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

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

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."[1] 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 obsoleteness. 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#c391742597779886 778.

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 Obsoleteness: 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 obsoleteness 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 Obsoleteness: 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 30th 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.[2]

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

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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 if 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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