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Introducing William Gibson. Or Not

In the early 21st-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).[1] 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.[2] 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"[3] 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*[4] or a nexus of topics identified as cyberpunk,[5] 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[6] 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.