went into the toilet, the spring on the door twanging. Undid her jeans, sat there in the dark, a universe away from Picasso. Remembered to toss some sawdust down into the hole when she was done," interacting with her ecosystem on a bricolage of levels (216). She is able to see the present as a multidimensional possibility, her description like an aspect-to-aspect transition in comics, pulsing across the senses and pausing across planes instead of forcing them all together.

Here Gibson synthesizes romantic and realist paradigms, much as Mark Twain does in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), creating a sense of wonder that dissolves the disaffected apathy pushing the near future to the sixth great extinction and presents the hope of a Possibly Ever After. While Wilf explains the environmental ruin between their timelines via a robotic peripheral in her time, Flynn "looked across the silver lawn... to where moon shadows lay, past stunted boxwoods and the stump of a concrete birdbath they'd pretended was a dragon's castle," her ability to see the fantastic of her present pressing her to question "if it could mean anything, really, when somebody told you something like that. When it was his past and your future" rather than accepting that her signed and sealed doom was being described (320). She sees Wilf's ominous future as both real and unreal, perhaps a trick of the light, her transformatory imagination reenvisioning his cataclysmic presagements: "The shadows on the lawn were black holes, bottomless, or like velvet had been spread, perfectly flat" (321). This scene is at once telescoped through Eden, the stars, and domestic place. Limitless space and time merge together in her yard, a cartographic symbiosis of possibility. Unlike the negatively leveled future, in part through her immersion in a plant-time framed future, Flynn cycles and digests the elements surrounding her, processing them, deriving nutrition from them, and then moving on from them, rather than allowing her system to become blocked as it has in the machinic peripheral body she wears when projecting into the far future. It cannot even eat. Through this perspectival mindfulness, she composts her surroundings, part of a symbiotic system rather than holding herself outside of

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12 In *London Films* Howells creates a filmic, shimmering, moving path built of words rather than images, which he called "the photographic school of fiction."

it, abstracted, or trying to distance herself from it, similar to Donna Haraway's call to enrich the future by composting the past in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.

Much like Flynne and her cohort before their catalyzing realizations, most readers have simply accepted *The Peripheral* as an alternative history novel even though all of its temporalities are tied to the future. It feels like one. And when the timelines meet and break off, technically, Flynne's time does become an alternative history for Wilf's future. Yet this term privileges the future in a way unbecoming of a split time novel. Besides, as Karen Hellekson writes, alternative histories typically explain the world "as it might be, as it could have been, or even as it should have been" (30). *The Peripheral* deals less with the standard "what ifs" of alternate history than the rarer "if thens" of alternative futurity, for *both* branching timelines. By the end of the novel Flynne has reoriented to the ecotopic spacetime of her narrative through her abutment with the unlived vegetal lives before her, cutting herself and her time free of the crushing bounds of her once-projected future and, in doing so, looking toward an alternate future instead of seeing her present as always-already-past.

In *The Peripheral*, William Gibson makes a shift from his usual technocentric lens, instead emphasizing ecological time and space. In doing so, he bridges social and environmental peripheries as a potential "cure" for the neganthropocenic future flu and creates an insurgent architect hero who is able to "hack" time, finding an alternative future for her once doomed present. This is not to read William Gibson's *The Peripheral* as utterly anti-technological, dystopian nor utopian. In fact, Gibson has been adamant that to read *The Peripheral*'s ending as "happy" is to misread it, suggesting to Jonathan Sturgeon in an online interview with *Flavorwire* that it may even be "a litmus test for sociopolitical sophistication." It is, however, somewhat hopeful: the two timelines end up merged together in a fecund stub, neither a clean, dead future nor a dirty, fertile past but a symbiotic temporal environment, separate yet mutually supportive, made more visible to themselves and to one another through a remapping of time's potentialities, and able to look past themselves to the wider ecological space-times in which they are enmeshed.

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## What Was Expected of William Gibson's Early Fiction: Themes in Negative Reception

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**Abstract:** The article presents various reader responses to Gibson's early fiction, ranging from reviews, through general discussions of Gibson and cyberpunk, through writings by fans, to scholarly articles. Most of the texts under discussion are relatively recent. The aim of the analysis was to determine what is the function of Gibson's work nowadays, and what stylistic and thematic features matter for today's readers. The conclusion is that Gibson's *Neuromancer* has been treated as an epic work, performing an "epic incantation" comparable to the functions and stylistics of Walt Whitman's nation-building poetry, but critics have so far been preoccupied mostly with the ideological aspects of the novel, rather than its literary qualities.

**Keywords:** *Neuromancer*, cyberpunk, science fiction, reader response, reception study, horizon of expectations

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Critical reception of William Gibson's fiction often focuses on its important contribution as paradigm-setters, inventors of science fiction. Most critical and negative discussions recognize these merits too, and thus, paradoxically, even when reviews are bad, they still contain some praise. This can sometimes lead to a mixture of positivity and negativity in one response, especially in fan reviews or casual forum posts, as in the following remark, meant as a defense and favorable appraisal: "So it's not that he wanted to break the mold, he MADE the mold."<sup>1</sup> Many negative reviews seem to share a more or less willing acceptance of Gibson's mold, but they otherwise fall into interesting and dissimilar groups. The present discussion is an attempt to systematize negative reviews and critical responses to Gibson's fiction into categories based on themes, response platforms (academic and non-academic ones), and the possible interpretative communities that the various types of responses might represent. The main issues in the responses are easily discernible. For one thing, since Gibson's most influential fiction was written a relatively long time ago, it is sometimes criticized in terms of obsolescence. Secondly and by extension, some critics note that reality has exceeded Gibson's imagination in one way or another.

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1 Rick [pseud]. Blog post comment on "Neuromancer." *A Bad Idea Poorly Executed*. Matthew Smith. 5 Feb. 2017. Web. 12 Dec. 2017. <http://thehappysmith.blogspot.com/2005/09/neuromancer.html?showComment=1486309614357#c391742597779886778>.

Thirdly, there are numerous negative opinions about the political connotations of Gibson's fiction. Fourthly, his representation of female characters has been described as stereotypical, unfair, or even dangerous to women. Similar opinions were given about his representation of Asian and Russian (post-Soviet) characters and settings. Finally, Gibson has been sometimes criticized as a not quite successful, but promising postmodern author who failed to live up to his artistic promise. A more detailed survey of such negative opinions will follow, with a few general conclusions.

The present analysis will be conducted using reader-response theory: the survey will identify the "horizon of expectations" (Jauss 12) of Gibson's readers. The result, which will be further elaborated on in the conclusion, is that the style of Gibson's descriptions in his early fiction answered to a particular type of reader's expectations, whereas his more recent fiction did not. The style of Gibson's early descriptions, which might be characterized as mimetic incantation, posited him as a prophet, or even a leader, of Cyberpunk when it was conceived of as a cultural and social movement. Gibson's more recent fiction did not fulfil this function, which is related (perhaps as a result) to the stylistic change into a more parodic, intertextual and discursive style. This perhaps accounts for the relative lack of interest in Gibson's fiction on certain critical platforms. The general conclusion is that the writer's status has radically changed in contemporary literature and culture.

The theoretical approach to Gibson's texts and their critics is informed by Hans Robert Jauss's well known notion of "horizon of expectations": readers approach a text with a set of expectations, shaped by their previous reading experience, and by general factors, such as education and upbringing. Historically significant events in literary history are apparently correlated with a breach of readers' expectations; when a text falls outside of the general public's horizon of expectations, an unconventional work is likely to be misunderstood. Jauss invokes, as an important example, the obscenity trial against Gustave Flaubert after the publication of *Madame Bovary* in 1857 (Jauss 17-18). Flaubert was famously accused of encouraging women to be adulterous, a charge which he allegedly addressed by claiming that he tried to do exactly the opposite. Jauss observes that Flaubert's work did not stand out in terms of graphic description of passion and hypocrisy; there was a similar novel by Georges Feydeau, which did not provoke an obscenity trial, but was widely read, accepted by readers, and subsequently forgotten. What made *Madame Bovary* provocative was its unprecedented, impersonal style, and the use of irony in the impersonal rendition of characters' attitudes through semi-indirect speech (18). In 1857, apparently, French readers did not know how to read this kind of fiction, which would only later become a standard example of literary realism. Consequently, Flaubert's contemporary public had read its own concerns into the text, trying to respond to those elements which fell within their horizon of expectations. Then, gradually, small groups of readers shifted the general horizon of expectations, and prepared ground for the general acceptance of *Madame Bovary* as a great novel (18). In science fiction studies, and in studies of popular literature, when reader-response approach is occasionally adopted, it is

usually with a focus on genre identification and cultural difference in reception, e.g. in Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi's study of American and Malaysian horror fiction (2015).

Now, with reference to Gibson, there is a general critical recognition of *Neuromancer* as an important novel, both by academic critics and by fan readers, and this recognition is voiced today as well, which would mean that the work fell, and still falls, within the horizon of expectations of the general public. At the same time, however, the themes of very many critical responses discussed below suggest that readers focus on Gibson's themes, rather than the use of language, intertextual references, and figurative imagery. In particular, Gibson's descriptions in his early novels seem particularly marked for style, a remarkably epic style:

‘The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games,’ said the voice-over, ‘in early graphics programs and military experimentation with cranial jacks.’ On the Sony, a two-dimensional space war faded behind a forest of mathematically generated ferns, demonstrating the spacial possibilities of logarithmic spirals; cold blue military footage burned through, lab animals wired into test systems, helmets feeding into fire control circuits of tanks and war planes. Cyberspace. 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 43)

Arguably, the characteristic style of his early descriptions, with sublime and ecstatic tone, epic catalogues, anaphoras, and long sentences, fell within a horizon of expectations of readers who treated *Neuromancer* as an epic text. It is as if readers approached Gibson's descriptions as incantations in the manner of poetic incantations by Walt Whitman: an epic author incantates its reader group, providing it with aspirations and hopes that this will help readers shape their future collective identity, an identity that was emerging under the influence of the epic (Trecker 13). Consequently, several critics read such passages as if they were stylistically transparent: many critical comments focus on the world represented in Gibson's early texts, debating Gibson's fiction as if it was historical writing, or prediction/prophecy, or a cultural manifesto. As Gibson's fiction grew increasingly ironic and less transparent stylistically, it provoked fewer responses of the five types discussed below.

### **Temporal Obsolescence: Future Is Old Now**

The first line of criticism, which usually refers to *Neuromancer*, has become commonplace now: critics compare Gibson's future with present developments, usually arriving at a conclusion that some of the writer's anticipated phenomena have become commonplace now (more commonplace than they were in the novel),

whereas others failed to materialize. This is not strictly criticism, and it echoes similar discussions of George Orwell's *1984* written in the 1980s: the critics either try to determine what Gibson got right and wrong, or complain that the present time somehow has not lived up to the promise of Gibson's fiction. Such criticism is often voiced by journalists and fans, rather than academic critics, and is often accompanied by nostalgic comments about youth and middle age. Daniel H. Wilson's *Where's My Jetpack* (2007) is a representative example of this trend in criticism. Perhaps the most eloquent criticism of this sort consists in comparing Gibson's descriptions of cyberspace with the contemporary practice of web browsing. Obviously, the descriptions in *Neuromancer* seem much more fun than what most Web users get today, when the Internet is physically still a desk job. In particular, the ecstatic tone of the following description (which is one among many) seems to match some of the contemporary critical responses conceived in terms of *Neuromancer* as an unfulfilled promise. In this case, it is the promise of mobility and world-wide accessibility:

Case punched for the Swiss banking sector, feeling a wave of exhilaration as cyberspace shivered, blurred, gelled. The Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority was gone, replaced by the cool geometric intricacy of Zurich commercial banking. He punched again, for Berne.

'Up,' the construct said. 'It'll be high.'

They ascended lattices of light, levels strobing, a blue flicker.

That'll be it, Case thought.

Wintermute was a simple cube of white light, that very simplicity suggesting extreme complexity.

'Don't look much, does it?' the Flatline said. 'But just you try and touch it.'

'I'm going in for a pass, Dixie.'

'Be my guest.'

Case punched to within four grid points of the cube. Its blank face, towering above him now, began to seethe with faint internal shadows, as though a thousand dancers whirled behind a vast sheet of frosted glass. (Gibson 93)

In a recent study of geographic interpretations of the Web, Aharon Kellerman mentions Gibson in the chapter titled "The Internet as Space" (21-33), which distinguishes subspaces in the cyberspace: inside the "virtual space," "cyberspace," and "the Internet," and numerous other (all abstract entities) there is the sad reality of "Internet screen-space," (29), a confusing stream of images which impedes the user's aggregation of cognitive maps. In 2009 Mark Sullivan flatly concluded that Gibson's descriptions were "very good reading, for sure, but very future-tense technology." Thus, Sullivan admits that Gibson's predictions appear often very impressive and relevant today, but in a slightly paradoxical way. Sullivan also remarks that Gibson's cyberspace is obsolete because some of his most impressive ideas (the simstim and the rogue AI's) have not materialized yet, and some of the novel's technology, according

to Sullivan, is unlikely to materialize at all (the Constructs). The result is that Gibson's vision is increasingly divergent from today's practice of Internet-use, with the advent of smartphones and tablets and with the rise of social media.

However, a more elaborate notion of obsolescence is constructed when critics complain about the level of commercialization and customer-disempowerment in the Web. In this respect, it is Gibson's characters that apparently have become old-fashioned today. It has been observed that character development in *Neuromancer* was influenced by hard-boiled detective fiction and by Jewish mysticism, both probably contributing an idealistic pursuit of truth as a theme of the novel. Which is "oh, so 1980s": Kym Thorne and Alexander Kouzmin voice this type of criticism, comparing the "egoism" of Web 1.0 to "narcissism" of Web 2.0 (2008). The "egoistic" users of the Internet were those who tried to develop their own, self-reliant domains, if not empires, on the Web, either as developers or as hackers. A "narcissistic" user, on the other hand, craves popularity on social media, and creates a self-image to be admired by other users. The platform of this activity, the social media, is usually beyond the user's control, or even interest, since it is the self-image that matters. Apparently, conformism, web surveillance and customer training on social media have replaced the spirit of self-reliance and individual development of the earlier Web age. But again, rather than practicing literary criticism, Thorne and Kouzmin are writing about the history of market administration, treating Gibson's texts as examples of cultural attitudes, and criticizing them (presumably it is about early Web users) for lack of foresight and undue optimism.

### **Non-Temporal Obsolescence: Truth Got Stranger Than Fiction**

Another type of negative assessment focuses on Gibson (and Bruce Sterling) as a paradigm-setter in the 1990s, not only for writers, but for culture in general: the reviewers write about lifestyle, fashion, and popular philosophy influenced by Cyberpunk and steampunk. Such reviews are often tinged with nostalgia for something that seemed the way of the future in the 1990s, but is somehow lost now. For example, Damien Walter asked, on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Neuromancer's* publication, "whatever happened to Cyberpunk?", describing Gibson's future as a "distant digital past," and noting that some of the bleak prospects described in the novel have actually exceeded Gibson's expectations. Web marketing, for example, has become more pervasive according to Walter: "I'm guessing being a teenager is like living 98% of your life in a digital mind control that is no longer experimental." Ironically, Walter mentions today's Cyberpunks' ignorance of Gibson's novel in the opening of his article. Apparently today Cyberpunk is a pre-packaged self-image for fashion consumers:

The girl in the black vinyl minidress, shit-kicker boots and neon hair braids told me she was a Cyberpunk. 'Wow,' I answered, shouting over the club's



thumping techno-trance beat, 'I love William Gibson.' I may as well have namechecked Samuel Taylor Coleridge at a Metallica gig. She stared at me for a while, then shouted back 'I'm not into the Bee Gees.' (Walter)

Walter concludes that Cyberpunk has degraded "from a dissent influence to a worn-out subgenre" and that "[t]he cultural moment that Cyberpunk described has passed, and the future Gibson wrote towards has now become the past." While this is not literary criticism of Gibson's fiction, it targets "hundreds of books [which] co-opted Gibson's style but entirely missed his message," and by extension might be perhaps read as a disparagement of negative influence of *Neuromancer* on cultural fashions. Again, this type of criticism seems to be less frequently (if at all) voiced on academic platforms, and to be more common in newspapers, general magazines or blogs. More convincing, from the point of view of scholarly research, versions of this type of criticism will be discussed below.

### Marxist Criticism

Some critics find fault in Gibson's ideology: his representation of the future has been described as dystopian and fatalistic, and consequently anti-revolutionary, his women characters seem undeveloped, to say the least, and his representation of foreign settings, especially Asian ones, has been criticized along post-colonial lines.

Sometimes, this type of criticism targets an external, emerging threat as well as Gibson's representation of it, so that it is not clear whether Gibson's texts are useful warnings against, or perhaps complicit products of the workings of international capital. Thus, Tony Myers complained that

The realization of Gibson's cyberspace, then, has devastating effects. In trying to concatenate the relationships between the individual and the totality, cyberspace subjects the latter to the imaginary dynamic of the former. The operations of this dynamic result in the subjectification of the totality, and both it and the individual subject merge into an absolute. The consequence of this is that, lacking any point of opacity in the signifying chain, the subject also disappears. (Myers 909)

It is not clear whether Gibson's cyberspace is meant here as the content of his novels, or as the contemporary Internet, and whether Gibson contributed to the disappearance of subjectivity or only prophesied about what Myers thought was happening in 2001.

Perhaps more convincingly, Joel Monssen Nordström argued that *Neuromancer* is a sort of opiate for the masses, persuading them to abandon all hope. On closer examination, the issue seems more complicated: writing in 2012, about a novel from 1984, the author basically suggested that the novel's seminal and long-lasting influence contributed to the alleged present pessimism about the rise of commodification and decline of revolutionary resistance, but his conclusions were far



from satisfactory. A similar line of reasoning was offered by Valerie R. Renegar and George N. Dionisopoulos, whose argument is based on two concepts from Kenneth Burke's *Attitudes toward History* (1937): the "comic posture" and "democracy inaction" (325). The comic posture is an attitude of self-reflection and self-directed sense of humor, which allows for increased consciousness and self-corrective criticism of a society. The comic posture is a means of overcoming "democracy inaction," which relates to passivity and conformism that can affect democratic societies. The authors of the article conclude that Gibson's use of incongruity and irony fosters self-reflective social criticism among readers, and thus the critics praise *Neuromancer* as "comic corrective" (337).

Similar criticism, though not always directly aimed at Gibson, was provoked by what might be described as commodification of Cyberpunk in the 1990s, when Timothy Leary announced that "the PC is the LSD of the 1990s" (1993), creating a somehow creepy reference to Marx's opiates. As it is known, Leary was enthusiastic, in a half-baked way, about cyberculture, cyberdelia, and what not, comparing hackers to mythic figures, and even mentioning Prometheus, Quetzalcoatl, and Gorbachev as members of the same glamorous rebel band (Stockton 593). Such attitudes quickly provoked criticism, some of it from former acolytes, as exemplified by RU Sirius's dramatic statement in a 1996 interview:

Well, anybody who doesn't believe that we're trapped hasn't taken a good look around. We're trapped in a sort of mutating multinational corporate oligarchy that's not about to go away. We're trapped by the limitations of our species. We're trapped in time. At the same time identity, politics, and ethics have long turned liquid... Cyberculture (a meme that I'm at least partly responsible for generating, incidentally) has emerged as a gleeful apologist for this kill-the-poor trajectory of the Republican revolution. You find it all over *Wired* [an online magazine]—this mix of chaos theory and biological modeling that is somehow interpreted as scientific proof of the need to devolve and decentralize the social welfare state while also deregulating and empowering the powerful, autocratic, multinational corporations. You've basically got the breakdown of nation states into global economies simultaneously with the atomization of individuals or their balkanization into disconnected sub-groups, because digital technology conflates space while decentralizing communication and attention. The result is a clear playing field for a mutating corporate oligarchy, which is what we have. I mean, people think it's really liberating because the old industrial ruling class has been liquefied and it's possible for young players to amass extraordinary instant dynasties. But it's savage and inhuman. Maybe the wired elite think that's hip. But then don't go around crying about crime in the streets or pretending to be concerned with ethics. (Lebkowsky)

With reference to *Neuromancer*, Sirius's agonizing comment might mean that the novel itself was part of a neoliberal political agenda, or a downright promotion of

selfishness, or at least contributed indirectly to the “savage and inhuman” attitudes displayed (presumably not always) in *Wired*. Such comments were voiced already in the mid-1990s by authors of essays collected by James Brook and Iain A. Boal, where criticism of “virtual life” was voiced in terms of cyberspace as source of limitations and oppression, rather than as space of freedom and subversion. This, however, is more of a criticism of cyberculture of the 1990s, as exemplified by Timothy Leary, rather than of Gibson. However, as it can be remembered, Gibson was part of cyberculture, writing for *Wired* and cooperating with Leary on a computer game based on *Neuromancer*. It seems important, consequently, how close Gibson has been to the cyberculture typified by the *Wired* magazine, or how prone his fiction is to the same kind of criticism that *Wired* has recently attracted for sexist attitudes (Rosman), forcing authors to ignore non-commercial culture (Byrne) and what has been described as rampant and mindless neoliberalism (Aune 145). This criticism, of course, goes beyond *Wired*, addressing the general dominance of men in computing, and Gibson, again, is referred to as an example of specific cultural attitudes (Millar 139). Even more generally, *Neuromancer* was mentioned as an instance of the dubious politics of “console cowboys” (Ross 152). Ross describes the dubious politics as “the atmospheric ethic of an alienated street dick,” a sort of self-obsessed and selfish Yuppie who sees welfare state as an enemy.

Sexist character representation is often described as part of a wider picture. For example, while referring to Gibson’s use of the cowboy and the hard-boiled detective as mythic models, and to the consequent description of cyberspace as a new American frontier, Kamioka criticizes the novel as a misguided version of the American frontier myth, re-conceived in bad faith:

Cyberspace has never been neutral since the beginning; when we have access to the Internet or a virtual reality, in both cases we enter spaces created by people. This may mean that, though we think we maintain an autonomous will, we are actually controlled by big corporations or manipulated by the logic of capitalism. The console cowboys, who behave like lone wolves, may also be being manipulated by big corporations, victimizing other people. And this can be said about real world hackers, too. (62)

This argument echoes the more comprehensive discussion by David Brande, who described Cyberpunk as another mask for capitalist ideology (512); Brande’s convincing discussion was later used for an analysis presented by Sharon Stockton (1995), who discussed Gibson’s descriptions of cyberspace in terms of “illusion of penetrable depth” (611). Apart from the pertinent sexual allusion in her argument, Gibson’s depth seems relevant for the evaluation of *Neuromancer* as a postmodern novel: arguably, it is indeed a far cry from the postmodern spirit of surface.

### Criticism of Gender Roles and Stereotypes

Perhaps the most intensive and valuable criticism was attracted by Gibson's representation of women characters. Again, most examples in this article are critical responses to *Neuromancer*, and occasional general comments about the role of "male fantasies" in cyberculture (Goicoechea). Cyberpunk, at least in its early varieties, has been generally described as a fantasy of "masculine self-making" (Malley 194) and ecstatic play of free subjects. Thus, some critics seem offended by Gibson's representation of women characters, as exemplified by this comment:

The few named female characters include Molly, Linda Lee, 3Jane, Marlene, Michèle and... the Matrix itself. Women are depicted as sexual objects, from the 'free' Linda Lee and Molly to the 'forced' wives of the sarariman, who are required to wear sackcloth and sport artificial bruises (p.154) and the meat puppets who endure sexual (ab)use, though technology can cancel-out their conscious awareness of it. Molly's recollections of her ordeals are possibly a reminder that no matter how they try to fix it, actions such as these always leave a mark somewhere.<sup>2</sup>

This is hardly unfair, but the poster reaches a generous conclusion that some of women characters in *Neuromancer* are indeed empowered, and the author gives them a chance to survive, retain dignity, and pursue post-gender identities. She adds, however, that many are punished: although Gibson seemingly hates the status quo, he accepts it as inevitable. Similar analyses were presented, in a wider context, by the previously mentioned critics, most importantly by Sharon Stockton and by Nobuo Kamioka. Stockton claims that women characters in *Neuromancer* are integrated parts of the "virgin territory" (603), points out to descriptions of electronic objectivization and sexual abuse: women are parts of cyberspace, resources free for all men who can get them. Kamioka is more concerned with sexual attitudes displayed by male protagonists: somehow they seem less "reduced to code" than women (55), and more destined to "exert their powers" and satisfy their sexual desires in cyberspace (56), an observation which refers to Suvin's study in Larry McCaffery's seminal essay collection on Cyberpunk (Suvin 350).

The representation of women in *Neuromancer* was linked to the myth of the American frontier, a place of unmitigated exploitation. A similar observation was made with reference to Gibson's representation of exotic locations, especially cities, but this time the representation was linked with colonial myths and stereotypes. Thus, Gibson is not only criticized as a capitalist writer, but also as a neo- (rather than post-) colonial one. This group of critical discussions sometimes refer to Gibson's infamous 1993 article about Singapore, titled "Disneyland with the Death Penalty" and first published in *Wired*. The article apparently brought on a ban on

2 g. [pseud.] "Gender Role Critique in 'Neuromancer' [Short Version]." *The Third Word*. 29 May 2010. Web. 9 Dec 2018. <https://the3rdword.wordpress.com/tag/linda-lee/>.

*Wired* in Singapore, and several responders accused Gibson of prejudice against non-American versions of technocracy, with one critic ironically noticing that California (where the real Disneyland is) has death penalty too, which seems not to have been disturbing for William Gibson (Ludlow 386). On the Singaporean side, in 2005 Weng Hong Tang published a review of the controversy, reasonably advising the reader not to take Gibson, and his Western critics, too seriously, because they do not know too much about Singapore. With reference to Gibson's fiction, however, such studies usually discuss Asian cityscape and the legacy of Western colonial occupation in Asian countries. Wong (104) provided a more comprehensive study of Hong-Kong cityscape in science fiction, and concluded that it is precisely colonial heritage that "opens" Asian cities to Western fantasies of fulfilment, expansion, and violent adventure.

### Ghettoization, Slipping out of the Slipstream

This category focuses on Gibson's fiction not quite reaching up to the standards of postmodern experiment, especially in more recent novels, which are sometimes described as formulaic. Critics in this category sometimes complain about the novel that Gibson has *not* written, and which, in their opinion, he should have:

One is left with a yearning for something entirely different from Gibson—some new, as yet unimagined form to match his unique understanding of our material culture. His essay 'Shiny Balls of Mud,' a brief, evocative masterpiece that originally ran in *Tate Magazine* in 2002, and is collected in 'Distrust that Particular Flavor,' from 2012, hints at a possibility. In it, Gibson sets a few fragments of Japanese culture, seen through an outsider's eyes, against one another: the immense Tokyu Hands department store, which 'assumes that the customer is very serious about something'; young people who refuse to leave their rooms for months or even years; the folk-art phenomenon hikaru dorodango, in which balls of mud are 'compressed with the hands and painstakingly formed into perfect spheres.' He comes at his subject stealthily, looking not at humans themselves but at what they build and buy, to understand them, to explore the way 'a life, lived silently enough, in sufficient solitude, becomes a different sort of sphere, no less perfect.' In an endnote a decade later, Gibson wrote, 'I wish this were a novel, somehow.' I do, too. (Winslow-Yost)

This might be fair when one considers the remarkably high standards set for Gibson, when he is described as a literary heir to William S. Burroughs (Wood 11), a new Pynchon, a new DeLillo, another Richard Powers, and so on. The above quote is representative of a popular line of criticism in the 1990s, before the publication of Gibson's more realist texts such as *Pattern Recognition*, and most examples again refer to *Neuromancer*.

Even some of the generally enthusiastic fan reviews can add to the type of objections mentioned above, for instance Matthew Smith complained about insufficient character development and a badly motivated plot:

This may be part of the problem with Cyberpunk. Anti-heroes and tough girls can be interesting because they break the mold, but if their characterizations do not go far beyond that, they don't hold your interest. Case and Molly are interesting character sketches. There's not a lot to Case—we know he's 24, that he used to be a great hacker cowboy, and that he got burned by a mega-corporation/crime syndicate... for being naughty with their data. We know little else about him, and, since despite attempts to correct them he maintains his drug addictions and his impropriety, it's hard to see why we should care what really becomes of him... Molly has more backstory (which will be familiar to readers of Gibson's *Johnny Mnemonic* (though not to viewers of that film)), but her motivation—she's only doing it for the money—makes her hard to know, hard to get involved with, and hard to care about. The most interesting character in the entire story, apart the eponymous *Neuromancer*, is Armitage, a broken and twisted man who's [!] backstory we get just a tantalizing hint of. But Armitage plays another role; he's more of a tool than a character, both in the sense of his role in the story and his characterization. (Smith)

This type of fan-criticism, probably informed by terminology of script-writing manuals (arc, development, backstory), rests on the assumption that *Neuromancer* is meant to be engaging entertainment, similar to its literary sources in Western fiction and hard-boiled detective fiction. This is why some fan-critics are not baffled and confused by the peculiarities of Gibson's fiction, but technically describe and weigh Gibson's relative merits and faults.

The two comments quoted above echo the recent turn in debate on the place of science fiction in cultural hierarchy: the question of whether it is still possible to believe in the “ongoing mutual concord between SF and postmodern writing,” announced time and again by enthusiastic readers of Gibson, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph McElroy, or other slipstream writers (Latham 103). Jonathan Lethem said emphatically no, in an ominous article from 1998, called “The Squandered Promise of Science Fiction,” where contemporary science fiction is described as result of a “retrenchment” into the ghetto, a “reactionary SF as artistically dire as it was comfortingly similar” in specialized subgenres known only to specialized readers. The general reading public, on the other hand, seems to perceive slipstream authors, such as McElroy or Pynchon, as science fiction (Latham 102). Gibson might therefore emerge as a once-SF author, who slipped out from the ghetto, but left *Neuromancer* behind, together with his apprenticeship short fiction. This is a movement similar to the career of J.G. Ballard in Britain. In theoretical terms, the “ongoing mutual concord between SF and postmodern writing” was, and perhaps still is, the horizon of expectations among readers who respond to *Neuromancer* enthusiastically, even when their enthusiasm

consists in a negative assessment of views and predictions expressed (explicitly or implicitly) in Gibson's early fiction. The relative lack of such responses to Gibson's recent fiction suggests that it falls outside of readers' horizon of expectations, and might provoke more enthusiastic responses only in the future, especially when it comes to responses from fans, bloggers, and other non-academic critics.

### Conclusions

Like many surveys of criticism, the present discussion makes no claim to be exhaustive, but it seems that a few plausible generalizations can be made. Firstly, it is perhaps symptomatic that the majority of critical responses to Gibson's fiction, positive or negative, refer to the *Sprawl* trilogy, with an occasional reference to *Pattern Recognition*. Gibson's early fiction, as it is still readable for SF readers, can be discussed in terms of concord between mainstream and SF, and can be thematically discussed in articles about non-literary matters, such as the impact of technology, technologically augmented bodies, the possible worlds after nanotechnology, or prospects of life with artificial intelligence. Many of the negative discussions mentioned above focused on such motifs, too. When Gibson's fiction became less concerned with these themes, critical interest seems to have declined. Another conclusion is that the majority of criticism on Gibson is thematic, and limited to relatively few issues: the impact of technology, postmodern identity and subjectivity, the city, and globalized economy, seem to be a list that covers most of thematic discussions. The third, and perhaps the most interesting conclusion is that negative discussions seem to blur the thin line between the text as symptom and the text as diagnose in cultural criticism. It is the opinion of the present author that Gibson's use of the frontier myth in *Neuromancer* was highly ironic, and that he consciously represented cyberspace as a failed and degenerating construct: a fallen world. It would seem that critics who allot *Neuromancer* to the "imperial" Western type of science fiction simply missed the point, but then again so did the .com-bubble enthusiasts of Cyberpunk, who embraced the early Internet as a new frontier of the mind, with Gibson as its prophet. Gibson's recent disavowals and bitter remarks seem to confirm this view; he was notably bitter about the publication, without his knowledge or consent, of his conversation with Leary as an "interview" in *Mondo 2000* (R.U. Sirius 2018). In an interview for *Paris Review*, he complained about the reduction of *Neuromancer* to a Cyberpunk manifesto:

A snappy label and a manifesto would have been two of the very last things on my own career want list. That label enabled mainstream science fiction to safely assimilate our dissident influence, such as it was. Cyberpunk could then be embraced and given prizes and patted on the head, and genre science fiction could continue unchanged. (Wallace-Wells 199)

Gibson, thus, refuses to be pigeonholed into the horizon of expectations of readers who focused on the cyberspace, and who praised and criticized *Neuromancer*



solely as the seminal Cyberpunk novel, a prediction and definition of a culture dominated by the Web. This refusal might form a frame of reference for analysis of his later fiction, whereas the critics discussed in the present article seem to be more interested in their horizon of expectations, rather than in the author who has succeeded in escaping from its confines. At the same time, in accordance with Jauss's theory of reader-reception, it could be argued that *Neuromancer* has shifted the horizons of expectations, preparing ground for Gibson's more recent fiction. It seems relevant and significant, then, that critical attention was focused mostly on Gibson's first novel, especially in non-academic platforms, such as blogs, magazines and newspapers.

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## Plus ça change? Translating William Gibson into Polish: “The Gernsback Continuum” and *The Peripheral*

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**Abstract:** This article has been inspired by the most recent Polish edition of William Gibson’s 1986 collection of short stories *Burning Chrome*. By focusing on the new Polish translation of one of Gibson’s earliest tales, “The Gernsback Continuum,” and juxtaposing it with the Polish version of his latest novel, *The Peripheral*, I intend to comment on the reception of his prose (both by the source culture and the target culture readers) and its translatability. Apart from the idiosyncratic aspects of Gibson’s work in general, various extraliterary factors will also be taken into account in order to elucidate the context in which Polish translations of his works continue to be created, distributed and assessed.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** literary translation, science fiction, foreignization, domestication, mistranslation, reader, alienating effect

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William Gibson’s prose entered the Polish literary market in 1990, when a small scale sf, fantasy and horror magazine *Fenix* published Krzysztof Sokołowski’s translation of “Dogfight,”<sup>2</sup> a short story co-written with Michael Swanwick and later included in the *Burning Chrome* anthology. With the exception of *Zero History*, all of Gibson’s novels were translated into Polish, but, as with many other cultural transfers in the formerly communist Poland, there was a significant delay as regards the first Polish edition of *Neuromancer* (1992, trans. by Piotr Cholewa), and the first Polish edition of Gibson’s short stories was released in 1996, i.e. ten years later than the original. Curiously enough, Zysk i S-ka, the editing house responsible for the Polish version of Gibson’s tales, published it under the title *Johnny Mnemonic* (with Katarzyna Karłowska, Piotr Cholewa and Krzysztof Sokołowski as translators), most likely in order to capitalize on the fact that the eponymously titled short story in the collection had by then been adapted into a mainstream feature film. However, in what follows I will be making references only to the most recently published Polish translations of Gibson’s writings, namely his latest novel, *Peripheral* (*Peryferal*—2016, translation by Krzysztof Sokołowski) and “The Gernsback Continuum” (“Kontynuacja Gernsbacka,” whose first translator was Katarzyna Karłowska), one of the ten stories in the *Burning Chrome* collection (its new Polish edition was published in 2018, this time with

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1 This article contains revised sections from two Gibson-related articles I published in 2002 and 2017 (mostly some examples of mis/translating *The Peripheral*). For detailed information see the Works Cited section.

2 [http://encyklopediafantastyki.pl/index.php/Johnny\\_Mnemonic](http://encyklopediafantastyki.pl/index.php/Johnny_Mnemonic).

a more faithful title, *Wypalić chrom*, and with Piotr Cholewa as the translator of all of the stories).

It is important to emphasize that the present article deals only with a few selected examples and does not aim to offer an exhaustive inventory of the decisions made by the above-mentioned translators. Rather, the following brief remarks are intended to capture and contextualize some of the most conspicuous methods and tendencies as regards translating Gibson into Polish nowadays, however questionable or unsatisfactory they might seem. Undoubtedly, the passage of almost thirty years since Gibson's debut in Poland encourages generalizations concerning the peculiar features of his literary works and their Polish translations. For instance, a tentative, perhaps naive assumption could be made that the growing familiarity with Gibson's literary oeuvre in the course of the past few decades should have had a positive impact on the quality of the Polish translations of his short stories and novels. Other points worth mentioning include the changes in the linguistic norms of the target culture (e.g., the ever-increasing tolerance for slang and obscene words and the rather troubling readiness to let in borrowings from English: two most striking phenomena as regards the written and spoken Polish in the 1990s); the professional reputation of Cholewa and Sokołowski (both are experienced, respected literary translators and they both translated a lot of science fiction, hence it has always been tempting to lend support to at least some of their inconsistent choices); selected socioeconomic aspects of the book industry in Poland, especially the fact that book distribution had been "controlled by a handful of retail monopolists" (Rychlewski 197); the niche status of genre fiction; poorly coordinated editing process in many publishing houses, etc.

Most relevantly, perhaps, the genre of the translated works should count as one of the principal factors as regards the quality and reception of the given author's work. In the 1990s Gibson was identified and marketed predominantly as a cyberpunk writer/visionary. Cyberpunk, a subgenre of science fiction focusing "on the effects on society and individuals of advanced computer technology, artificial intelligence and bionic implants in an increasingly global culture, especially as seen in the struggles of streetwise, disaffected characters" (Prucher 30), relied on IT lingo and "insanely baroque" (Staggs) plotlines and settings. Its cryptic nature was taken for granted, perceived as an inextricable part of the demanding, somewhat alienating reading experience, while the parameters of the technologically advanced, socially transformed near-future left plenty of space for artistic experiments and innovative use of words. Gibson's refusal to make his story-telling more readable/accessible/elegant (Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska "Approaching" 437) may have contributed to the readers' expectations towards the translations of his novels. However, the publication of *Pattern Recognition*, set in the contemporary, resolutely non-futuristic world, modified this line of reasoning. The post 9/11 malaise depicted in the novel may have struck a more familiar chord, but even though the novel lacked the cyberpunk provenance, Gibson's writing method remained confusing. To complicate issues even more, 2014 saw Gibson's return to his science fiction roots. With its peculiar concept

of time travel, postapocalyptic landscapes and two futures, *The Peripheral* sounded very much like science fiction squared. Between “The Gernsback Continuum,” “Gibson’s first metafictional consideration of science fiction and its effects” (Westfahl 33; cf Lucas), but with a satirical thrust, and the latest, more grounded dystopia, the writer seems to have come full circle.

The blurb on the back cover of *Wypalić chrom* exemplifies several problems with the perception of Gibson as a writer and public figure in Poland. He is termed “the most influential S-F author of our times” and the ten stories included in the collection are described as wonderful, innovative and gripping. The authors of the promotional text also claim that “[i]n the year 2018 Gibson remains an unquestionable guru, prophet and spokesman for the new cybernetic order and virtual reality”—an anachronistic throwback to the 1980s and 1990s, whose cyberspace-friendly enthusiasm stands in stark contrast with the present zeitgeist and the ongoing reappraisal of the writer’s arguably most seminal work, *Neuromancer*.

Though phrased awkwardly and somewhat nonsensically, nevertheless the 2018 blurb draws attention to how the readers might be looking at those stories now, with the benefit (or, indeed, curse) of hindsight. More importantly, at least from the point of view of this article, it also briefly comments on the quality of his prose: apparently, it is “laconic, [it] dazzles [literally, ‘glitters’] with catchy phrases and expressions which enter [sic] our lexicon for many years to come.” Quite apart from the confusing time frame, the blurb message to the prospective readers (including translators, arguably the most attentive reader category) could not be more clear: they should be prepared for a truly challenging experience and count their blessings.

### “The writing style is killing me,”<sup>3</sup> or, Prosaic Matters

Gibson’s prose has always attracted more attention because of its subject matter, rather than its stylistic features. Larry McCaffery’s oft-quoted comment about *Neuromancer* being “[d]ense, kaleidoscopic, fast-paced, and full of punked-out, high-tech weirdo’s” and its reliance on the “use of quick-fire stream of dissociated images” (217-218) might serve as a fairly accurate description of all of his writings, although the bullet point-like phrasing certainly downplays their less endearing qualities. Relatively few critics and scholars would share Ned Beaman’s unfettered enthusiasm for Gibson as a topical writer *and* a refined stylist:

Gibson presents you with something new—a technology, a garment, a building, a scheme, an expertise, a power structure—and this new thing is burnished with so much imagination and lyricism and attention to detail,

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3 This is a direct quote from the post by trytoholdon in the book section of *reddit.com*, published sometime in 2014 and titled “Neuromancer: anyone else find it difficult to follow?” The 29 responses it generated contain most of the objections typically raised against Gibson’s writing style and storytelling techniques. See [https://www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/1xv5bu/neuromancer\\_anyone\\_else\\_find\\_it\\_difficult\\_to/](https://www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/1xv5bu/neuromancer_anyone_else_find_it_difficult_to/).

and so much of the noir and the gothic and the postmodern all at once, that it's electrifyingly exciting just to contemplate.

What Beaman found appealing and extra cool about *The Peripheral* and Gibson's earlier works, others have deemed mannered, boring in its repetitiveness, showy and shallow. In retrospect, it has also been easier to reexamine even those novels which were universally praised and considered most resonant back in the day. For instance, in the past few years, both professional critics and the so-called ordinary readers leaving comments on webpages such as goodreads.com or amazon.com have voiced their disappointment with Gibson's debut novel: in their opinion it did not age well and the sprawling, muddled story with multiple threads and scenes which were difficult to visualize caused particularly strong irritation because it forced them to constantly reread some of the passages. Needless to say, the publication of *The Peripheral* only confirmed the existence of those "timeless" flaws and raised similar objections.

In a 2013 compendium devoted to the writer, Gary Westfahl confirmed the commonly held view of Gibson's prose: "his distinctive style makes his work difficult to understand" (84). Westfahl even went as far as to suggest the most sensible strategy for dealing with unclear passages: "continue reading in the hopes that later passages will provide more illumination... a technique known to experienced science fiction readers, who realize that writers often begin stories by withholding information that gradually becomes clear by means of scattered references or infodumps" (85). Naturally, one would have to question the very idea that the gradual reveal Westfahl mentions is somehow more typical of science fiction than of any other genre (modernist writers would have certainly found it amusing), but the quote extract offers an apt summary of Gibson's method.

The problems with making sense of Gibson's prose often begin at the basic level of syntax and his chaotic use of pronouns and nominal sentences. The following comment from an exasperated source culture reader illustrates the prevailing sentiment quite vividly:

My comment on style: Why do you want to make us work so hard trying to figure out who you are talking about? Way too many pronouns"—he, she... sometimes I did not figure it out, even after multiple readings and much thought. Using names would have helped a lot! I'd rather use my brain- power thinking about concepts and plot twists, rather than wasting it trying to figure out who is being discussed... I don't see how "pronoun identity confusion" makes me more of an interactive reader; it's not like trying to figure out a mystery, or envisioning advanced concepts (as Gibson does present in all of his books).<sup>4</sup>

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4 Yonah [pseud]. "Inconsistencies & Style Comment." *William Gibson Board*. 8 Dec. 2014. Web. 17 June 2018. <http://www.williamgibsonboard.com/topic/inconsistencies-and-style-comment>.



Although the above posting referred to *The Peripheral*, it reflects the perennial issue with Gibson's demanding prose. In short, it is not reader-friendly. It requires constant focus because even a seemingly unimportant detail might turn out to be meaningful in the course of the next hundred pages or so. As has already been stated, disgruntled readers often resent having to reread some passages in order to make sense of the given story. The usually slow unveiling of the context in which things are happening can strain the patience of even the most ardent fans of the writer, both native and non-native (cf Drabik, Norek, and numerous other Polish bloggers/journalists who reviewed Gibson's latest novel). Piecing together the available information is made even more difficult because of his enigmatic dialogues, bizarre metaphors, understatements and multi-layered intertextual references.

As regards the literary qualities of Gibson's writing, Jim Elkins's review of *The Peripheral* is perhaps most incisive since it articulates legitimate objections against the author's creative shortcuts:

[M]ost of the book needs to be read slowly because of what he's doing to language. His observations, dialogue, descriptions, and metaphors are often thoughtful and persuasive... At the same time, however, he seems to feel as if serious writing can often best be achieved by neologisms. Inventive language... defamiliarizes. Gibson's does too, but mainly by inventing things that don't exist... The language of *The Peripheral* is a concerted attempt to 'cloak' ordinary writing in a veneer of micro-metaphors, translucent to ordinary meaning but safe from it... [I]t is a misunderstanding to think that language itself can't be interesting unless it is injected with nanobots of unfamiliarity.

Additionally, apart from the peculiar rhythm of Gibson's prose, whereby laconic, matter-of-fact descriptions are interspersed with poetic metaphors, the rendition of his work in the Polish language is further compounded by the use of complex, basically untranslatable neologisms. In short, failure *is* an option. Distortion of the already "difficult" original is inevitable. Gibson's texts tend to resist both the source and the target culture readers, but ultimately it is the latter group that is bound to have a more alienating reading experience.

### **Trans(a)l(ien)ation: Theories**

Taking into account popular translation theory paradigms, there is nothing particularly unusual about the fate of Gibson's texts once they are translated into a foreign language. The binary oppositions of otherness and familiarity, foreignizing and domesticating, getting closer to the reader and forcing the reader to get closer to the text, have been neatly wrapped up by Lawrence Venuti in his attempt at defining the essence and the goals of translation. Put simply, for Venuti, translation is always a form of textual abuse/violence:

the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target-language reader... The aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text, often in highly self-conscious projects, where translation serves an imperialist appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, political. (209)

By equating domestication with violence and emphasizing the ideological ramifications of producing too fluent translations, he wholeheartedly embraces deliberately “disruptive” (Kwieciński 30) texts and alienating reading experiences. His insistence on the value of immersion in otherness and Antoine Berman’s advocacy of literalism (297) are a form of sustained criticism against texts which are easier to understand and more polished or “elegant” than their original versions. However, the dichotomy espoused by Venuti seems less pertinent in situations when the target culture receives and domesticates an artefact from a more influential source culture (cf Milton 457). In addition, it tends to ignore or downplay the mediating role of translation and the “countless instances in which translation can clarify or elucidate a cryptic original” and “in which the target language rises above the source language” (Fogel 24).

Venuti’s fear of domestication contrasts with Sun Yifeng’s emphasis on the need “to recognize the practical usefulness of violence in translation, which functions to curtail alienation and estrangement” (173). Yifeng distinguishes between “gentle” violence in translation, perpetrated “primarily to facilitate crosscultural communication in dealing with the otherwise linguistically or culturally untranslatable” (160), and less benign violence, “represent[ing] manipulative rewriting, variously motivated to change meaning and sometimes form of the original as well,” “abusive and even destructive as far as the source text is concerned” (160). Yifeng also draws attention to the “poignant paradox that the translator respects the original by abusing it and sometimes much is lost in translation not because of violence, but because there is a lack of violence” (173).

Yifeng’s remarks are inspiring insofar as they encourage a less Manichean way of thinking about translation and translation quality assessment. If what happens to translated texts can, indeed, be termed violence and if translations are by their very nature imperfect, then perhaps they should be analysed in terms of avoidable violence: errors which can be easily eliminated as a result of a rigorous editing process should perhaps be distinguished from errors which seem more subjective and sometimes resist being categorized as such because they are connected with the overall stylistic effect of the given text. To sum up, from the vantage point of Polish translators and editors the most productive dilemmas involve the degree of “gentle violence” they are ready to perpetrate: should they “bow” to the enigmatic nature of Gibson’s prose? Should they attempt to make it more palatable for the sake of Polish readership (cf Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska, “O przekładaniu” 46)? Or should they be bold enough to offer their own, idiosyncratic approximation of the writer’s style, in

line with Peter Newmark's adage that "creativity in translation starts where imitation stops" (9) and his emphasis on "freedom within limits" (6)?

### Trans(a)l(ien)ation: Practices

In this section of the article several translations samples will be presented and commented upon, but although they have been taken from the most recent publications of Gibson's prose in Poland, the doubts and objections they provoke are by no means new. In order to systematize and summarize the recurring problems with Polish translators' efforts, I have identified five main issues which could be described as follows: attempts at clarifying the original often make it even more difficult to understand; slang expressions and conversations sound unnatural; neologisms are handled poorly; straightforward mistranslations occur rather frequently; slavish imitation of the original syntax and lexicon seems to be the preferred strategy. Among the minor issues one should perhaps mention inconsistencies in tone and registers, the occasional division of the chapters into paragraphs which does not correspond with how the writer chose to divide them, and lack of attention to the peculiar cadence and rhythm of his sentences.

A close examination of the initial paragraphs in Gibson's *Peripheral* and its Polish translation (Table 1) reveals the presence of many of the above listed issues. Immediately noticeable is the Polish translator's decision to divide the introductory paragraph in the original into two paragraphs and to reorganize sentences into smaller or larger units, thus diminishing the power of the single paragraph exposition, breaking its flow and introducing unmotivated, syntactically dubious emphasis (for example, the phrase "Ociepłała i uszczelniała," the equivalent for "to stop it leaking and for insulation," sounds unnatural without a complement). The smart choice to replace "ghosts of the tattoos" with a more neutral expression, "memory of war tattoos" ("wspomnienie po wojennych tatuażach"), and to contextualize the word "pickers"<sup>5</sup> is marred by occasional mistranslations (in the Polish version it is Leon who smells, not the trailer; on the other hand, one cannot exclude the possibility that a simple typographic error has been committed), lazy editing (the nonsensical repetition of the word "później"), bizarre syntax ("gniazda os tak wielkiego, jakiego w życiu nie widzieli"), omission of pronouns coupled with slightly confusing punctuation (as a result of which the reader has to reread the passage to be sure that it is Flynn who is ten years old, rather than the trailer) and unnecessary change of register ("kaleka" denotes a "cripple"—a much more informal expression than "disability" in the original). Leaving words such as "haptics" and "airstream" untranslated (the

5 In the paragraph under discussion, "picker" denotes "an early bird" "scoop[ing] up the good deals" (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Picker>). The translator opted for the more formal and dignified "kolekcjoner" ("collector") and thus avoided potential ambiguity (the rough informal equivalent, "szperacz" is not a commonly used word in the context of collecting things; it usually refers to a reflector).

so-called loan-translation) only strengthens the foreign feel of the text. And this is just the beginning of an almost 500-page translation of the novel.

**Table 1.**

| Source text (English)  | Target text (Polish)   |
|--|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">THE HAPTICS</p> <p>They didn't think Flynne's brother had PTSD, but that sometimes the <b>haptics</b> glitched him. They said it was like phantom limb, <b>ghosts of the tattoos he'd worn in the war</b>, put there to tell him when to run, when to be still, when to do the bad-ass dance, which direction and what range. So they allowed him <b>some disability</b> for that, and he lived in the trailer down by the creek. An alcoholic uncle lived there when they were little, veteran of some other war, their father's older brother. <b>She and Burton and Leon used it for a fort, the summer she was ten</b>. Leon tried to take girls there, later on, but <b>it smelled too bad</b>. When Burton got his discharge, it was empty, except for <b>the biggest wasp nest any of them had ever seen</b>. Most valuable thing on their property, Leon said. <b>Airstream</b>, 1977. He showed her ones on eBay that looked like blunt rifle slugs, went for crazy money in any condition at all. The uncle had gooped this one over with white expansion foam, gone gray and dirty now, <b>to stop it leaking and for insulation</b>. Leon said that had saved it from <b>pickers</b>. She thought it looked like a big old grub, but with tunnels back through it to the windows. (<i>The Peripheral</i> 1)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">HAPTYKI</p> <p>U brata Flynne nie zdiagnozowali zespołu stresu pourazowego. Uznali, że czasami dopadają go <b>haptyki</b>. Ich zdaniem było to trochę jak bóle fantomowe amputowanej kończyny, <b>wspomnienie po wojennych tatużach</b>, dyktujących, kiedy ma biec, kiedy zamierać w bezruchu, a kiedy zagrać zajebistego twardziela, oraz w którą stronę i na jaki dystans. Dzięki nim dostał <b>małą rentę dla kalek</b>. Wprowadził się do przyczepy przy strumieniu. Kiedy byli mali, mieszkał w niej wujek alkoholik, weteran innej wojny, starszy brat ich ojca. <b>Była fortem w zabawach jej, Burtona i Leona latem, miała wtedy dziesięć lat</b>. Leon próbował zapraszać do niej dziewczyny, to później, ale później to <b>już za bardzo śmierdział</b>. A kiedy Burtona puścili do cywila, stała pusta, jeśli nie liczyć <b>gniazda os tak wielkiego, jakiego w życiu nie widzieli</b>.</p> <p>Leon powiedział, że to ich najcenniejsza rzecz, ten <b>airstream</b> z 1977 roku. Pokazał jej zdjęcia z eBaya. Wyglądały na nich jak tępe pociski karabinowe, a szły za szalone pieniądze, niezależnie od stanu technicznego. Wujek oblepił je białą gąbką z metra, teraz już szarą, postrzępioną. <b>Ocieplała i uszczelniała</b>. Leon twierdził, że to gąbka uratowała ją przed <b>kolekcjonerami</b>. Jej zdaniem przyczepa wyglądała jak wielki stary wykarczowany pień, ale z tunelami prowadzącymi do okien. (<i>Periferia</i> 7)</p> |

A comparison of the first paragraphs of “The Gernsback Continuum” and its Polish rendition (Table 2) reveals an interesting pattern: although the translation problems here are less glaring than in the case of *The Peripheral*'s introduction, nevertheless the Polish text abounds in rather baffling choices, especially in terms of lexis and syntax. Starting with the first sentence, the exclusively abstract nature of the lexical equivalent for “the whole thing” leads to an unnatural-sounding collocation with the verb “blaknąć” (“to pale”). The “mad-doctor” gets translated as “obłąkany nau-

kowiec,” even though “szalony” would definitely be the preferred adjective in this expression. Because of the difficulty of transforming “latające skrzydło” (“flying wing”) into an adjectival structure, the translator enriches the description of the “flying-wing liner” (likely to make sure that the Polish reader understands the concept). Cholewa’s most interesting, if controversial, lexical choice involves the word “chrome,” which gets translated as “odpryski przezroczy” (literally: “chips” or “slivers” of slides)—the word “odprysk” refers either to the process of splashing off or to the resulting hollowness, or to a tiny fragment or an object that has splashed off a hard surface.<sup>6</sup> If this idea is far from precise, it at least activates the readers’ imagination and seems to be in tune with the protagonist’s constant questioning of the observable reality. The obvious mistranslation in the paragraph—the adverb “discreetly” is rendered as “uprzejmie” (“kindly”)—seems rather inconsequential, as opposed to the unnatural (“był ten wielki liniowiec... nad San Francisco”) or illogical syntax (it would make sense for the concluding sentence in the Polish translation to follow the syntactic pattern of the preceding sentence, e.g., “Sporo pomogła mi telewizja” —literally “Television helped [me] a lot”). Paradoxically, the perfective aspect of the verb “to help” (“pomogła” rather than the imperfective “pomagała”) would have been a more rational choice and, together with the elimination of the unnecessary coordinating conjunction “I” (“and”) it would have prevented the last sentence from losing the cadence of the original.

**Table 2.**

| Source text (English)   | Target text (Polish)   |
|---|--|
| <p>Mercifully, <b>the whole thing</b> is starting to <b>fade</b>, to become an episode. When I do still catch the odd glimpse, it’s peripheral; mere fragments of <b>mad-doctor chrome</b>, confining themselves to the corner of the eye. <b>There was that flying-wing liner</b> over San Francisco last week, but it was almost translucent. And the shark-fin roadsters have gotten scarcer, and freeways <b>discreetly avoid</b> unfolding themselves into the gleaming eighty-lane monsters I was forced to drive last month in my rented Toyota. And I know that none of it will follow me to New York; my vision is narrowing to a single wavelength of probability. I’ve worked hard for that. <b>Television helped a lot.</b><br/>           (“The Gernsback Continuum” 37)</p> | <p>Szczęśliwie <b>cała sprawa</b> zaczęła powoli <b>blaknąć</b>, stawać się epizodem. Niekiedy wciąż dostrzegam jakiś przebłysk, ale już tylko na granicy pola widzenia: ledwie widoczne kątem oka <b>odpryski przezroczy obłąkanego naukowca</b>. W zeszłym tygodniu <b>był ten wielki liniowiec, latające skrzydło</b> nad San Francisco, ale wydawał się prawie przejrzysty. Coraz rzadziej spotykam skrzydlate krążowniki szos, a autostrady <b>uprzejmie unikają</b> rozwijania się w lśniące osiemdziesięciopasmowe monstra, jakimi w zeszłym miesiącu musiałem jechać wynajętą toyotę. Wiem też, że nic z tego nie podaży za mną do Nowego Jorku—mój wzrok zawęży się do pojedynczej długości fali prawdopodobieństwa. Ciężko na to pracowałem. <b>I telewizja bardzo mi pomogła.</b> (“Kontinuum Gernsbacka” 41)</p> |

6 <https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/odprysk;2493556.html>.

Numerous passages in the Polish translations of *The Peripheral* and “The Gernsback Continuum” suggest that Sokołowski and Cholewa were not entirely invested in making the original texts more accessible. On the contrary, some of their decisions as regards grammar, syntax or phrasing actually made the prose even more confusing. The scene in *The Peripheral* in which Flynnne, the female protagonist, is beta-testing a virtual game (Table 3), is a striking example of this tendency. The expression “this one” in the second sentence of the English original clearly refers to one of the robot girls Flynnne is observing. This shift in emphasis has not been successfully rendered in the translation, where each of the sentences begins with a verb in the same grammatical form (tense, person, gender, mood and number—enough information to make the use of the relevant pronoun unnecessary and unnatural). The beginning of the third sentence of the Polish translation implies that the person described here is still Flynnne. Therefore, the details of the face provided in the final sentence of the paragraph lead to a cognitive dissonance; only by rereading all of the sentences again, the reader will be able to understand whose body is being watched and described.

**Table 3.**

| Source text (English)   | Target text (Polish)  |
|---|---|
| <p>SURVEILLANT<br/> <b>She dropped</b> toward two bugs, <b>hovered</b>, scoping one of the robot girls without changing focus. <b>This one</b> was wearing a quilted vest with lots of pockets, little shiny tools sticking up in them. <b>She</b> was using something like a dental pick to individually arrange things, too small to see, on top of sushi. Round black eyes in the china face, wider apart than human eyes, but they hadn't been there before. (<i>The Peripheral</i> 33)</p> | <p>OBSERWATORKA<br/> <b>Skoczyła</b> na dwa robale. <b>Zawisła</b> nieruchomo, nie spuszczać z oka jednej z robotek i nie zmieniając ogniskowej. <b>Miała</b> na sobie pikowaną kamizelkę z mnóstwem kieszeni, z których sterczały małe lśniące narzędzia. <b>Używała</b> narzędzia przypominającego zgłębnik dentystyczny do układania na sushi czegoś tak małego, że aż niewidocznego. <b>Miała</b> też okrągłe czarne oczy w porcelanowej twarzy, rozstawione szerzej niż ludzkie, a przecież przedtem ich tam nie było. (<i>Peryferal</i> 27)</p> |

Neologisms have always been a staple of Gibson's fiction, regardless of the literary genre he chose for his short stories or novels, and a major challenge for their translators. *The Peripheral* is no exception in this regard. As an extrapolation of two future, largely transhumanist worlds, it makes frequent references to new sociocultural rituals, trends, artefacts, professions, and communities. In what might be perceived as the most striking example of a Gibsonian neologism, the sixth chapter of the novel describes *patchers*: a group of one hundred “deformed cannibals” (Joyce) inhabiting a plastic garbage island drifting on the Pacific Ocean.



**Table 4.**

| Source text (English)   | Target text (Polish)  |
|---|---|
| <b>The patchers</b> , their prime directive to cleanse the fouled water column, had assembled this place from recovered polymers. ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 22) | <b>Plamiarze</b> , ich głównym zajęciem było oczyszczanie skalanych kolumn wody, złożyli to miejsce z odzyskanych polimerów. ( <i>Peryferal</i> 24) |

As can be seen in Table 4, The Polish translator opted for the word “plamiarz,” a noun which does not appear in dictionaries of the Polish language and is not used in everyday speech. The rationale for Sokołowski’s choice seems obvious enough: the official Polish name for the actually existing Great Pacific garbage patch is “Wielka Pacyficzna Plama Śmieci.”<sup>7</sup> However, the application of the analogous word-forming mechanism (patch → patchers, plama → plamiarze) impoverishes and distorts the original. Apart from its toponymic aspect, the word *patcher* refers also to the idea of repairing something in a fairly primitive way; creating something new (*patchworking*); modifying and/or improving computer software; cosmetic procedures (*patch* as the so-called beauty spot), etc.<sup>8</sup> Its Polish counterpart brings associations with destroying things or making them dirty, rather than with creating or improving them. On the other hand, the multi-layered network of references activated by Gibson’s neologism makes it practically impossible to offer a completely satisfactory equivalent in the Polish language.

While the translator’s failure is understandable in the case of particularly complex neologisms, such as the above discussed *patcher*, his overall approach towards newly coined expressions cannot be excused so easily. There are simply no clear-cut or consistent rules as regards the creation and spelling of the neologisms in *Peryferal*. The table below demonstrates Sokołowski’s hodge-podge methodology and the highly problematic nature of some of his literal translations.

**Table 5.**

| Source text (English)                                  | Target text (Polish)   |
|--|--|
| quadcopters ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 78)                | quadcoptery ( <i>Peryferal</i> 118)  |
| shards ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 119)                    | shardsy ( <i>Peryferal</i> 187) [the “s” and “y” morphemes double the idea of plurality] |
| had a Viz ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 49)                  | miała Viza ( <i>Peryferal</i> 69) [noun declension]                                      |
| display ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 113)                   | displej ( <i>Peryferal</i> 177) [no noun declension]                                     |
| stub [rozwidlenie czasowe] ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 48) | kikut ( <i>Peryferal</i> 68)   |
| Rainey’s cameraperson ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 17)      | kamerosoba Rainey ( <i>Peryferal</i> 16)   |

7 [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wielka\\_Pacyficzna\\_Plama\\_Śmieci](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wielka_Pacyficzna_Plama_Śmieci).

8 <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/patch>.



|  |   |
|--|---|
| mourning jet ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 42)                     | dżet ( <i>Peryferal</i> 56)                                       |
| driftglass ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 42)                       | driftglass ( <i>Peryferal</i> 56)                                 |
| Wheelie Boy's tablet ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 210)            | Tablet Szalonej Jazdy ( <i>Peryferal</i> 331)                     |
| fabbing [3D printing] ( <i>The Peripheral</i> : 90)          | fabrykowanie ( <i>Peryferal</i> 138)                              |
| fabbing ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 174)                         | fabowanie ( <i>Peryferal</i> 275)                                 |
| Homes [Homeland Security agents] ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 28) | Krajowcy ( <i>Peryferal</i> 34)                                   |
| [S]quidsuit. Cuttlefish camo. ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 120)   | [K]amomąta. Kamuflaż z ośmiornicy. Mątwy. ( <i>Peryferal</i> 188) |
| drop bear ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 178)                       | spadomiś ( <i>Peryferal</i> 279)                                  |
| The klept ( <i>The Peripheral</i> 210)                       | klepty ( <i>Peryferal</i> 331)                                    |

Finally, the issue of syntactic and lexical calques deserves to be raised, especially because they constitute one of the arguably most irritating aspects of the work done by the Polish translators. However well-meant it may have been, the slavish imitation of the constructions and lexical items in the literary originals often results in unnatural, downright ridiculous translations, particularly when the context requires a less formal register (Table 6).

**Table 6.**

| Source text (English)   | Target text (Polish)   |
|---|--|
| ‘But it could be worse, huh?’<br>‘That’s right,’ I said, ‘or <b>even worse, it could be perfect.</b> ’ (“The Gernsback Continuum” 50) | – Ale mogłoby być gorzej, nie?<br>– Zgadza się – przyznałem. – Albo <b>calkiem fatalnie: mógłby być perfekcyjny.</b> (“Kontinuum Gernsbacka” 52) |
| The Thirties <b>had seen</b> the first generation of American industrial designers (“The Gernsback Continuum” 39)                     | Lata trzydzieste <b>widziały</b> pierwszą generację amerykańskich projektantów wzornictwa przemysłowego. (“Kontinuum Gernsbacka” 43)             |
| The designers were populists, <b>you see.</b> (“The Gernsback Continuum” 40)  | Projektanci byli populistami, <b>rozumiesz.</b> (“Kontinuum Gernsbacka” 44)  |
| Fixed me with <b>his best basilisk glare.</b> (“The Gernsback Continuum” 42)  | Obrzucił mnie <b>najlepszym bazyliškowym wzrokiem.</b> (“Kontinuum Gernsbacka” 46)   |
| “You’re a horrible <b>piece of shit,</b> ” said Wilf. ( <i>The Peripheral</i> : 303)  | – Obrzydliwa z ciebie <b>kupa gówna</b> – powiedział Wilf. ( <i>Peryferal</i> : 477)   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>“It’s real,” Daedra said. “And <b>whoever</b> was operating your guard is now <b>wherever</b> you started from, <b>whenever</b>, telling <b>whoever</b> is there that you’re in trouble. ... But not understanding how much.” (<i>The Peripheral</i> 296-297)</p> <p>She didn’t really like the business part of it. She <b>guessed she disliked it about as much as Shaylene liked it.</b> (<i>The Peripheral</i> 312)</p> | <p>– Jest prawdziwa – powiedziała Daedra. – A <b>ten, który</b> operował twoją ochroną, jest teraz <b>tam, skąd</b> przyszliście, <b>gdziekolwiek</b> to jest, i mówi <b>komuś, komukolwiek</b>, kogo <b>tam</b> spotkał, że wpadliście w kłopoty. ... Ale nie wie, <b>w jak wielkie</b> kłopoty. (<i>Peryferal</i> 466)</p> <p>Prowadzenie biznesu nie podobało jej się zbyt. <b>Było czymś, czego nie lubiła chyba tak bardzo, jak Shaylene lubiła.</b> (<i>Peryferal</i> 492)</p> |
|--|--|

## Conclusions

In my 2002 analysis of Polish translations of two novels by Gibson, *Neuromancer* and *Idoru*, I emphasized the heavily foreignizing quality of the work done by their translators, Piotr Cholewa and Zbigniew Królicki, respectively, and their refusal to make the novels more accessible to the uninitiated readers (“Approaching” 436). I also suggested that because of their rich experience some of the inconsistencies in their work tended to be ignored or treated as intentional, even justified. Furthermore, to furnish the context for literary translators’ endeavors in general, I mentioned the profound lexical and syntactic changes in the Polish language in the second half of the 1990s, resulting partly from the rapid pace of political, economic, cultural and technological transformation in Poland and the readiness of the country’s literary market to “take advantage of the instability of translation norms” (“Approaching” 432). In addition, I commented on the lack of properly coordinated, fully professional editing process so typical of numerous publishing houses in Poland, especially those keen on releasing genre fiction, including science fiction. Of course, to make the picture complete, more issues should be touched upon, such as relatively low remuneration for literary translators coupled with oftentimes unrealistic deadlines, and their being deprived of affordable legal assistance.

Disappointingly enough, the passage of 28 years since the first Polish translation of Gibson’s prose was published has not led to a radical change for the better. Similarly to the previous translations of Gibson’s work, the Polish edition of *The Peripheral* and the second version of *Burning Chrome* rarely succeed in making the cryptic content of the originals more accessible (cf. Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska, “Approaching” 442) and, to make matters worse, they offer numerous instances of mis-translations and stylistic incongruities, while the editing process, as always, leaves a lot to be desired. One is tempted to suggest that the experience Sokołowski and Cholewa have gained throughout the years encouraged them to produce very literal, “safe”, slavishly imitative translations.

But there is yet another aspect of the time travel I decide to undertake in order to pinpoint some of the regularities as regards translating Gibson into Polish. On a meta level, his idea of a continuum could easily be extended to cover the above described translation practices. Termed an “economical commentary on the history of science fiction over the past half-century” (Ross 412), Gibson’s story functions partly as a satire on the notion that progress happens in a linear, logical manner, through systematic accretion. Ironically, Polish translations of Gibson’s oeuvre in the past 28 years take this notion to another level. Time passage does not guarantee that the translators will “know better”—that they will make much fewer errors or distort/neglect the literary original to a lesser extent. One could argue that with the advent of the Internet and its popular lexicons, databases and encyclopedias, such as Wikipedia, IMDb or Lyrics.com, most of the cultural references in the source texts should not even be treated as challenging, nor should they be worthy of translators’ domesticating efforts since, after all, most of them are easily Googleable. However, truly good and captivating translations of Gibson’s prose are still nowhere to be seen, and at least two partial explanations can be offered to account for that lack. Firstly, the availability of even the most reliable information cannot solve what should be treated as a problem of literary style, rather than merely content and big ideas. In other words, Gibson is still waiting for a Polish translator with a genuine writing talent. The other answer might seem scarier: the perfect, or at least more polished translation, free from avoidable errors, is merely an unattainable, constantly receding point of destination—a (semiotic) ghost, like the flying-wing liner hovering over the protagonist of “The Gernsback Continuum” in its faux translucence. And this is a humbling, if unacceptable, scenario.

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