CHAPTER 6

On William Gibson and Cyberpunk SF (1989–1991)[1]

To the memory of Raymond Williams

0. Preliminary Reflections

More so than for other literary genres, a commentator of current SF has to cope with its very spotty accessibility. It is well known that new books in what the market very loosely calls SF come and go quickly, and are apt to be taken off the bookstore shelves in weeks if not days. Even in the case of those recognized names whose titles get reprinted, the reprinting is as a rule patchy, both selective and short-lived, governed by long-ago contracts and bureaucratic middlemen in publishing and distribution whose reasoning may be accessible to some ESP godhead but not to earthly logic. In Summer and Fall 1988, for example, in North America from the numerous SF titles by Samuel Delany there were two in print. How is a critic or historian to cope with that?

1 After the first mention, the often cited works by Gibson will be as a rule abbreviated as follows: *Burning Chrome* as *BC*, *Count Zero* as *CZ*, *Neuromancer* as *N*, and the collective anthology *Mirrorshades* as *M*.

Addition 2008: I have since realized, in the wake of Tom Moylan's analyses, that the second significant name in "cyberpunk", beside Gibson, is Pat Cadigan. Also, today what Moylan has rightly called the "implosion" of the horizons and in particular of the utopian aspect of Gibson's first trilogy can be counterbalanced by his interesting later works. This essay is what I was able to grasp by the late 1980s.

One way, favoured by fans, used to be building up a huge personal library. Even in the days before 1970, when a strict definition of the genre would have found considerably fewer than 200 new titles in English yearly, this was a somewhat crazy undertaking, often accompanied by enforced specialization on some subset of SF. To speak from direct experience, until the second half of the 1970s I tried to stay atop the field by reading if not 200 new books per year then an appreciable fraction thereof which would permit me to follow all significant authors and trends. I discontinued this endeavour in despair when the SF field mushroomed – catalyzed by the big money of a few Hollywood adulterations à la *Star Wars* and the horror mass media successors (in literal and metaphorical senses) to the often tolerable and sometimes actually thoughtful *Star Trek* series – and when the esthetic-cum-cognitive quality simultaneously dropped off sharply in direct response to the New Right dominance in the US media: a case of quality turning into quantity indeed.

All this is to say that in the 1980s no single person can follow the field, unless perhaps this is the economic mainstay of her or his life. Coming to the matter at hand, "cyberpunk" SF (the name seems less brainless than either "Golden Age" or "New Wave" and I shall henceforth use it without quotation marks) – a state of ingent confusion seems to prevail as to what ought to or may be included into and excluded from it. If narratives by Greg Bear, Pat Cadigan, Marc Laidlaw, Rudy Rucker, Lucius Shepard, Lewis Shiner, and John Shirley – people included in the important *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* – as well as by a number of further names which I have at various points seen associated with it, are to be called cyberpunk SF, then I am not competent to talk about this phenomenon as an extensive whole: I have not read many of their writings – or at least I cannot remember having read them, which may be in itself some kind of a significant comment. I have in my ongoing readings plus a 1988 attempt to catch up succeeded in locating – beside William Gibson and Bruce Sterling – only most books by Rucker, and some by Bear, Shepard, and Shirley. Yet it would be easy to show that, e.g., Bear's *Blood Music* is – under an initial and misleading overlay of hard science (biotechnology) and thriller – a naive fairytale relying on popular wish-dreams that our loved ones not be dead and that our past mistakes may all be rectified, all of this

infused with rather dubious philosophical and political stances. On the other extreme, Shepard's much more considerable, if possibly somewhat overlush, *Life During Wartime* focuses on a soldier in the field, his participation in a drug-saturated war, and his eventual ethical revulsion from such a dehumanization. Thus – in spite of its politically illiterate attribution of global power struggles and protracted wars to an *Illuminatus*-type conspiracy, based yet on two Panamanian families in control of a rare drug source – it is the weightiest contribution I know of (beside Gibson) by a new writer to SF in the 1980s. However, its narrative texture and composition is nearer to the 1960s, like an impressive cross between Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (or indeed Pynchon's *Gravity Rainbow*) and one of the better John Brunner novels (say *Stand on Zanzibar*): something like a drug-perfected ESP story used for anti-war purposes. Obviously, we are here fast approaching the limits of "cyberpunk SF" as a meaningful synchronic category. Conversely, Norman Spinrad's *Little Heroes*, by almost any definitional element I can think of: its cheerless future world, tough, gritty, and disillusioned protagonists, streetwise future slang, erasing of "hard" vs. "soft" boundaries or melding of personal experience and politics with biochips and the entertainment industry, etc., could be taken – in its characteristics and in its significance – for a central cyberpunk novel. Yet it equally seems rather uneconomical to put Spinrad into the same category as Gibson and co. This problem may be overcome by saying that Spinrad was himself (say in *Bug Jack Barron*) a major precursor of cyberpunk and that he has in feedback turn been reinvigorated by Gibson and co. I would in fact assume both of these semi-reasons are correct. Nonetheless, they also indicate that the usefulness of cyberpunk as a self-contained diachronic category has here become doubtful.

An encompassing survey of cyberpunk SF looks therefore not only materially impossible but also methodologically dubious. My solution in this pragmatic dilemma is to opt for representative intension rather than extension. As I hinted above, I have read all the books authored exclusively by Gibson and Sterling, who seem to be – by accessibility as well as by critical attention paid them – the most popular, and who are taken to be the most representative, writers of this trend. They will therefore in this first approach figure as the positive and negative pole of cyberpunk,

as well as a gauge of whether there is in fact an esthetic cohesion to it (as different from coterie mutual admiration). Nonetheless, should anybody wish to stress the "preliminary reflection" nature of this chapter, implied by the "On" in its title, I shall happily assent. Still, it seems to me legitimate to begin by discussing cyberpunk SF from what are, within the range of my knowledge, undoubtedly its best works, i.e., the less than half a dozen of Gibson's short stories published from 1981 to 1983 in *Omni* and Terry Carr's *Universe 11*, and the novel to which they led and in which they culminate, *Neuromancer* of 1984. I shall assume that these works constitute the furthest horizon of cyberpunk and try to briefly characterize it. Then I shall compare it to Gibson's *Count Zero* and to some aspects of Sterling's writing, and proceed to a tentative conclusion.

1. Pro: Utopia

The critics said it almost unanimously: Gibson "brings an entirely new electronic punk sensibility to SF" (*Asimov's SF Magazine*), a "technopunk sensibility" (New York's prestigious *Village Voice*). I would say it consists in a truly novel SF formulation of the structure of feeling dominant among some fractions of the youth culture in the affluent North of our globe (more about this in the conclusion). All of Gibson's protagonists are somewhere between fifteen and thirty years of age, all of them are totally immersed in – or indeed, it would be more accurate to say, their sensibility is constituted by – the international pop culture. They have been socialized into the new space of the 1980s, which

> [...] involves the suppression of distance [...] and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places [...]. [The body] is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed. (Jameson, "Mapping" 351)

As the propagandist of the movement, Sterling, has testified, for cyberpunks technology is inside, not outside, the personal body and mind itself:

> Eighties tech sticks to the skin, responds to the touch: the personal computer, the Sony Walkman, the portable telephone, the soft contact lens [...] prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. (Sterling, *M* xiii)

And even further, cyberpunk is centered on the mind-invasion motifs of "brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry – techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of self" (Sterling, *M* xiii). The pop culture, that largest sub-culture of our times, stemmed from the punk music and life-style of the 1970s as it was internationalized by global media and jet travel; it is international in the sense of a global market of junk (the *gomi* of Gibson's story "The Winter Market"). This is well approximated in Julie Deane's office, the first interior the reader encounters in *N*:

> Neo-Aztec bookcases gathered dust against one wall of the room [...]. 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 [...]. (12)

Delany has observed that "The bricolage of Gibson's style, now colloquial, now highly formal, now hardboiled, makes him as a writer a *gomi no sensei* – a master of junk. Applied to Gibson, it is a laudatory title" (Delany, "Some Real Mothers" 8). I would argue that this too is a development of the astounding "kipple" chapters in P.K. Dick's much underrated *Martian Time-Slip*. But here the punk tradition meshes with the high-tech of the 1980s, in particular with the burgeoning of modern computerized communications; in Gibson, their world is discreetly and very reasonably extrapolated into new drugs or hologram games, and mainly into biotechnics which come to provide their new software. These characteristics of Gibson's stories are well-known. What may be less noticed is that the "hard science" elements function as narrative mediations and common-denominator

connectives between the two poles of Gibson's agential system. These poles I take to be the overwhelming Powers-That-Be and the Little Man caught in their killing meshes. In a world whose inhabitants increasingly function as literally software (this is, e.g., the theme of "The Winter Market" and its "neuroelectronics"), the distinction between hard and soft sciences is difficult to maintain.

Case in *N* thinks his destiny is "spelled out in a constellation of cheap crome," in the knife-edge little *shuriken* stars (11–12). But underneath the symbolic glitz, the role of Destiny is in Gibson's narratives perspicaciously allotted to the power-systems dominant in our 1980s world, the ruthlessly competing "multinational corporations that control entire economies" (*Burning Chrome* 103), well symbolized by the Japanese name but also tradition of *zaibatsu*. Although Gibson's views of Japan are inevitably those of a hurried if interested outsider who has come to know the pop culture around the Tôkyô subway stations of Shibuya, Shinjuku, and Harajuku, I would maintain there is a deeper justification, a geopolitical or perhaps geo-economical and psychological logic, in choosing such "nipponizing" vocabulary. This logic is centered on how strangely and yet peculiarly appropriate Japanese feudal-style capitalism is as an analog or indeed ideal template for the new feudalism of the 1970s–1980s corporate monopolies: where the history of capitalism, born out of popular merchant-adventurer revolt against the old sessile feudalism, has come full circle – Worm Ouroboros carrying us back to Leviathan. (The focus on neo-feudalism, by the way, also explains Gibson's undoubted affinities with the Bester of *Tiger, Tiger*.) Not only Night City in *N*, but the whole "biz" world is "like a deranged experiment in Social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button" (7). Gibson's major SF precursors are Dick and Delany (and then Spinrad and John Varley). However, in between Dick's nation-state armies or polices and Delany's Foucauldian micro-politics of bohemian groups, Gibson has – to my mind more realistically – opted for global economic power-wielders as the arbiters of peoples' lifestyles and lives. This can be exemplified in his *femme fatale* Sandii, who is symbolically a "Eurasian, half gaijin, long-hipped and fluid," and who moves the way "the crowds surg[e] around Shinjuku sta-

tion, wired electric night [...] rhythm of a new age, dreamy and far from any nation's soil" (*BC* 104–07).

Dick's (and John le Carré's) focus on the increasing role of intelligence agencies has in Gibson been transferred to industrial espionage, conducted either through cyberspace or by organizing corporate defection: these two activities account for practically all of his plots. Thus, the second and narratively central pole or focus of Gibson's are the "computer cowboys" riding this cyberspace range as the hired hands, wildcard operators, hustlers, mercs or outlaws in the "intricate dance of desire and commerce" (*N* 11). They are the hero(in)es of his writings: Case in *N*, or Bobby and Angela of *CZ*. A secondary role is that of a "street samurai" (*N* 30), a mercenary of the monopoly wars: Molly in *N*, Turner in *CZ*, Sandii in *New Rose Hotel*. Usually, his narrative agents come in pairs. Gibson's theme, or at least his central agential relationship, is often a love story: *Romeo and Juliet in the world of zaibatsu* (Case and Molly in *N*, Turner and Allison, Bobby and Angela, Jaylene and Ramirez in *CZ*, Johnny and Molly in "Johnny Mnemonic," Lise and Casey in "The Winter Market," Jack and Rikki in *BC*). Such an updated Juliet, the female co-heroine, whom the narrative spotlights almost but not quite equally, is refreshingly independent and strong: Delany acutely points out the parallel between Molly and Russ's Jael, though he seems to me to overstate the case of direct filiation between Gibson and Russ or Le Guin (Delany, "Some *Real* Mothers" 8). Sometimes this Juliet turns out to be a le-Carréan traitor, a Kim Philby of the *zaibatsu* wars, as in "New Rose Hotel," sometimes she simply at the end walks away, as in *N* and *BC*, or shifts into inaccessible cyberspace, as in "The Winter Market"; but in this cruel world the love story usually ends badly. Gibson's basic affect is to be the bearer of bad news, as was Dick. A happy ending is in his work a signal for a lowering of narrative intensity, as in "Johnny Mnemonic" (so that this is rightly taken back through Molly's incidental memories in *N*). Or it is even a sign of outright low-quality faking, as in Angela's silly transition from voodoo to TV goddess at the end of *Count Zero*.

In a world laced with pills and drugs, cyberspace is itself a kind of super-drug vying in intensity with sexual love. Cyberspace, that central metaphor, is defined by Gibson as "consensual hallucination," "[a] graphic

representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system [...] in the nonspace of the mind" (*N* 51), a "monochrome nonspace where the only stars are dense concentrations of information, and high above it all burn corporate galaxies and the cold spiral arms of military systems" (*BC* 170). Sometimes not only his console cowboys but he too seems to consider cyberspace as the new sensorium of an undifferentiated human species, as "mankind's extended electronic nervous system" (*BC* 170) in which anything is possible. An abstract logic and cultural ecstasy is hidden beneath this hardboiled technical vocabulary, a yearning to get out of the dinginess and filth of everyday life that can, in Gibson's most woolly-minded moments, easily branch off into heterodox religion (as in the voodoo that vitiates much of *Count Zero*). More prudently and plausibly, cyberspace can be seen as a landscape simulation (extrapolated from "primitive arcade games [...] [and] graphics programs," *N* 51) of the mathematizable data fed into all the corporate computers, into which his hustler heroes plug by means of cranial jacks (extrapolated from present-day military experimentation). Its matrix is "bright lattices of logic" (*N* 5), contrasting with their closed horizons, the sordid temperfoam of a coffin hotel. Case in *N* sees the black-market quarter of Ninsei "as a field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialties [...] the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh [...]" (16). It has clear affinities with erotics. Case's first orgasm with Molly is one of Gibson's fine lyrical passages lurking just below the cynical, street-wise surface, and therefore chopping up the rhythms of a prose poem into brief clauses: it is described as "flaring blue in timeless space, a vastness like the matrix, where the faces were shredded and blown away down hurricane corridors, and her inner thighs were strong and wet against his hips [...]" (33). Even more strikingly, toward the end of *Neuromancer* sexual love is seen as a kind of life-affirming ocean of super-information; since the passage is situated in cyberspace, where Case is meeting his first love, Linda Lee, as a ROM construct, the two-way traffic between eroticism and cyberspace grows intricate:

> "No," he said, and then it no longer mattered, what he knew [i.e., that she was an illusion], tasting the salt of her mouth where tears had dried. There was a strength that ran in her, something he'd known in Night City and held there, been held by it, held for a while away from time and death, from the relentless Street that hunted them all [...]. It belonged, he knew – he remembered – as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read. (239)

Cyberspace is a utopia out of video-arcades or *pachinko* parlors (see Gibson's interview, *Mississippi Review* 226), a mathematized love-philtre of computer hacker lore; and – like Harlan Ellison or Spinrad – Gibson is on the side of his petty juvenile criminals trying to penetrate the corporate "blue ice." (Ice means, we are told, "intrusion countermeasures electronics," but it obviously also connotes the extremely rarefied, lonely, Antarctic edge of exhilaratingly dangerous exploration among those informational super-glaciers.) The cowboy-samurai love affairs usually end badly, but at least they (and only they – not the rulers obscenely devoted to money or power) are capable of it.

2. Con: Ideology

The rapt utopia of bright logic and teeth-gritting erotic tenderness contrasts strangely, sometimes in interesting and sometimes in kitschy ways, with the melodramatic plots full of double-crossings out of le Carré or Spinrad. The ending of *N* was already ambiguous, and somewhat vague: one Case was left in cyberspace with Linda Lee, another in "real" space alone, while the artificial intelligences (whose unshackling – the reader comes to realize – had constituted the hidden plot of *N*) pursued their unclear extraterrestrial contacts somewhere in the background. We are not too far here from Arthur Clarke's homespun quasi-mysticism, somewhat updated into the era of Fritjof Capra and of the pleasures or indeed (literally) ecstasies of

the computer, that emblematic informational super-machine of "the great suprapersonal system of late capitalis[m] [...]" (Jameson, "Pleasure" 73).

Among the different senses of ideology let me use here Althusser's sense of a twisted representation of the subject's relationship to his or her real conditions of existence. In fiction on the capitalist market a quite basic and all-permeating ideology is the need for permanent excitement and mounting reader stimulation (see Suvin "Commodities"). As Gibson's work expands but also weakens in *Count Zero*, it becomes clear that this more and more obtruding ideology and its narrative concomitant, melodrama, are *within the utopia itself*. Of the four or five principal narrative agents in *Count Zero*, three veer off, more or less strongly, into mystical realms: Marly and Turner rely on their intuition or "edge" – "that superhuman synchromesh flow that stimulants only approximated" (14) – while Angela's biotechnical enhancement manifests itself even more sensationally as voodoo and then (as already mentioned, inconsequentially) ends up as a simstim ("feelies") entertainment-industry career. Yet, in spite of his plot oscillation between defeatism and kitschy happy-endings, which is an indicator of a real dilemma this very intelligent writer finds himself in as to the direction of history and even as to the possibility of meaningful action within it, Gibson's powers of observation, the flip face of his verbal inventiveness, are on the whole very refreshing. His work does not accept the values of the black, closed world he evokes with such skill: he hates the status quo. But his balancing act accepts the status quo a bit too readily as inevitable and unchangeable.

Paradoxically, this is for me too "realistic" in the pedestrian sense, too direct a reflection of the short-term situation all of us who radically doubt the dominant values of the new capitalist feudalism find ourselves in. I believe a deeper, or longer-range, view would be to hold fast to a belief in really possible, even if statistically at the moment not very probable, radical changes. Neither the tough-guy lyricism of erotics nor the excitement of cyberspace, acceptable and even fine as they undoubtedly can be, seem to me finally satisfactory as utopias. Both, it will be noticed, are deeply socialized but still privatized utopias – or in fact utopian surrogates. Cyberspace is "[...] an information map of the economically grounded world of data and documentation: not history, certainly, but history's material fallout"

(Delany, *Mississippi Review* 33). Perhaps unwittingly, Delany has here put the finger on a basic ambiguity in this characteristic imaginary or narrative space: *cyberspace is simultaneously an acknowledgement of the overriding role of History and a flight from it*. The only way to cope with blue ice is to serve it or to destroy (a part of) it; the single person Chrome can be "burned" but the *zaibatsu* system as a whole cannot. History is an all-encompassing cruel Destiny, more than a little transcendental in its very intimate insertion into the flesh of the little protagonists. The dilemma of how personal actions and conduct relate to social change is simultaneously inescapable and insoluble within Gibson's model. I have suggested earlier that a solution logically latching on to cyberspace, and allowing a surrogate reconnecting [*re-ligio*] between disparate people and their destinies outside of and against history, is then religion. As Delany goes on to acutely observe, religion is therefore a permanent temptation of the cyberpunkers: "The hard edges of Gibson's dehumanized technologies hide a residing mysticism" (*Mississippi Review* 33).

In sum, a viable thisworldly, collective and public, utopianism simply is not within the horizon of the cyberpunk structure of feeling. When Sterling interprets the cyberpunk emblem of mirrorshades, mirrored sunglasses reflecting the light, as "prevent[ing] the forces of normalcy from realizing that one is crazed and possibly dangerous" (*M* xi), he seems to me wrong. It is true that the mirrorshade wearer's gaze is obscured for the observer, who cannot tell whether she or he is being looked at or not. Nonetheless, it is not too difficult to gauge a person's behaviour even when the eyes are hidden. Rather, in my opinion mirrorshades are a two-way transaction between the wearer and his social environment: they conjoin a minor degree of effective withdrawal with a large degree of psychological illusion of withdrawal in the wearer. In political terms, such an illusory dead end becomes obvious when Sterling continues the cited sentence by listing those dangerous mirrorshade visionaries: "the biker, the rocker, the policeman, and similar outlaws" (sic! – these macho associations of mirrorshades justify my "his" for the wearer). As Delany points out, "[mirrorshades] both mask the gaze and distort the gaze"; he then rightly proceeds to read them as an emblem or "a nice allegory of what is happening in this particular kind of SF" (Delany, "Some *Real* Mothers" 8).

Thus an evaluation of cyberpunk depends, I think, on the works examined. Even where I disagree with Gibson's horizons, he has certainly identified some real or even central problems of our spacetime. He latches onto some great precursors on the margins of SF and "high lit," such as Pynchon (in honour of whose Oedipa Maas Gibson's recurring villainous *zaibatsu* of Maas Biolabs has been named), or William Burroughs, who pioneered the insight that the hallucinatory operators are real. It is mainly in his hands that cyberpunk has been "that current SF work which is not middle-class, not comfortable with history, not tragic, not supportive, not maternal, not happy-go-lucky [...]. But it's only as a negative [...] that cyberpunk can signify." (Delany, *Mississippi Review* 30) Gibson's first two books have refreshed the language and sensibility of SF. In fact, it is correct but not quite sufficient to praise Gibson for broadening the range of SF (or indeed of modern literature) with the new vocabulary of lyricized information interfaces. The new vocabulary is, as always, a sign for new human relationships. To say, as does the first sentence of *N*, "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel," means to foreground electronic interfaces into a new nature, a second nature that has grown to be a first nature.

Sterling, on the contrary, does not play in the same league. His general form is that of a rather loose and verbose picaresque string of adventures. The yawning gap which I feel exists between Gibson and Sterling can be illustrated by comparing the erotic relationship between the junkie protagonist of *Involution Ocean* and the alien, physiologically incompatible woman Dalusa to the couples discussed earlier in Gibson. Sterling's love affair lacks the tension between Eros and Thanatos characteristic of Gibson. While the situation as set up is potentially interesting, it never gets beyond rather thin sadomasochism, where the pain inflicted (primarily on the woman) is another sexual thrill. The tension is here abolished in favor of the only remaining horizon of death. Furthermore, after two readings I cannot see either a causal or an analogical function for the love-story within the "involution ocean" quest of Captain Desperandum – itself a not very interesting foal sired by Captain Ahab's quest out of *Dune*.

Perhaps it may not be fair to judge anybody by a first novel. And in fact Sterling's second one, *The Artificial Kid*, is to my mind his most interesting

work. There is much inventiveness in the protagonist's "combat-artist" youth subculture – with "technomedicine" including superdrugs – that arises in response to the long-lifers' grip on society, i.e., on economics and politics. This subculture is both an analogy and a writing large of contemporary punk plus violent sports plus (most interestingly) their use for mass entertainment under the rulers' patronage. These fun touches, however, are accompanied by naive or outright dubious disquisitions on politics, such as Manies's "Chemical Analog" theory of society (where individuals function as molecules – not a great advance on Asimov's psychohistory). True, at least there is in this novel an essay at a range of meditations on social organization, which includes also Chairman Moses' attempt at redesigning society, St Anne's eco-theology, and perhaps most important Arti's own experiential trajectory. In spots, the novel therefore approaches allegorical validity. Unfortunately, not only are these aspects rather shallow, they are also thrown about in a slapdash manner and usually given as long speeches breaking up the tension. The plot itself meanders about and ends up in the last third echoing some fairly old SF conventions (e.g., some early Aldiss) as well as dodging the initial youth-culture issues by means of a happy ending based on friendship between young and old oiled by prosperity.

Sterling's next novel, *Schismatrix*, is a somewhat updated space opera flitting from colony to colony, in a rather forced derivation from something like the Italian Renaissance city-states and their different systems with internal intrigues of little relevance. It is an advance on his earlier novels in ambition but not in execution. It recirculates with a new sauce, pretending to some metaphysical depth of "Prigoginic levels of complexities," the hoariest clichés of 1940s–1950s SF, say from Heinlein to Farmer. As usual, some interesting themes (loneliness, flesh vs. disembodied mind) are hurriedly tossed off and quite buried under a torrent of micro-ideas neither fully digested nor integrated into the narrative. Thus the basic plot tension between the Mechanics and the more biologically inclined Shapers, transferred from five stories of his between 1982 and 1985 and evolving against a horizon of ultimate futility, does not seem to me meaningfully worked out either as concept or in the plot (see Tom Maddox, *Mississippi Review* 237–44). Again, there are amusing fragments and witty passages in the

novel, but the principle of how they are strung together escapes me. Finally, for all the inventive and hip, "postmodernist" conceptual proliferation, neither the political canvas of Sterling's *Schismatrix*, nor the supposedly biological one *of Involution Ocean*, nor the attempt to combine the two in *The Artificial Kid*, have anything like the lyrical force, intrinsic fascination, or indeed referential relevance of Gibson's cyberspace.

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I must confess, at the end of this section and in the nature of a post-scriptum to it, that the neat polarization between a worthy Gibson and an unworthy Sterling is somewhat shaken by their latest novels. Upon my first two readings, Gibson's *Mona Lisa Overdrive* confirms and solidifies his trajectory from critical to escapist use of cyberspace, masked by plot recomplication. The ending, where the Romeo-and-Juliet pair (continued from *Count Zero*) willingly withdraw from empirical to cyberpunk space, is tired old stuff, identical, for example, to the end of Fritz Lang's expressionist movie *Der müde Tod* (*The Tired Death*, translated also as *Destiny*, 1921), where the space into which the lovers enter after all the empirical defeats is more accurately – if less science-fictionally – identified as the domain of a friendly Death. As is well known, Death is the final horizon of melodrama.

On the other hand, Sterling's *Islands in the Net* is technically his smoothest work. Yet it is achieved, first of all, at the cost of a withdrawal from the earlier, more exuberant multiplicity of viewpoints to old-fashioned single-protagonist focus on Laura Webster. Further, it is politically woolly-minded, or if you prefer, its extrapolated twenty-first century has too many loose ends. Though centered on power-struggles which grow quite violent, this is a much more cheerful vision than Gibson's. True, in this "post-millennium" world the detente and international cooperation through the UN means in fact the domination of multinational companies. However, not only is this a world without the nuclear threat in bombs or power plants, without traffic jams, and without network television, its corporations also come in a spread running from responsible "economic democrats" (like Laura's Rizome) to data pirates and straightforward fascists

(like the tiny nation-states of Grenada, Singapore, and Mali where most of the derring-do occurs, and which are at the end dispossessed). Due to the exertions and sufferings of our candid and sturdy heroine, the good guys of Rizome, who value creativity and a feeling of belonging (which Sterling persists in spelling *gemeineschaft*), i.e., who sympathize with the "scientist and engineers, and architects, too, [...] who do the world's true work" (*Islands* 94–95), are at the end left in control of the field. Their framework and symbol is the omnipresent audiovisual and information Net, "Computers [...] fusing together [...] [t]elevision – telephone – telex. Tape recorder – VCR – laser disk" (*Islands* 15). The Net is a poor parent of Gibson's Cyberspace both because it is flatly extrapolative, and because its value and its values are never doubted; both of these mean that it is quite alien to Cyberspace's utopian core. Outside the Net are the disadvantaged: people like the dyslexic Carlotta, and most of the Third World population. It is interesting to look at the provenience of some names given to his narrative agents: Valeri Chkalov and Sergei Ilyushin were (in the readers' historical world) famous Russian aviation people of the 1930s–1940s, Lacoste is a famous present-day brand of clothing etc., Yaobang is the first name of a recent secretary of the Chinese Communist party, etc. Such second-hand tags from daily papers or historical handbooks indicate well the superficiality of Sterling's international politics. The fake alternative of Atom Bomb vs. The Net, on which the novel is based, is finally simply the alternative between old-style military capitalism (against which much indignation is directed) and new-style informational invasion: neither of which could in a reasonable extrapolation exist without the other. It speaks well for Sterling's ideological instincts, but badly about his narrative framework, that he was on page 292 (out of 348) forced to bring out of nowhere an anarchic rebel, extrapolated from T.E. Lawrence, to save Laura and let her properly inform the world, in a triumph of media freedom against international UN bureaucracy ... The hoariest clichés of US liberalism, those which gave it a deservedly bad name, celebrate their rebirth here.

3. Parting Doubts

A general conclusion therefore might be that Gibson best demonstrates how "Today, one need not 'be a Marxist' to realize that aesthetics, politics, economics, technology, and social relations are interdependent cultural phenomena" (Sobchak 8): though I would add one need to have at least – and that is no small least – absorbed some central propositions of Marxism. This interdependence means also that literary utopianism cannot grow any more into an independent literary genre, but only (as I have had occasion to argue) into a dominant component of SF.

Furthermore, Gibson's work also presents (at any rate, for the moment) the coalescing of a new structure of feeling. A structure of experience and of feeling is, as the late and regretted Raymond Williams formulated it, "a particular quality of social experience and relationship [...] which gives the sense of a generation or of a period"; however, that remains only "social experiences in solution" or "a [semantic] formation at the very edge of semantic availability" until it precipitates and becomes "more evidently and more immediately available" (131–34). In Gibson, a structure of feeling has indeed become formulated and therefore more immediately available for our collective discussion.

There can be few higher praises than this for a work of verbal or any other art. But for cyberpunk SF as a whole, at least two questions in mutual feedback remain to be tentatively answered or indeed simply posed. First, whose structure of feeling might this be? Second, what ideological horizons or consequences does it imply?

It is, of course, quite insufficient and improper to call this structure of feeling simply one of the 1980s. No doubt, it is such – but of everybody living in the 1980s? in the whole world? Based on both external and internal evidence, I would speculate that cyberpunk SF is representative for the structure of feeling of an important but certainly not all-inclusive international social group. As I hinted at the beginning, this is some fractions of the youth culture in the more affluent North of our globe. More particularly, cyberpunk is correlative to the technicians and artists associated with the new communication media, and to the young who aspire to such a status.

It is, of course, quite irrelevant whether a formulator of such an ideology (e.g., Gibson) is personally a computer hacker or video-arcade addict. It is only necessary that the formulator's ideology be an ideal representation of the experience from which cyberpunk arose, persuasively characterized by Sterling as follows:

> [...] high-tech recording, satellite video, and computer graphics [have turned] the artists at pop's cutting edge [...] quite often [into] cutting-edge technicians in the bargain. They are special effects wizards, mixmasters, tape-effects techs, graphics hackers, emerging through new media to dazzle society with head-trip extravaganzas like FX cinema and the global Live Aid benefit. (*M* xii)

Now this group is widespread, international, and significant beyond its numbers as a cutting edge. However, it is certainly a small, single-digit percentage even of the youth or fifteen-to-thirty age group, even in the North (never mind the whole world).

As to my second parting question, let me here too start from the language at the end of Sterling's quite representative passage just cited. It is, to put it mildly, puzzling. Is cyberpunk then proudly proclaiming itself to be another extravaganza to dazzle society in head-trips and (let me add) to be integrated into the profit-making and highly ideologized culture industry? Is it to be, as Delany observed, reactionary macho cynicism, "at its best conservative and at its worst rebarbative – if not downright tedious," so that it could well be "co-opted to support the most stationary of status quos" (Delany, "Some *Real* Mothers" 9–10; see also Csicsery-Ronay, *Mississippi Review* 266–71)? Or is it something more – perhaps even a cognitive poetry of the horizons of that social group, important for all of us? To put the crucial question: In its forte, the integration of agents and action into technosleaze, is cyberpunk the diagnostician of or the parasite on a disease? Such items as Sterling's and Shiner's collaborative short story "Mozart in Mirrorshades" (*M* 223–39), which have nothing to envy Robert Adams's genocidal "mercenaries' SF" (if I may so baptize it) – and might be even more repulsive for the slick sheen they add to it – certainly testify that it can be the parasite.

Is cyberpunk then, despite all trendy mimicry of rebelliousness, complicitous with the owners and managers of the culture industry, finally with the death-dealing *zaibatsu* so well described by Gibson, and merely trying

to get some crumbs off their table by flaunting its own newness as a marketable commodity; or is it truly (at least in intention and in part) a coalescing oppositional world-view whose final horizon would be a historical world of liberated erotics and cognitive cyberspace, without the zaibatsu or escapist head-trips? Only time will tell. But the evolution (or if you wish, the involution ocean) of cyberpunk after 1984 does not, at the moment, bode too well. The dilemma has, with some exaggeration, been put provocatively thus:

> So cyberpunks, like near-addicts of amphetamins and hallucinogens, write as if they [we]re both victims of a life-negating system and the heroic adventurers of thrill. They can't help themselves, but their hip grace gets them through an amoral world, facing a future which, for all intents and purposes, has gone beyond human influence, and where the only way to live is in speed, speed to avoid being caught in the web [...]. (Csicsery-Ronay, *Mississippi Review* 276)

The attitude thus described is, of course, properly an adolescent one. "Adolescent" does not necessarily mean invalid; indeed, it means very probably at least partly valid; but it also, finally, means untenable à la longue. We can only hope pessimists such as Csicsery-Ronay and I will be confounded by Gibson and some new stars, or at least shuriken.

Or perhaps (unkind thought, subject to verification by further SF writings): perhaps we should simply stop talking about "cyberpunk SF," that witty coinage of Gardner Dozois's? Perhaps it might be more useful to say that there is the writer William Gibson, and then there are a couple of expert PR-men (most prominently Sterling himself) who know full well the commercial value of an instantly recognizable label, and are sticking one onto disparate products?[2]

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