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Cyberspace as final frontier: artificial and virtual space in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*

Talking about space in speculative fiction (i.e. fantasy, science fiction or supernatural fiction) touches upon several key aspects of the genre such as worldbuilding, perception of reality and the human condition: what kind of space do we create for ourselves, how do we attribute meaning to it, in which ways are we limited or isolated by its boundaries? Especially in cyberpunk, with its focus on near-future societies and the technologies of the information age, the space we live in and the space we send our minds to do not have to be the same, so the answers are manifold.

The following paper will discuss some basic configurations of world and otherworld in speculative fiction, give a short introduction to cyberpunk literature and William Gibson's dual world of cyberspace and meatspace, briefly present Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, examine the question to which extent the world of *Neuromancer* might be understood in terms of such a hyperreality, and offer some ideas about alternate realities we might already live in.

1. World and otherworld

The relationship between our world and any kind of otherworld provides a simple, yet useful way of distinguishing different kinds of speculative fiction.

In many high fantasy and science fiction stories the otherworld exists *instead* of our own, constituting a closed reality not affecting our sphere of experience.[1]

A second category of stories also provides us with another world, but this world exists *next* to our own, with distinct laws or properties. However, it is safely separate, e.g. behind a magic mirror or dimensional rift, and travel between both worlds is possible, but accomplished only by a select few or by extraordinary, 'magical' means. Prominent examples of such 'looking-glass' worlds would be Carroll's Wonderland or Star Trek's Mirror Universe.

The third category is the domain of supernatural fiction and most of urban (or 'contemporary') fantasy from H.P. Lovecraft to Neil Gaiman:

1 I use the term "world" in the broadest possible sense, encompassing everything from Gormenghast Castle to that well-known galaxy 'far, far away', depending on setting, genre and mode of the story.

both worlds *overlap* and influence each other. John Clute calls this a "crosshatch narrative" and likens the intersection to the forest in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* "[where] two or more worlds may simultaneously inhabit the same territory".[2] The same holds true for any story of mystical creatures or alien invaders in which the epistemological conflict between both realities and the breach of our laws of nature is at the heart of the story.

While most fantasists tell their tales despite knowing them to be impossible, and many writers of the supernatural for the sheer fun of terror, advocates of science fiction have always believed it would be possible, at least somewhere and someday, to actually travel to other, yet-to-be-imagined places or even through time or to alternate universes. Along with this sense of mission and fuelled by the US spaceflight programs came science fiction's own kind of frontier myth including the old stereotypical implications of cowboys and colonists.

However, almost no one expected that at the beginning of the 21st century we would not be exploring the space between stars but the space between our computers. One of the first to do so was William Gibson.

2. Cyberspace

"Cyberpunk" was the title of a short story by Bruce Bethke, written in 1980 and published in 1983. It became a buzzword that soon transmuted into countless derivative spin-offs, most notably 'steampunk'.

The term 'cybernetics', derived from the Greek word *kybernétes,* 'pilot', was made popular as early as 1948 by the mathematician Norbert Wiener. Wiener likened organic bodies to electronic systems governed by the brain just as though by a computer, making both kinds of systems ultimately interchangeable.[3]

The 'punk' half of the term refers to a culture of protest and anarchism and – if we follow Norman Spinrad – also of technology-affirmation.[4] Born was the perfect "snappy label" to sell the kind of stories Gibson wanted to tell, much to his own dismay of such labels.[5]

In many regards, cyberpunk was a product of the 1980s. Claiming to be "the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of

2 John Clute: "Crosshatch". In John Clute and John Grant (eds.): *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. London: Orbit 1997, p. 237.

3 Cf. Norbert Wiener: *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. Cambridge: The MIT Press 1961 (1948).

4 Norman Spinrad: *Science Fiction in the Real World*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1990, pp. 110–111.

5 David Wallace-Wells: "William Gibson, The Art of Fiction No. 211", *The Paris Review* No. 197 (2011), http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6089/the-art-of-fiction-no-211-william-gibson (23/03/2014).

science fiction but in a truly science-fictional world",[6] cyberpunk authors told stories of "computer-driven, hightech near-future venues inhabited by a slum-bound streetwise citizenry for whom the new world is an environment, not a project."[7] The opposition of these rebels is at least to some degree derived from the hacker ethos of that time and still mirrored in the steampunk credo 'love the machine, hate the factory'.[8] In terms of traditional Western science fiction and its common blind eye towards the downsides of global economics, the US government or the military, cyberpunk was instant "heresy".[9]

On closer examination, Gibson's vision of a shady, post-democratic urban sprawl covering the entire US East Coast is neither clearly dystopian nor utopian: at least the multinational corporations prevented a worldwide nuclear war, and Gibson seems right in asserting that "many people in Rio have worse lives than the inhabitants of the Sprawl".[10] Much of the impact of *Neuromancer* arises from its uncanny semblance to our present, not the differences.

The term 'cyberspace' precedes the term 'cyberpunk' by one year. Gibson used it in 1982 in "Burning Chrome" ('Cyberspace Seven' being the name of the protagonist's 'matrix simulator', renamed 'cyberspace deck' in *Neuromancer*), and during the 1990s it became synonymous with virtual realities and sometimes the internet. Gibson famously describes cyberspace as "the colorless nonspace of the simulation matrix, the electronic consensus-hallucination that facilitates the handling and exchange of massive quantities of data."[11]

In contrast, the world outside the matrix is sometimes called 'meatspace', the world of flesh and blood.[12]

3. Hyperreality

Although the concept of a simulated world that can be experienced, even traveled, with all our senses has never become reality, Cyberpunk has received (and is still receiving) a lot of critical attention. It is widely regarded as the expression of postmodernism in science fiction[13] and tagged

6 Bruce Sterling: "Preface". In Bruce Sterling (ed.): *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. London: HarperCollins, 1994, pp. vii–xiv, p. ix.

7 John Clute: "Gibson, William (Ford)". In John Clute and Peter Nicholls (eds.): *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. London: Orbit 1993, pp. 493–494, p. 493.

8 Apparently coined by one Professor Calamity on the now defunct forum of *Steam-Punk Magazine*.

9 Clute, "Gibson, William (Ford)", p. 493.

10 Wallace-Wells, "William Gibson", *The Paris Review*.

11 William Gibson: "Burning Chrome". In William Gibson: *Burning Chrome*. London: HarperCollins 1995 (1986), pp. 195–220, p. 197.

12 A supplemental term of unknown origin, probably dating back to internet discussions of the early 1990s.

13 For cyberpunk as postmodernism, cf. John Clute: "Cyberpunk". In John Clute and Peter Nicholls (eds.): *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. London: Orbit 1993, pp.

with labels such as posthumanism, postindustrialism or postnationalism.[14] Fredric Jameson calls it "the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself."[15]

Most prominently, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has been honored as the "central theorist of cyberpunk philosophy".[16] Especially his concept of 'hyperreality' has caught the critics' attention and has often been ascribed to Gibson's cyberspace.[17]

Hyperreality, according to Baudrillard, would be marked by a prevalence of simulacra: symbols or representations that are not linked to anything 'real' anymore, rendering people effectively unable to tell simulation from reality by making the distinction itself obsolete. They mark the endpoint of what he famously calls

> the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the *absence* of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.[18]

Examples for such copies without an original, referring to nothing but to themselves, might be the colorful, yet non-existent products sold in advertisements, the virtual 'goods' of the global stock market, the second-hand 'facts' and dreams of mass media.

Hyperreality, the world of simulacra, knows no distance between the real and the imaginary anymore as it did e.g. in Romanticism. But without this distance, Baudrillard says,

> [t]here is no real, there is no imaginary [...]. [T]errestrial space today is virtually coded, mapped, registered, saturated [...] – a universal market [...] of values,

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288–290. Larry McCaffery: "Introduction: The Desert of the Real". In Larry McCaffery (ed.): *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*. Durham: Duke University Press 1991, pp. 1–16. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.: "Editorial Introduction: Postmodernism's SF/SF's Postmodernism", *Science Fiction Studies* 18:55 (1991), http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/intro55.htm (23/03/2014).

14 Steve Cook: *Towards a Definition of Cyberpunk*. http://www.cyberartsweb.org/cpace/scifi/ cyberbib/Essays/DefiningCpunk.html (23/03/2014).

15 Fredric Jameson: *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso 1991, p. 419.

16 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.: "Antimancer: Cybernetics and Art in Gibson's Count Zero", *Science Fiction Studies* 22:65 (1995), http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/65/icr65art.htm (23/03/ 2014).

17 According to Damien Broderick, this "standard comparison" was first drawn by N. Katherine Hayes. Cf. Damien Broderick: *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction*. London: Routledge 1995, p. 172. N. Katherine Hayles: *Chaos Bound*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1990, p. 275.

18 Jean Baudrillard: "The Precession of Simulacra". In Jean Baudrillard: *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2006, pp. 1–42, p. 6.

> signs, models, leaving no room for the imaginary [...]. *[W]hen the map covers the whole territory, something like the principle of reality disappears.*[19]

In a similar way, Gibson's cyberspace covers meatspace. Unfolding like an "origami trick" (one of his favorite ways of describing the experience of 'jacking in'),[20] the virtual landscape covers reality like the all-encompassing map Baudrillard mentioned (an idea he borrowed from Borges and originally from Carroll): one infinity replaces the other.[21]

Gibson, however, repeatedly stresses that this map is not scaled 1:1. Cyberspace is an illusion, "a tailored hallucination we all agreed to have",[22] following mostly aesthetic considerations: "The Fission Authority had always looked like a big red Aztec pyramid, but it didn't have to; if the FA wanted it to, they could have it look like anything."[23]

Even more importantly, this pyramid is still anchored and referring to something real: customers and employees can *go* there and *enter* these constructs to do their banking business. Other cyberspace constructs might serve even more basic needs, like opening a door in a networked facility. Other meatspace places are not part of the network and therefore not represented in cyberspace, just as some places exist exclusively in cyberspace, but are accessible and manipulable by meatspace constructs – not mapping, but being mapped. In both cases, the relationship is a dialectic one. True simulacra – signifiers without anything signified – do exist, but very rarely so, and they are not necessarily native to cyberspace.

The comparison of Baudrillard's hyperreality to Gibson's cyberspace is as tempting as it is inaccurate. Cyberspace, while invading meatspace in a transgressive, sometimes assimilating manner, is still part of a binary opposition: both worlds are still separated, if by an ever-so-slightly barrier which Gibson's characters try to tear down or forget by means of technology or drugs.

Especially the sequels, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* cover the clash and partial fusion of both spheres, shifting from a looking-glass type of story to a crosshatch narrative, while still maintaining the distinction between real and artificial space. Hyperreality, on the other hand, is no otherworld one can travel to and experience with one's senses. It is a semiotic model describing certain cultural phenomena where and when they occur.

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19 Jean Baudrillard: "Simulacra and Science Fiction". In: *Simulacra and Simulation,* pp. 121–128, pp. 121 and 123.

20 William Gibson: *Neuromancer*. London: HarperCollins 1995 (1984), p. 68. Cf. "Burning Chrome", p. 216. Also appears in "The Gernsback Continuum". In: *Burning Chrome,* pp. 37–50, p. 49.

21 Cf. Jorge Luis Borges: "On Exactitude in Science" (1946). In Jorge Luis Borges: *Collected Fictions*. London: Penguin 1999 (1946), p. 320. Lewis Carroll: *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*. In Lewis Carroll: *The Complete Stories and Poems*. London: Gramercy 2002 (1893), pp. 172–243.

22 William Gibson: *Count Zero*. London: HarperCollins 1995 (1986), p. 170.

23 William Gibson: *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. London: HarperCollins 1995 (1988), p. 84.

On this misunderstanding also hinges the question whether Gibson's world still allows for any concept of transcendence or 'beyond'. In Baudrillard's vision of an infinite, distanceless hyperreality "we can no longer imagine any other universe; the grace of transcendence was taken away from us. [...] We will no longer even pass through to 'the other side of mirror'" [sic].[24]

This, however, is clearly at odds with the very heart of Gibson's novel, as already evident in its title.

4. Neuromanticism

Dorsett Case, the main character of *Neuromancer,* takes every opportunity to escape the 'case' of his flesh and the extortion of his employers by jacking into his deck, even if this means risking death. His main impulse throughout the novel is to leave the prison of his body and his isolated mind behind. If he is unable to do so, he resorts to taking drugs. In that sense, he is addicted to the otherworld in much the same way as Dunsany's or Lovecraft's hashish-eaters long for their respective dreamlands.[25] Living on the proverbial edge, in a constant state of transgression, is his status quo.

This longing which Shelley once famously described as the "desire of the moth for the star"[26] is also implicit in the upward movement of the plot: from the gutters of Ninsei to the heaven of Freeside, from the fetters of Night City to zero-g Straylight.

The ambiguous "booby-trapped portmanteau" title of the novel[27] ('neuro-', 'necro-', 'new romancer') therefore not only refers to the eponymous artificial intelligence which introduces itself as follows: "To call up a demon you must learn its name. [...] Neuro from the nerves, the silver paths. Romancer. Necromancer. I call up the dead."[28] As Norman Spinrad points out, it can just as well be applied to Case who conjures up the spirits of the matrix, "an electronic necromancer in a black leather jacket and mirror-shades".[29]

> Often going days without eating or washing, seldom sleeping, he leaves the mundane material world of "meat" behind and voyages through a purer landscape of

24 Baudrillard: "Simulacra and Science Fiction", pp. 123 and 125.

25 The structural parallels between escape into cyberspace and escape into a classic otherworld such as W.B. Yeats' Tír na nÓg are pointed out by Donald E. Morse: "William Gibson on the Knife-edge of a Specious Moment". In Yoke and Robinson, *The Cultural Influences of William Gibson,* pp. 37–57.

26 Percy Bysshe Shelley: "To –" [One Word is Too Often Profaned]. In Thomas Hutchinson (ed.): *Poetical Works.* London: Oxford University Press 1967, p. 645.

27 Wallace-Wells: "William Gibson", *The Paris Review.*

28 *Neuromancer,* p. 289.

29 Spinrad: *Science Fiction in the Real World,* p. 112.

> the mind. There he encounters one visionary experience after another, including death himself. Like Faust, however, he has sold his soul to the devil to do so.[30]

In other words, "the Neuromancer trilogy is all about escaping the flesh."[31]

Appropriately enough, another substitute for cyberspace is sex. The interchangeability of the carnal urges and the 'neurological romance' between human and machine manifests itself not only in Molly, the cybernetically augmented street samurai, but also in Case: Molly calls his relationship to his deck "pornographic".[32] 'Matrix' is derived from 'mater', entering the matrix is called 'jacking in'. During the Straylight run, Case is granted direct neural access to Molly's body and senses. The descriptions of cyberspace and sex follow a similar imagery (with blue as color of ecstasy);[33] Case's orgasm with Molly is explicitly likened to the matrix experience.[34]

And even the artificial intelligences Neuromancer and Wintermute are yin and yang, striving for union first with themselves and then with something other than themselves: signs of alien intelligence they located in outer space. They, too, are fuelled by a 'new romantic' longing for a higher state of being.

5. The re-enchantment of outer space

Gibson admits in an interview he basically "needed something to replace outer space and the spaceship".[35] In an ironic twist on the genre, he substitutes man-made cyberspace for the central object of longing and wanderlust of traditional SF. Even first contact is established by the AIs, not the human characters, who only respond with a casual "no shit?" to the revelation of alien (artificial) life in the Centauri system.[36]

However, the virtual marriage of the AIs is short-lived; the new center cannot hold. After the fragmentation of the Neuromancer/Wintermute entity its different facets go about haunting the matrix. Soon people identify them with the Haitian Loa, turning cyberspace into the playground of a new polytheism. Originating in orbit, the advent of these Loa, the "signs

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30 Lance Olsen: *William Gibson*. San Bernardino: Borgo Press 1992, p. 67.
31 Clute: "Gibson, William (Ford)", p. 494.
32 *Neuromancer,* p. 62.
33 Cf. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.: "The Sentimental Futurist: Cybernetics and Art in William Gibson's Neuromancer", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 33 (1992), http://dpuadweb.depauw.edu/icronay_web/sentimental.htm (23/03/2014). Joseph A Nazare: "Boys Gone Wild: Neuromancer as a Book of the Dead". In Yoke and Robinson, *The Cultural Influences of William Gibson,* pp. 275–296, p. 276.
34 *Neuromancer,* p. 45.
35 Wallace-Wells: "William Gibson", *The Paris Review*.
36 *Neuromancer,* p. 316.

[...] stored against the night", brings about a remythologization of both cyber- and meatspace.[37]

Consequently, the console cowboys speaking of the 'change' that affected the matrix in a whisper, the neuromancers and stranded nostalgics longing for a new meta-narrative in their lives, strive to discover the "Shape" of the matrix, which it did not possess before, when its borders only stretched into "blank, unstructured sectors".[38] The quest for it is likened to the one for the Holy Grail.[39]

Cyberspace, charged with magical and religious connotations, changes from being a mere simulation, a landscape of signifiers, into a source of significance, the origin of meaning. Meatspace, however, seems desperately in need of it.

6. Artificial and natural space

"The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" – right from the beginning of *Neuromancer*, with its famous opening line, the old pastoral paradigm has been inversed: the city gives birth to nature, even generating its own weather.

> The Sprawl's patchwork of domes tended to generate inadvertent microclimates; there were areas of a few city blocks where a fine drizzle of condensation fell continually from the soot-stained geodesics, and sections of high dome famous for displays of static-discharge, a peculiarly urban variety of lightning. There was a stiff wind blowing, as Bobby followed Lucas down the street, a warm, gritty breeze that probably had something to do with pressure shifts in the Sprawl-long subway system.[40]

The idea of art being the firstborn and nature merely its imitator is of course much older. In "The Decay of Lying" Oscar Wilde accuses the sunsets of London to be nothing but "a very second-rate Turner, a Turner of a bad period".[41] Joris-Karl Huysmans postulates in *À Rebours:*

> Nature has had her day; she has finally exhausted, through the nauseating uniformity of her landscapes and her skies [...] the good-natured admiration of all true artists, and the moment has come to replace her [...] with artifice.[42]

The decadent authors of the 1880s still called shamelessly for a second creation. Maybe it needed the environmental awareness of the 1980s to

37 *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* p. 264.
38 *Count Zero,* p. 173.
39 *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* p. 83.
40 *Count Zero,* p. 164.
41 Oscar Wilde: "The Decay of Lying". In J.B. Foreman (ed.): *Complete Works*. London: Collins 1966 (1889), pp. 970–992, p. 987.
42 Joris-Karl Huysmans: *Against Nature: A Rebours*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009 (1884), p. 20.

rephrase that sentiment: the closer the prospect of losing the original, the more frightening the vision of an artificial world apparently became.

7. The rapture of simulacra

Many inhabitants of the Sprawl already suffer from a Baudrillardian inability to distinguish between reality and simulation. Their life is governed by simulacra: Little Bird does not know vampires exist only in simstims, Mona is surprised by how dirty and foul-smelling the Sprawl is when she experiences it for the first time with her real senses. The Ritz she believes to be a burger joint in Cleveland.

> Mona's universe consisted in large part of things and places she knew but had never physically seen or visited. The hub of the northern Sprawl didn't smell, in stims. They edited it out, she guessed, the way Angie never had a headache or a bad period. But it did smell.[43]

Whenever possible, she presses the 'play'-button on her simstim-player to escape into the glamorous world of Sense/Net star Angie Mitchell. Watching the fight between her kidnappers and guardians like a reality show, she considers the danger to her life to be merely "interesting".[44] Her main motivation is a street preacher's promise of "rapture".[45]

At the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* that promise is fulfilled: Mona replaces Angie, substituting Sense/Net's sparkling hyperreality for her own life, and thereby revealing the irony of the title: "A name associated with authentic beauty is applied to a novel whose core concerns the multiplication of simulacra."[46]

8. Tracing the referents

Many of Gibson's characters collect artwork or artifacts of the past. The many layers of alienation that distance them from their past or a meaningful present bother them. So they struggle to unravel the inner workings of their world, barely able to find their way through a jungle of signs and substitutes. Their efforts are reflected in the ubiquitous cyberpunk fetish for the 'real' thing: old books and music, personal keepsakes, real clothing or food. "Gibson and his protagonists embark in story after story on quests to restore value and meaning."[47]

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43 *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* p. 93.
44 Ibid., p. 291.
45 Ibid., pp. 68 and 305.
46 Olsen: *William Gibson,* p. 109.
47 Csicsery-Ronay: "The Sentimental Futurist".

Throughout the novels, references to the national origin of objects abound, sometimes ornamental, as in the description of barkeeper Ratz – "his teeth a webwork of East European steel" –, sometimes a desperate attempt not to lose touch with these origins, as in the case of the "fifty-year-old Vietnamese imitation of a South American copy of a Walther PPK".[48]

> While Gibson's world is in many ways tangential with Baudrillard's simulacrum, it never loses sight of [...] the original [...]. It never completely lets go of its impulse to locate meaning within depth, ambiguity and metaphor. A whole universe of nostalgia lurks beneath the technologies of the post-modern age.[49]

The task is not an easy one – everything in Gibson's world is a copy, a collage of different cultures and times, "a global market of junk"[50] reminiscent of Lyotard's assessment of eclecticism as "the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games."[51]

> Neo-Aztec bookcases gathered dust against one wall of the room where Case waited. A pair of bulbous Disney-styled table lamps perched awkwardly on a low Kandinsky-look coffee table in scarlet-lacquered steel. A Dali clock hung on the wall between the bookcases, its distorted face sagging to the bare concrete floor. Its hands were holograms that altered to match the convolutions of the face as they rotated, but it never told the correct time.[52]

Justifying Lyotard's distrust of the "slackening" in the arts,[53] Gibson's world more than often seems not to point forward anymore, but only inward into itself like a set of matryoshka dolls: it is a world without the potential for anything new, as exemplified by Mona's one-night stand Michael. His job is to come up with new and innocuous names for brands:

> There were so many companies already that the good names had been used up. He had a computer that knew all the names of all the companies, and another one that made up words you could use for names, and another one that checked if the made-up words meant "dickhead" or something in Chinese or Swedish.[54]

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48 *Neuromancer,* pp. 9 and 29.

49 Randy Schroeder: "Determinacy, Indeterminacy, and the Romantic in William Gibson", *Science Fiction Studies* 21: 63 (1994), pp. 155–163, p. 162.

50 Darko Suvin: "On Gibson and Cyberpunk SF", *Foundation* 46 (1989), pp. 40–51, p. 42.

51 Jean-François Lyotard: "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?". In Keith Crome and James Williams (eds.): *The Lyotard Reader and Guide.* New York: Columbia University Press 2006, pp. 123–132, p. 127.

52 *Neuromancer,* p. 21.

53 Lyotard, "What is Postmodernism?", p. 123.

54 *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* p. 127.

Slick Henry is an anachronistic artist living on a junkyard. He suffers from lapses of his short-time memory; experiencing the fragmentation of reality first-hand, loss of identity is not desirable for him. He yearns for something tangible and lasting in the machines he is building. The smell of old books makes him sad, and the world around him also seems to drown in its memories: everything is cluttered in old fax paper, just as the streets of bygone decades were cluttered in newspapers.

Nothing in this world is ever really repaired; it is only covered, white-washed. As Molly explains to young Kumiko in the London Underground:

> "You know what bothers me? It's how sometimes you'll see 'em sticking new tile up in these stations, but they don't take down the old tile first. Or they'll punch a hole in the wall to get to some wiring and you can see all these different layers of tile ... it's getting narrower, right? It's like arterial plaque ..."[55]

Kumiko's word for this special kind of plaque is 'gomi', Japanese for 'rubbish'. It includes any cheap material, rummage or abandoned possession. In the Sprawl, it turns into

> a rich humus, a decay that sprouted prodigies in steel and polymer [...] the fabric of time, each wall patched by generations of hands in an ongoing task of restoration. The English valued their gomi in its own right, in a way she had only begun to understand; they inhabited it.[56]

Gomi is the world visibly growing old, like annual rings in a tree: "The present's relationship to the past is one of layering and coexistence, rather than linear progression."[57] Haunting beneath the surface remain the "semiotic ghosts" of times gone by, relics of a future that never happened, "bits of deep cultural imagery that have split off and taken on a life of their own, like the Jules Verne airships that those old Kansas farmers were always seeing."[58] These ghosts are 'semiotic' because they are nothing but signs, and they are ghosts because they do not have a body they belong to.

One of Gibson's most memorable examples of a ghost come alive are the stored memories of hacker legend McCoy Pauley, the "Lazarus of cyberspace".[59] Living on as the 'Dixie Flatline' in Case's cyberdeck, he is well aware of his precarious existence:

> "I'm dead, Case. [...]."
> "How's it feel?"
> "It doesn't."

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55 Ibid., p. 74.
56 Ibid., p. 169.
57 Amy Novak: "Virtual Poltergeists and Memory: The Question of Ahistoricism in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*". In Yoke and Robinson, *The Cultural Influences of William Gibson,* pp. 11–36, p. 17.
58 "The Gernsback Continuum", p. 44.
59 *Neuromancer,* p. 98.

> "Bother you?"
> "What bothers me is, nothin' does."
> "How's that?"
> "Had me this buddy in the Russian camp, Siberia, his thumb was frostbit. Medics came by and they cut it off. Month later he's tossin' all night. Elroy, l said, what's eatin' you? Goddam thumb's itchin', he says. So l told him, scratch it. McCoy, he says, it's the other goddam thumb."[60]

It is the absence of phantom pain that bothers the Flatline – a living simulacrum, conscious of the gruesome fact that everything it once referred to has long been amputated like his buddy's thumb.

9. Into the beyond

Despite the irrefutable importance of postmodern influences on Gibson's society, his world is by no means trapped in a spiritual or imaginative impasse without any potential for change or escape. Some characters retreat into the remaining islands of pastoral life, others upload their minds into private microcosms where they enjoy virtual renditions of the past.[61] Still others strive to lose themselves altogether in the ecstasy of simulation or the union with someone or something other than themselves, using the technological tools their world has to offer, thereby turning themselves into what Spinrad christens "neuromantic cyborgs".[62]

> [Gibson's protagonists] have an advantage over the earlier inhabitants of modern fiction, in that the cybersphere promises that it may be possible artificially to construct transcendence. Because the cybersphere has already absorbed the affects and objects that in the past were associated with sacredness and value, Gibson's protagonists have no choice but to try out artificial transcendence.[63]

This artificially enhanced 'Romanticism 2.0', reaching out from meatspace to cyberspace, is structurally congruent with the classic looking-glass type of story, with strong tendencies towards a crosshatch narrative. It is however incompatible with Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality which knows no distinction between image and reality, and therefore leaves no room for conflicting truths or transcendental ambitions.

Gibson has replaced outer space as the stage for adventure with cyberspace. And while his meatspace, just like our 'real world', does indeed show traits of the hyperreal, cyberspace is where his protagonists chase

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60 Ibid., p. 130.

61 For an analysis of the pastoral impulse in *Neuromancer* and its sequels, cf. Oliver Plaschka: *Verlorene Arkadien: Das pastorale Motiv in der englischen und amerikanischen fantastischen Literatur – H.P. Lovecraft, James Branch Cabell, Mervyn Peake, William Gibson*. Heidelberg 2009, http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/10106 (23/03/2014).

62 Spinrad: *Science Fiction in the Real World,* p. 116.

63 Csicsery-Ronay: "The Sentimental Futurist".

their dreams and desires – at times nostalgic, at times rebellious or even suicidal, with Alpha Centauri, Shelley's proverbial star, as literal ending point for both *Neuromancer* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.

The boundaries of a world which has become too small are pushed back beyond the horizon. The cyberspace expedition embarking on their quest to Centauri on the last pages of the trilogy is not headed backwards or into itself, but beyond that strange and unexpected 'final frontier'. It seems as if a new direction has been opened up for these knights-errant, like Tolkien's Straight Road which leaves the curvature of Earth, pointing to a territory Borges' cartographers forgot to cover with their infinite map. The exploration of outer space, both cyberspace and meatspace, with all its promise of freedom and mission, has once again come back into focus.

10. Afterthought: nothing realer than the real?

An apprehension of the hyperreal can easily be achieved by training people to accept the image for the real thing by means of make-believe: this is how to make live action role-players believe in the power of magic, or any given cultist in the power of any symbolic system. This is how to make customers buy the idea of a tasty hamburger which exists only on the billboard and in their imagination but bears no semblance to the questionable product they will actually acquire. The financial market seems to consist solely of simulacra unrelated to any real value and wholly dependent on the agreed-upon trust of the brokers – with the consequences that are to be expected. And just the same, it is possible to make smartphone users believe in the importance of charging virtual 'resonators' with 'exotic matter'.

In Google's alternate (or 'augmented') reality game *Ingress,* players turn into agents of two warring factions and are asked to check in at 'portals' that have opened up in our world at certain landmarks. Since the game uses a modified version of Google Maps, the playing field *is* indeed scaled 1:1. And while Google profits from countless players roaming the streets with their GPS activated, collecting pictures and data e.g. for future Google services, the players staring at their screens lose themselves in the twilight world of the game.

When playing in teams, it is convenient to give each other directions in terms of the game, using *Ingress* portals as landmarks (e.g. "let's go to 'Faces at a wall'"), substituting the real thing it more or less accurately refers to (e.g. a certain side of a building) for the image. Other elements of the game, like resonators or exotic matter, are purely virtual. Still, the game requires players to step up to their 'location' in order to 'interact' with them, making traffic accidents a considerable risk if players do not pay attention. It is easy to imagine how much more immersive games like this will feel with e.g. Google Glass.

Alternate reality games and augmented reality services might exceed the promise William Gibson gave us thirty years ago: to create a virtual world not merely co-existing next to our own, but tightly fused with it and all around us at any given moment, until eventually we are not able to tell them apart anymore. The near future might turn out to be closer to the hyperreal than anything we have experienced so far.