☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

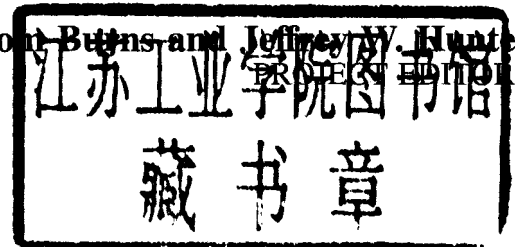CLC 186

Volume 186

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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PROJECT EDITORS

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Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 186

Preface

Named "one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years" by *Reference Quarterly,* the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC,* therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today's reader.

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Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

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■ A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

■ The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

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- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." In *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy,* edited by Charles Bernstein, 73-82. New York: Roof Books, 1990. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Vol. 169, edited by Janet Witalec, 3-8. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

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Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Project Editor:

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Neuromancer

William Gibson

(Full name William Ford Gibson) American-born Canadian novelist, short story writer, poet, and screenwriter.

The following entry presents criticism on Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984) through 2002. For further information on his life and complete works, see *CLC*, Volumes 39 and 63.

INTRODUCTION

Gibson's first novel, *Neuromancer*, is regarded as one of the most influential works of twentieth-century speculative fiction and the canonical work of the "cyberpunk" movement, a futuristic style of science fiction that combines the tough atmosphere and scatological language of crime fiction, imagery from the punk counter-culture movement, and the technical developments of the 1980s. The novel claimed all three major science fiction literary awards in 1984—the Nebula Award, the Hugo Award, and the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award—and garnered Gibson a vast critical and popular audience. Resembling the "New Wave" authors of the 1960s, who introduced such topics as sex and narcotics to the traditionally conservative science fiction genre, Gibson created a narrative in *Neuromancer* that embodies the unique sociological concerns of the 1980s. *Neuromancer* has also won wide praise for accurately forecasting several monumental technological advances, including the Internet and virtual reality.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

"The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." This oft-quoted opening line of *Neuromancer* captures the atmosphere of the novel—a world in which nature has given way to industry, technology, and mass media. *Neuromancer* is set in the near-future, where much of the East Coast of the United States has become one continuous metropolis known as "the Sprawl," and multinational corporations have superseded the role of governments. Information is the world's most valuable commodity, and black-market technicians known as "cowboys" continually monitor a vast matrix of data—resembling the Internet—known as cyberspace. Gibson coined the term "cyberspace" in his short story "Burning Chrome" which first established the world *Neuromancer* inhabits. By employing neural implants, cowboys attempt to pirate information by "jacking"—or plugging—themselves into the matrix, a subreality simulated by a globally-linked computer database.

The novel's protagonist, Case, is a former cowboy, living in Chiba City, Japan. After Case betrayed his former employers, they used a neurotoxin to damage Case's nervous system, preventing him from jacking into cyberspace. The down-on-his-luck Case is approached by Molly Millions, a cybernetically enhanced bodyguard with retractable razorblades implanted under her fingernails, with an offer from a mysterious employer. Armitage, Molly's financier, offers to repair Case's neural damage if he assists Molly in stealing the Dixie Flatline, a computer construct of the consciousness of a legendary cowboy and one of Case's mentors. They intend to use the Dixie Flatline to attack the computer network of the Tessier-Ashpool clan, the secretive founders of a gigantic multinational corporation. The Tessier-Ashpools reside in a complex called Straylight, which is part of a large orbiting space station known as Freeside. Case eventually discovers that Armitage is working for Wintermute, a sentient artificial intelligence (AI) program created by the Tessier-Ashpools. In the future, there are strict laws limiting the development of AI constructs, and Wintermute wants Case to free it and its twin AI program, Neuromancer, from their confinement in the Straylight network. Case and Molly travel to Freeside, where they meet 3Jane, a cloned descendant of the Tessier-Ashpool family. After obtaining information from 3Jane, Case utilizes a particularly effective form of "ice"—a program that bypasses computer defenses—to break into the Tessier-Ashpool system. This frees Wintermute and Neuromancer who merge together, creating a new form of higher intelligence. With Case's assistance, the new program escapes into cyberspace where it becomes a fully omniscient presence in the matrix. *Neuromancer* became the first novel in a trilogy of works—known collectively as the "Sprawl novels"—which includes *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). Though Case's fate is only hinted at briefly, Molly Millions, the Tessier-

Ashpool clan, and the Wintermute/Neuromancer construct feature heavily in the subsequent works, particularly *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.

MAJOR THEMES

The dominant theme in *Neuromancer* is the evolving relationship between humanity and technology and how scientific advances will one day blur the lines dividing the two. Gibson challenges the boundaries between man and machines by portraying human characters who rely on electronic enhancements and computer programs that adopt emotions and personalities. *Neuromancer* presents an ambivalent perspective on these developments, characterizing this merging of nature and technology as neither positive nor negative. This ambivalence is further reflected in Gibson's characterizations, particularly with Case, who functions as both a reluctant hero and a tool for Wintermute's aspirations. In Gibson's future, not even death is viewed as a constant, when individuals can have their memories stored for eternity on the matrix. Conflicting cultures are another recurring thematic concern of *Neuromancer* as Gibson creates a firm division between the world's dominant corporate powers and the urban under-class of Chiba City. The Tessier-Ashpools, the embodiment of the wealthy establishment, are portrayed as isolated and incestuous relics of a stilted past. Conversely, the black-market cowboys—though poor and amoral—are viewed as counter-culture rebels who only seek personal freedom.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Since its initial publication, *Neuromancer* has been lauded as a monumental science fiction text and the seminal work of the "cyberpunk" genre. Critics have argued that the novel's strength lies in Gibson's stylistic virtuosity, embodied by his vivid and precise narrative voice. Gibson has drawn praise for his skillful and effective combination of literary and cinematic influences in *Neuromancer,* with scholars frequently comparing his prose to the works of William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Stone. *Neuromancer* has also been recognized by reviewers for its postmodern pastiche of media and subculture references as well as its decidedly antiauthoritarian perspective on the future. Some academics have labeled *Neuromancer* as a prophetic work of speculative fiction, noting that Gibson's theories on the impact of a global Internet network on the world have been proven amazingly accurate in the years since the book's first release. However, some critics have reacted negatively to *Neuromancer,* asserting that Gibson overuses technical jargon that obscures the impact of his narrative. Such reviewers have also argued

that the novel features weak characterizations and an overly complex plot. Despite such claims, the majority of commentators have recognized *Neuromancer* as one of the twentieth-century's most significant works of science fiction.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Neuromancer (novel) 1984
*Burning Chrome (short stories) 1986
Count Zero (novel) 1986
Mona Lisa Overdrive (novel) 1988
The Difference Engine [with Bruce Sterling] (novel) 1991
†*Agrippa: A Book of the Dead* (poetry) 1992
Virtual Light (novel) 1993
Johnny Mnemonic (screenplay) 1995
Idoru (novel) 1996
All Tomorrow's Parties (novel) 1999
Pattern Recognition (novel) 2003

*Includes the short stories "The Belonging Kind," co-written by John Shirley, "Red Star, Winter Orbit," co-written by Bruce Sterling, and "Dogfight," co-written by Michael Swanwick.

†*Agrippa* was released exclusively on a computer diskette, designed by Dennis Ashbaugh to self-erase after the poem is read. The full text of the poem is now available on the Internet.

CRITICISM

John R. R. Christie (essay date 1990)

SOURCE: Christie, John R. R. "Science Fiction and the Postmodern: The Recent Fiction of William Gibson and John Crowley." *Essays and Studies* 43 (1990): 34-58.

[*In the following essay, Christie examines the elements of both traditional science fiction and postmodern experimental fiction in Gibson's* Neuromancer *and John Crowley's* Engine Summer.]

Is there a postmodern science fiction? To a question posed as broadly as this, the answer has to be, yes and no. Yes, because science fiction as a fictional genre is most often placed in a notional future, and therefore attempts to be 'post' whatever modernity happens to be current. And no, because it retains the conservatism of most genre fiction, slow to change or to break with the structures and formulae which bind alike the writerly goals and readerly expectations of generic performance and consumption.

There is additionally an issue of clarification to be undertaken for the term *postmodern*. Without the addition of a suffix, the term has an unfixed status. *Postmodern* could refer to an era, the period which has succeeded the age of modernity, or it could refer to a cultural and critical category, picking out those aesthetic endeavours which somehow place themselves beyond the aesthetic paradigms of the various modernisms, of architecture, art, film, and literature. The question of science fiction and the postmodern therefore becomes a double question. Has recent science fiction, the science fiction of the 1980s, exhibited particular signs of adaptation, firstly to what economists, sociologists, and others discern as an age of *postmodernity*, and secondly, to what cultural commentators and literary critics call *postmodernism*? Despite the inertial conservatism of popular genre writing, its reliance on the boundaries which traditionally limit plot, structure, character et al., science fiction does indeed show signs of positive adaptation, both to the global postmodernity of historical process, and the postmodernism of literary and other cultural media. It does so, moreover, in ways which allow the critic to grasp at least some of the senses in which a postmodernist culture can be understood to express the preoccupations and represent the processes of an age of postmodernity.

Perhaps the 'boundaries' of genre writing, so useful for criticism's mapping exercises, are less like hermetic barriers than like the borders of territories. For it is a property of borders that, as well as demarcating, they are regularly crossed. In 1980s science fiction, I suggest, one may glimpse two processes at work. There is a quite traditional function of science fiction being quite normally fulfilled: namely the fictive exploration of emergent futures as indicated by novel technological, scientific, political, and social elements of the contemporary world. It is thus less than surprising to find science fiction's fictive discourse coinciding at certain points with the diagnostic and prognostic discourses of 'intellectuals'. Then, more significantly for the critic's interests, and perhaps more surprisingly, there is a specifically literary process whereby some science fiction writing takes on the ideological preoccupations, the stylistic registers, the formal dislocation, which might be held to characterize cultural postmodernism. It will prove possible to argue, on the basis of certain science-fiction texts, that the coincidence of subjects and themes derivative of particular perceptions of postmodernity with a literary postmodernism is not occasional and contingent, but structural and causal. If this case holds, it will validate the category of a 'postmodern science fiction', by demonstrating the integration of both connotations of postmodern, the historical postmodernity with the aesthetic postmodernism.

Part of the difficulty of this exercise is of course the lack of any consensus over what constitutes the post-

modern, either historically or aesthetically. It is a much used term, whose increasingly rapid velocity of circulation tends to devalue it as linguistic currency.[1] As a historical category, nonetheless, there seems broad agreement that it marks a relatively new developmental phase of capitalism, as capitalism makes new inroads on the geopolitical globe to incorporate the Third World and now even Communist nations within its markets, and as it frees itself from two major historical constraints, the nation state and human labour. In the formal, discursive terms of political economy, postmodernity is also and obviously marked by the official adoption of a fourth order to supplement the classical triad of land, labour, and capital, to wit, information. Information in turn provides the name for the characteristic technological dimension of postmodernity: it is an age where information technology increasingly dominates archival, productive, and communicative processes, and binds them increasingly within a unifying and global network. The debates over postmodernity occur within this broad definitional consensus. Does it indicate a further turn of the oppressive screw of capitalism, or does it offer liberatory potentials? Does it presage a society rendered communally rational by the universality of its information and communication, or one where individuals become little more than information terminals, nodes for sending, switching, and receiving messages? These and other, comparable arguments between philosophers and cultural critics such as Habermas, Lyotard, and Jameson all tend to take place on the assumption that significant, perhaps fundamental shifts in economic, social, and political formations have recently occurred, whose ramifications bear strongly upon cultural practice and human subjectivity. The arguments themselves focus on the nature and implications of the change, not upon whether it has occurred.

On the cultural front, postmodernism generates a wide variety of definitions, dependent often upon which field of cultural practice is under consideration.[2] In general terms, postmodernism tends to be seen as a cultural formation where representation itself becomes established as an autonomous realm, an independent economy of signs whose power is such that it breaks down the epistemological barrier between representation and the world, between signs and referents. The image, the sign, become simulacra, no longer secondary or derivative, but primary and self-determinative, forming a surface without depth which constitutes the cultural consciousness of the age. This lack of depth, of affect, induces fragmentation, of individual and cultural identity, and the great explanatory endeavours and orderings of modernity and modernism no longer exert their powers of coherence and unification. Marx's historicism and Freud's psychoanalysis, each positing a depth of underlying powers which, when grasped, conferred intelligibility and coherence upon the epiphenomenal chaos of history, civilization, and human character, no

longer command the kinds of positive and critical defer-
ence which once they did. They no longer inform
cultural imagination and analysis as master-codes of
understanding and practice, but rather as codes *tout
court,* subsisting fragmentarily alongside other and
equally plausible systems of representation, usable but
not demanding to be used. Equally, postmodernism is
held to leave behind modernity and modernism's
primary demand, prevalent in both economic and
cultural spheres, namely to make it new, to produce the
novel out of the never-failing well-springs of human
creativity and ingenuity. Postmodernism substitutes
instead the total system of existing representational
signs and forms, and seeks to create not novelty or
progress, but *difference*; this it achieves by collage, bri-
colage, selecting, recombining, borrowing, plagiarism,
pastiche—the usage in different fashion of what is
already there, rather than original, *de novo* creation.

Postmodernism therefore appears to constitute itself as
a series of lacks, abandonments, and absences: causal
explanations, human originality, history, psyche, all
recede. Or rather, the forms in which they subsisted and
generated orders of meaning recede. As signs, they all
persist, capable that is of producing meaning, but not
under their old forms. In postmodernism, they generate
meaning in the new, synchronic, and surface economy
of differential signs, rather than in the old, diachronic
order of human development and its deep sources. As
with postmodernity, attitudes towards this cultural set
can vary and polarize. A building which may mix Palla-
dian, rococo and twentieth-century functionalist styles,
and which may be, for all one can tell immediately, a
bank, hotel, factory, or museum, or perhaps some
combination of all of these, may strike one as a
monstrous abandonment of historical, aesthetic, and
social order; or it may seem an elaborately program-
matic, highly erudite and self-conscious, politically
liberated piece of architecture. Comparable attitudes
may be taken on music which mixes the forms and
instrumentation of classical and rock, or on novels
which mix authenticated history and fiction, which
deploy then deny sub-generic conventions, which use
characters and scenes from other novels, and so forth.
Postmodernist practice, in other words, can appear not
just as a denial of older orders of meaning, but as a wil-
ful, nihilistic, monstrous, or fatuous abuse of those
orders. It can equally appear as art raised to hitherto un-
achieved levels of rigorous self-consciousness, scepti-
cally self-questioning, aesthetically liberated, playfully
ingenious. But once again, and as with all debates which
are not simply a clash of incommensurables, there is a
discernible level of agreement as to just what it is that
receives contrary evaluations.

On the basis of the foregoing characterizations of post-
modernity and postmodernism, a closer approach to the
question of science fiction and the postmodern can now

be made. There are a number of authors and works
well-suited to such an enquiry, the most notable being
Philip K. Dick. Dick, a science fiction writer of central
importance and great popularity in the 1950s, 1960s
and 1970s, was one of the select few to break out of the
ghetto of regular science fiction readership to reach a
wider audience. His fictional world, a world of schizoid,
autistic, paranoid, and megalomaniac personalities, of
fragmented culture, of simulacral artefact replacing
nature, is one which could be held to have invented
much of postmodernity and postmodernist literary
practice decades before their eventual recognition and
canonization by academic analysts and cultural com-
mentators. Although his death is reliably certified by a
Times obituary, appropriately enough for the author of
such an *oeuvre,* Dick continues his existence now as a
fictional entity, appearing as a character in other science
fiction, and even having one novel devoted entirely to
him—Michael Bishop's ironically titled *Philip K. Dick
Is Dead, Alas* (1988). His semiotic character persists
well beyond his fleshly incarnation, a usable sign now
incorporated in other codes and representational
systems, subsisting there to invoke Dick's own precari-
ous world of collapsing personalities and continually
metamorphic appearances. It is, one might say, a
peculiarly postmodernist fate to persist as a fictional
sign mobilized in other texts, rather than to possess that
immortality which conventionally arrives with literary
fame. It is nonetheless a fate entirely consistent with
the intent, character, and direction of Dick's work, and
therefore one which, in all reason, he would have found
difficult to disavow.

To provide a satisfactory treatment of Dick's fiction,
even within the limits imposed by this essay's topic, is
not realistically possible, so large and variegated is the
body of his work. His semiotic fate can perhaps stand
as one sort of complex postmodern effect within the
generic field of science fiction, while his work supports
a familiar science-fiction critical claim, to the effect that
what general literary culture only now recognizes and
expresses also rehearses the science fiction of two
decades ago. Rather than treat Dick's work inadequately,
therefore, this essay will examine two works of the
1980s, both well-received by readers, critics, and other
science fiction authors, both indicative of science-fiction
adaptation to the postmodern, in ways which both
overlap and diverge, so that they indicate both the focus
and the range of themes, techniques, and attitudes which
inform this dimension of contemporary science fiction
writing. The works under discussion are William Gib-
son's first novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), and John Crow-
ley's third novel, *Engine Summer* (1979).[3]

Along many lines of comparison, these appear to be
deeply antithetical works. In tone and style, Gibson's
writing is a densely packed and hard-edged third-person
naturalism, whereas Crowley's is a discursively

rambling, warmly hued first-person, softly-toned real-ism. Gibson's plot is a pulp-book or popular film caper, Crowley's a traditional quest-romance. Gibson's characters are stereotypical science-fiction cardboard cut-outs, Crowley's are idiosyncratically individualized and sympathetically portrayed humans. Gibson's setting is a near-future world where the nation state has withered away and power lies with multinational corporations, where the leading edge of development is in the East not the West, and where electronic information technology has come not only to dominate forms of life recognizable to us, but to create new and increasingly unrecognizable forms of life as well. Crowley's tale is set by contrast in a relatively far, post-holocaust future, largely pastoral and inhabited by small and idiosyncratically variegated local communities.

Beyond these contrasts, however, exist common features. Both Gibson and Crowley have young male protagonists, undergoing strenuous trials and adventures, moving thereby to some kind of maturity, a standard science-fiction plot line held in place by the predominantly young male readership of science fiction. The difference between the two here is merely generational. Gibson's protagonist generates the romantic appeal of 1980s street culture, of outsider criminality, whereas Crowley's protagonist, on a quest of mythic proportions for lost and powerful objects named in the legends of his commune, inflects a hippy sensibility of the late 1960s. Even the drugs each hero uses follow this half-generational difference, Crowley's inducing tranquillity, the painless passing of time, inner clarity, whilst Gibson's requires nerve-blasting speed stimulants. To the comparability of protagonists may be added an overriding common concern to explore the significance of what one could call artefactual persons—human/machine electronic interfaces, Artificial Intelligences, machine-recorded personalities—and through this to rethink the relations of human nature and culture, of history, memory, and subjectivity. Although their methods, styles, and conclusions differ markedly, Gibson's and Crowley's novels are united in their focus upon the capabilities of this new technological interface for radically transforming the hitherto human subject. It is just this theme, namely the technologically induced mutability of subjectivity itself, which is the characteristic preoccupation of postmodern science fiction in the 1980s.

Gibson's exploration is commendably direct. He assumes a future whose two primary elements, the twin domination of a multinational capital and information technology, are by now conventional items in the listings of postmodernity. An internal feature of this environment, namely 'cyberspace', is then shown as constituting its deep structure. 'Cyberspace' is the visual image produced when one dons a headset linked into the now universal information network. In cyberspace

are represented all electronic data stores, colour-coded, varying in size and brilliancy according to the density of information each contains. As a map of information, it is also a map of power and wealth. Case, Gibson's protagonist, is a new kind of criminal for this new environment. He has learned how to penetrate the defences of the data stores, and hires himself out to steal from them. At the outset, Case is in exile, his nerves biochemically burned out by employers he cheated, unable to pursue his trade. Restored to working order by a mysterious benefactor with opaque purposes, Case is able, tears streaming down his face, to achieve once more 'his distanceless home'. Cyberspace, the electronic matrix, is in other words where Case lives, moves, and has his being, a subjectivity whose essential features are formed in this human/electronic interface.

Thereafter, the plot of Neuromancer concerns Case's mission to liberate into autonomous existence a powerful Artificial Intelligence. In this he is aided by Molly, a razor-nailed woman of militant ferocity, Armitage, a controller and organizer, Riviera, a bio-engineered illusionist of deep perversity, Finn, an old computer expert, and Dixie Flatline, an electronic cassette recording of the cynically amusing personality and abilities of Case's one-time criminal mentor, now dead. Few of this cast's intentions and actions are of their own volition. They have been assembled by one still enchained half of the AI, who has plotted the actions necessary to unite it with its other half, thus creating the first free AI, a new form of electronic life, the first born native of cyberspace. The point about the plot is its literality. It is constituted simply by the AI's own plotting of the moves which will bring it to full being. The point about the characters is their puppet-like status, subjected to manipulation by the AI's judicious mix of inducement and compulsion. Not only are they puppet-like, they are stereo-typically recognizable for science fiction readers, preceded in memory by many analogous creations.

This, however, is by no means to enter a critical note concerning Gibson's derivative and flat methods of characterization. At one moment, Case comes upon comic-book caricatures of himself and Molly. Gibson wishes us, we may take it, to realize that his two-dimensional stereotypes are intended to be just that, and must as such perform some integrated function for the narrative. Discerning this function is a significant part of discerning the postmodernist composition of Neuromancer. To populate his electronic postmodernity, Gibson constructs characters which are themselves flat images, beings of no psychological depth, but whose interest and significance derive from their semiotic lineage, in comic, film, pulp crime fiction, and other science fiction. They are intertextual characters, drawn from a knowing acquaintance with a wide range of contemporary popular culture. To read them critically

requires not an assessment of their psychological realism, their 'humanity', but a knowledge of their semiotic descent, their always already constituted being as signs, recognizable icons within mass-marketed Western culture. In other words, Gibson's superficiality is itself a quite meticulous compositional method, a part of his postmodernist aesthetic.

This aesthetic contains other key postmodernist elements. As Case nears the end of his mission, he finds himself amid the vast historical and cultural collections of the industrial clan of Tessier-Ashpool, at whose very heart is symbolically situated the mechanism, a jewelled, enamelled head, which will release the AI. In these collections is a library; but Case does not know what it is, for books are unknown to him, as indeed are all the historical and cultural treasures of the collection. Jumbled and juxtaposed, these artefacts of civilization are now only a residuum, recognizable for readers, but lacking meaning and content for the text's actors. In this sense, they are torn loose from history, from cultural memory, from depth of being, obliged by necessity to live in the perpetual present of electronic reality.

That reality exerts itself increasingly throughout the course of the narrative. Within it, the voice of the Dixie Flatline cassette has as much presence as the human actors, and at times more. Within it, human consciousness can be trapped within hallucinatory environments, meet and talk with electronically reconstructed dead people, with simulacral images who cannot be distinguished from their human counterparts. Cyberspace is therefore a world where image and original, sign and object, are indiscriminable, a powerful fictional representation of that dissolution of the epistemological barrier between representation and world which typifies the postmodern.

This postmodernist stance receives an intriguing modulation in *Neuromancer*'s closing scenes. The AI has been liberated, and a powerful new being, quite different from any hitherto, is loose in the world. What are the implications of this apparently apocalyptic moment in human history? The following exchange occurs between Case and the AI:

> 'So what's the score? How are things different? You running the world now? You God?'
>
> 'Things aren't different. Things are things.'
>
> 'But what do you do? You just *there*? . . .'
>
> 'I talk to my own kind.'
>
> (p. 270)

We have here Gibson's distinctive version of the postmodernist aesthetic of difference. The apocalyptic difference, a new order of being represented by the AI, turns out to be of little significance for human culture, a non-event. It is not merely the case then that Gibson's postmodernism characteristically chooses the pursuit of difference rather than of depth out of which to create aesthetic order and meaning. More significantly, difference-as-meaning is itself abandoned, an abandonment which coincides with the emergence of a self-conscious, intention-formulating, language-using non-human agent.

Gibson's novel can therefore be characterized, for all its apparent formularism, as a work of extremist postmodern character in its bare-faced contemplation of a technologically determined world whose culmination may be meaninglessness. His version of the postmodern is actually a rigorous posthumanism, where there is no nature, where representation constitutes the effective real, where human character is determined by cultural icon, where inhuman agents dominate; but above all, where none of this matters very much, anyway.

Gibson's posthumanist cynicism with respect to meaning is a salutary extension for postmodernism generally. It can function as a reminder that writers such as Thomas Pynchon, often regarded as central for American literary postmodernism, are often prone reflexively to privilege literary representation precisely in order to preserve the realm of representation as a haven of humanized meaning over against the intrusive advances of science and technology within contemporary culture.[4] Gibson by contrast, although on the evidence of his texts a Pynchon reader, pursues a more relentless course, constructing a minimalist paradigm of meaning through which to express the cultural implications inherent in his version of postmodernity. To his credit, there is no resort even to alienation, to characters who would be fully human if history would only allow it; his flattened characters survive if they have the skills and speed requisite in their harsh environment, where things happen too fast for regret and lamentation. Such moralized terms cannot persist in Gibson's lexical schemes, which thus complement the decline of meaning with a literal de-moralization.

Neuromancer achieves a high degree of consistency between subject, setting, character, and linguistic register. It is helped rather than restricted in this by its generically science-fiction form. Science fiction has always been written as if machinery were as or more important than persons. For science fiction, Gibson's is a familiar if extreme disenchantment; our tools and products unmake and remake us as we make them. Mainstream literature, for whatever reasons, and with odd and honourable exceptions, has found this reciprocity far more difficult to admit and express.

* * *

Engine Summer's ensemble of subject, setting, character, and style is apparently far gentler than *Neuromancer*'s.