



PROJECT MUSE®

The Postmodern Imaginary in William Gibson's Neuromancer

Tony Myers

MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 47, Number 4, Winter 2001, pp.
887-909 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/mfs.2001.0100



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mfs/summary/v047/47.4myers.html>



THE POSTMODERN IMAGINARY IN WILLIAM GIBSON'S *NEUROMANCER*

Tony Myers

Much of William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* is centered around cyberspace, or the matrix as it is alternatively called, the representational innovation for which his work has become famous. It is first defined for the reader via the narration of a children's educational program: "Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding . . ." (67). The concept of cyberspace is valuable as a narrative strategy because it is able to represent "unthinkable complexity," to gain a cognitive purchase upon the welter of data. It is a response to what Fredric Jameson has called "the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" (*Postmodernism* 44). Pointing toward his troubled call for cognitive mapping, the spatial metaphor Jameson invokes here is richly suggestive; for, in trying to think the totality, the postmodern novelist encounters a more immediate problematic, which, as Jameson notes, operates as an analogue of the totality, and that is the metamorphosis of space itself. This metamorphosis "has finally

succeeded in transcending the capacities of the human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world."¹

In this respect, we may see cyberspace as an attempt at a postmodern cartography; that is, as a representational strategy for domesticating what Jameson terms "postmodern hyperspace" (*Postmodernism* 44). Central to this enterprise is, as Gibson's reference to the "city lights" above suggests, a recognition of the change in, and thus a recodification of, contemporary urban experience. As Paul Patton notes, "Images of the city play a crucial role in accounts of the postmodern condition. As a matter of course, these accounts include as one of their essential moments a description of the experience of contemporary urban life" (112). Indeed, the individual's relationship with, and navigation of, metropolitan space has, as Raymond Williams argues, occupied a privileged position in the thematic hierarchy of literary materials since the Romantic era. In Williams's reading, the city always presents itself as a space of sublimity—from the literal strangeness of crowds in Wordsworth to the impenetrable fogs of Dickens and the dark and dizzying streets of Conrad—the metropolis is never completely knowable, and therefore the individual's relationship to it is always monadic and alienated, even as it revels in a certain vital exoticism produced by this estrangement. Literary attempts to tame the concrete jungle vary, but one worth noting in this context is, as Williams observes, "the new figure of the urban detective":

In Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories there is a recurrent image of the penetration by an isolated rational intelligence of a dark area of crime which is to be found in the otherwise (for specific physical reasons, as in the London fogs, but also for social reasons, in that teeming, mazelike, often alien area) impenetrable city. This figure has persisted in the urban "private eye" (as it happens, an exact idiom for the basic position in consciousness) in cities without the fogs. (42)

The very name of *Neuromancer*'s protagonist—Case—signposts an inheritance from this tradition of urban rationalism that Scott Bukatman, among others, has located as a specific relationship with "the alienated spatialities of Chandler" (142). Echoing Friedrich Engels's comments about

Manchester crowds, Jameson proposes that the work of Raymond Chandler is subtended by a sense of spatial disjunction:

[T]he form of Chandler's books reflects an initial American separation of people from each other; their need to be linked by some external force (in this case the detective) if they are ever to be fitted together as parts of the same picture puzzle. And this separation is projected out onto space itself: no matter how crowded the street in question, the various solitudes never really merge into a collective experience, there is always distance between them. Each dingy office is separated from the next; each room in the rooming house from the one next to it; each dwelling from the pavement beyond it. This is why the most characteristic leitmotif of Chandler's books is the figure standing, looking out of one world, peering vaguely or attentively across into another. ("On Raymond Chandler" 131)

We may note a certain equivocation in the social status of detectives, from Sherlock Holmes to Philip Marlowe, which stems from an involvement with marginalized activities and characters (opium and *femmes fatales*, for example) that is seemingly at odds with a more respectable pursuit of justice and the law. This can be seen as the expression of an affinity with, and therefore of an ability to negotiate, just those urban spaces that are occluded from the "normal" social gaze. If we plot this affinity as a trajectory, then its logical end-point might well be found in a character like Case who, being a thief, is, in every sense of the word, streetwise.

In *Neuromancer*, as Claire Sponsler avers, "although the dominant culture always looms in the background—in the multinational corporations (the Maas-Biolabs and Hosakas) as well as in the form of a few powerful individuals (the Tessier-Ashpools and Josef Vireks of the world)—the surface attention is all on the counterculture, from orbiting Rastafarians to punk street gangs to mincome Project voodoo worshippers" (629). For Case the "outlaw zones" (Gibson, *Neuromancer* 19) that provide the topography of *Neuromancer* are readily navigable, throwing up certain understandable patterns as long as you know what you are looking for, such as in this description of the apparently aleatory mobilities of

the street mob: "Groups of sailors up from the port, tense solitary tourists hunting pleasures no guidebook listed, Sprawl heavies showing off grafts and implants, and a dozen distinct species of hustler, all swarming the street in an intricate dance of desire and commerce" (18–19). The taxonomic specificity of the expert gaze here obviates the unknown terror of the urban crowd and replaces it with cognizance of an otherwise invisible concatenation of distinct purposes that unite in the collective experience of "desire and commerce." We may note then that, as with Jameson's Chandler, the metropolitan populace's "need to be linked by some external force" is fulfilled by what, following Williams, we may term the "private eye" of Case. At one level, this example of Case's all-knowing gaze operates as a rehearsal of the larger problematic of point of view in the novel and in the postmodern generally; for, as Bukatman observes of the latter, there has "arisen a new and boundless urbanism, one that escapes the power of vision through its very dispersal" (122–23).

We may take this "boundless urbanism" to register both a geographical and a metaphorical metropolitan incontinence. The former finds its instantiation in the topography of *Neuromancer*, where Case's hometown, "the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis," is suitably indexed, for a city overflowing the measure, by the sobriquet "the Sprawl" (57). The sheer material expansiveness of the metropolis, which in *Neuromancer* extends even into the extra-terrestrial orbit of Freeside, the space-station town that is "brothel and banking nexus, pleasure dome and free port, border town and spa" (125), is matched in another sense by the ubiquity of urban experience. It is this that Jameson has in mind when he remarks upon the complementary "disappearance of Nature":

Where the world system today tends toward one enormous urban system [. . .] the very conception of the city itself and the classically urban loses its significance and no longer seems to offer any precisely delimited objects of study, any specifically differentiated realities. Rather, the urban becomes the social in general, and both of them constitute and lose themselves in a global that is not really their opposite either (as it was in the older dispensation) but something like their outer reach, their prolongation into a new kind of infinity. (*Seeds* 28–29)

We may perhaps discern in this global imperative of the urban the broad outline of a dynamic that finds one of its most instructive delineations in Jacques Lacan's concept of the imaginary. Specifically, it is what Lacan means in referring to the imaginary "vertigo of the domination of space" (28). For the city, like the ego, pursues its other in "Nature" only insofar as it then subsumes that difference within the identity of itself. As Teresa Brennan points out: "The ego [...] is opposed to the history of anything different from itself. It is interested in difference only in so far as everything different from it provides it with a mirror for itself. In this respect, it will reduce all difference to sameness" (37). If "difference" is continually being chewed up and swallowed in the territorializing maw of the ego, then this, as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen reflects, makes of its world a space "strangely petrified and static, a sort of immense museum peopled with immobile 'statues,' and 'images' of stone, and hieratic forms" (59).²

We can find something of this unregeneracy in the character of the postmodern city, for, as Sharon Zukin contends, "Despite local variations, [...] the major influence on urban form derives from the internationalization of investment, production and consumption. In socio-spatial terms [...] internationalization is associated with the concentration of investment, the decentralization of production, and the standardization of consumption" (436). Zukin cites McDonald's and Benetton as examples of this standardization and notes that "[t]heir shops are ubiquitous in cities around the world," and therefore help to make those cities over in the image of each other (436). Such a process, however, occasions a problematic definition of otherness, for if urbanicity has achieved such a ubiquity that even the most bucolic of backwoodsmen can simultaneously assume the position of streetwise urbanite, how can urban experience be characterized with any sense of singularity? For Jameson the answer to this question can be found in the global sweep of representation. Instead of drawing upon national images of provincial and rural boredom to counterpoint and thus characterize the excitement of the city, he argues that this contrast is preserved, "but simply transferred to a different kind of social reality, namely the Second World city and the social realities of a nonmarket or planned economy" (Seeds 29–30). As adductions for his argument Jameson calls upon the now classic images of "meager shelves of consumer goods in empty centrals from which the points of light of advertising are absent, streets from

which small stores and shops are missing, [and the] standardization of clothing fashion (as most emblematically in Maoist China)" (30).

In *Neuromancer*, Turkey occupies the position of other in capitalism's cultural imaginary; it is, the narrative assures us, "a sluggish country" (108). Such sluggishness is due, in no small part, to the antiquated technologies still operating in Turkey: a Citroen sedan is only "a primitive hydrogen-cell conversion" (108), "the left hand of John the Baptist" is merely kept "inside this brass hand thing" rather than "in a support vat" (116), and even "the written word still enjoy[s] a certain prestige here" (108). More tellingly, however, it is the superannuated architecture, with its "crazy walls of patchwork wooden tenements" (107) and "soot-stained sheets of plastic and green-painted ironwork out of the age of steam" (112), that provides the most pressing sense of otherness. It is, the narrator comments, "an old place, too old" (113). Indeed, without the seclusion of a "dome," the Finn, who traffics in stolen goods, feels "agoraphobic" (108), and it is only upon entering the bazaar that he is "comforted by the crowd density and the sense of enclosure" (112). The irony of this architecture is that it constitutes a kind of return to origins, for as Jameson points out, postmodern buildings "which are open emporia in which one finds food markets, theaters, bookstores, and all kind of other specialized services, run together in a fashion that surely derives ultimately and historically from the great open-air markets or bazaars of the East and of precapitalist modes of production" (Seeds 156–57).

What is striking about this observation and its relation to the representation of Turkish space in *Neuromancer* is how it articulates the dynamic of capitalism's cultural imaginary. If the Finn feels "comfortable" in a bazaar, it is because his indigenous topography has already subsumed that archaic spatial form within itself. The otherness of Turkey here is thus merely a property of its separation from the other spatial and technological forms that constitute the postmodern in its unity.³ Indeed, for Jameson, the form of cyberpunk develops from "the evaporation of a certain Otherness" (Seeds 151). Such a process of "evaporation" perhaps finds its most salient expression in an economy of enclosure or fortressing.⁴ An example of this is, of course, the bazaar, which stands as such an emblematic postmodern form because of "the sense of enclosure" (112) it affords. This sense of envelopment proceeds from what Jameson terms "a logic specific to Imaginary space, whose dominant

category proves to be the opposition of container and contained" and "the fundamental relationship of inside to outside" (*Ideologies* 86). Without explicitly making the connection himself, Jameson has, in later publications, linked these relationships to both postmodern architecture and science fiction in general. Of the former he notes that it is subject to what he designates "the *Blade Runner* syndrome" in which "the interfusion of crowds of people among a high technological bazaar with its multitudinous nodal points, all of it sealed into an inside without an outside, . . . thereby intensifies the formerly urban to the point of becoming the unmappable system of late capitalism itself" (*Seeds* 157). Of the latter, Jameson proposes that "all SF of the more 'classical' type is 'about' containment, closure, the dialectic of inside and outside" ("Science Fiction" 58). Above and beyond the spaces we have already been looking at, then, it is perhaps not fortuitous that the mise en scène of much of *Neuromancer* is cyberspace or, more pertinently, the matrix, a word that finds its etymology in "womb"—the paradigmatic topos of container and contained. In this respect, of course, the name of Case himself is a not insignificant reference to such a spatial formation.

There is, then, a contradiction at work in the postmodern metropolis. It is, in its boundlessness, what Jameson terms a "total space" (*Postmodernism* 40); it is also, in its replication at the micro-level, a totalizing space, one whose very boundedness aspires to "some new category of closure" (39). This "imploded urbanism" (126), as Bukatman describes it, may be more readily understood by reference to Jameson's celebrated analysis of the Bonaventure Hotel. Jameson detects a certain modality of hermeticism at work in the overtly discreet construction of the entrances to the Bonaventure, which serve to seal its occupants into the total space of the hotel: "[I]deally the minicity of Portman's Bonaventure ought not to have entrances at all, since the entryway is always the seam that links the building to the rest of the city that surrounds it: for it does not wish to be part of the city, but rather its equivalent and its replacement or substitute. That is obviously not possible, whence the downplaying of the entrance to its bare minimum" (*Postmodernism* 40–41). We can find a similar thematic at work in the architecture of *Neuromancer*, for example in Cheap Hotel, where "the courtyard that served the place as some combination of lobby and lawn" (30) is located on some unspecified level above the fifth floor; or in

Straylight where "the entrance to the elevator had been concealed beside the stairs to the corridor" (299).

In a second moment the difficulty of locating an entrance to postmodern buildings is joined by an active repulsion in the form of the building's very materiality, which in the case of the Bonaventure is its "great glass reflective skin":

[T]he glass skin repels the city outside, a repulsion for which we have analogies in those reflector sunglasses which make it impossible for your interlocutor to see your own eyes and thereby achieve a certain aggressivity toward and power over the Other. In a similar way, the glass skin achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighbourhood: it is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel's outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it. (*Postmodernism* 42)

As Bukatman argues, "The new monument is no longer the substantiality of the building, but the depthless surface of the screen. This is a transformation literalized in *Blade Runner* by the proliferation of walls which are screens, sites of projection now rather than inhabitation" (32). The city, in other words, maintains an extimate relation with itself; it is, to recall Borch-Jacobsen's memorable phrase "ex-posing itself, exactly as the eye can see itself only by exorbiting itself in a mirror" (52).

The move from the opacity of walls, with all their connotations of density, solidity and substantiality, to the reflectiveness of screens is realized as something of a leitmotif in *Neuromancer*. Indeed, according to Gibson, mirror/silver is clearly the color of the future. For example, the Jarre is "walled with mirrors" (14), the Sense/Net building is "mirror-sheathed" (80), the Chinese virus program has "black mirrors" on its flanks "reflecting faint distant lights that [bear] no relationship to the matrix around it" (216), boots are "sheathed in bright Mexican silver" (4), "the beach [is] silver-gray" (281) and even the aftershave has a "metallic edge" (111). It is little wonder, then, that with so many reflective surfaces, one of the paradigmatic topoi of *Neuromancer* is the *mise-en-abyme*. For example, when Molly, who has "twin mirrors" of "empty quick-silver" for the lenses of her sunglasses (42), meets Terzibashjain, similarly

attired with "silver glasses" (36), the reflections cause them to make, as he points out, "the *tunel* infinity, mirror into mirror" (109). This is equally a problem at the level of built space, for example, in Freeside: "The glass wall of the balcony clicked in with its view of Desiderata, but the street scene blurred, twisted, became the interior of the Jarre de Thé, Chiba, empty, red neon replicated to scratched infinity in the mirrored walls" (172). Traditional architectural notions of exteriority and interiority are thus suspended in this new reflective space. People and buildings are absented from their actual place by projection, only to return in the phenomenologically vertiginous non-space of the *mise-en-abyme* in which location is never fixed. It is a problem compounded by the autotelic spatiality of postmodern interiors, that total space which, like the Villa Straylight, the labyrinthine house on Freeside, "is a body grown in upon itself" (206) and which replicates its traditional exterior within itself in the connotative form of street lights and road signs and, most obviously, plants which for Case on Freeside are "too cute, too entirely and definitively treelike" (154).

Whilst, on one level, there is something uncanny about this environment, something too unfamiliarly familiar, where even the random forms of nature itself betray a degree of calibration in the "too cleverly irregular slopes of sweet green grass" (154), we may also take this as an instance, at another level, of the larger problematic of coordination that is so pointedly emblemized in the *mise-en-abyme*. For Bukatman, "[t]he new urban space is directionless—coordinates are literally *valueless* when all directions lead to more of the same" (126). Such a sublime topography is precisely what is adumbrated in *Neuromancer*. On Freeside, for example, "[i]f you turned right, off Desiderata, and followed Jules Verne far enough, you'd find yourself approaching Desiderata from the left" (180). Molly sums up the problem with admirable terseness when she points out to Case that "[t]he perspective's a bitch":

They were standing in a broad street that seemed to be the floor of a deep slot or canyon, its either end concealed by subtle angles in the shops and buildings that formed its walls. [. . .] There was a brilliant slash of white somewhere above them, too bright, and the recorded blue of a Cannes sky. He knew that sunlight was pumped in with a Lado-Acheson system whose two-millimeter armature ran the length of the

spindle, that they generated a rotating library of sky effects around it, that if the sky were turned off, he'd stare up past the armature of light to the curves of lakes, rooftops of casinos, other streets—But it made no sense to his body. (148)

If this metropolitan simulacrum, in which even the sky can be "turned off," makes no sense to Case's body it is because, as Jameson declares, "[w]e do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace [...] in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism" (*Postmodernism* 38–39). Absented from itself, this imaginary space finds its most succinct and troubling definition in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* when one of the characters recalls the fundamental lesson of the new geography: "There's no there, there" (55).⁵

What strikes the reader about this concatenation of spatial motifs is how the logic of the topographical content in *Neuromancer* finds its expression in the form of the novel itself. We may note, for example, how the postmodern building's impediments to entry and its rebarbative exterior are realized formally by the novel's opening, as it were, in medias res. Furthermore, the reader's difficulty in coordinating her/himself in the reading space of *Neuromancer* is exacerbated by the genuinely forbidding nomenclature and technical innovations it portrays. The novel is, in effect, a total space that repels the cyberspace ingénue. As Bukatman observes, its difficulty rehearses a certain elitism, for "[n]ot everyone can read *Neuromancer*; its neologisms alienate the uninitiated reader" (152). Such assertions beg the question of how one joins the privileged ranks of the initiates. In this respect we may profitably attend to the construction of metaphors in the text, which replicate at the level of the sentence the topeme we have already identified as the *mise-en-abyme*. Nowhere is this metaphorical incest more clearly expressed than in cyberspace itself, operating as both vehicle and tenor of a series of tropological substitutions that ultimately dissolve the very saliency of such distinctions. For example, early on in the novel, the narrative recounts Case's experience of being followed in the street:

[I]n some weird and very approximate way, it was like a run in the matrix. Get just wasted enough, find yourself in some desperate but strangely arbitrary kind of trouble, and it was possible

to see Ninsei as field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to cell specialities. Then you could throw yourself into a high speed drift and skid, totally engaged but set apart from it all, all around you the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market(26)

The macro- and microscopic are conflated here in a process of equivalence that finds being chased through the city comparable to programming a computer, the content of which is subsequently compared to the metropolis itself and that, in turn, to bio-chemical systems in the body, which is then an image of bodies themselves, and, finally, an analogy of cyberspace data. Similarly, in the penultimate run of the novel, Case's sensory experience is described as "receding, as the cityscape recedes: city as Chiba, as the ranked data of Tessier-Ashpool SA, as the roads and crossroads scribed on the face of a microchip, the sweat-stained pattern on a folded, knotted scarf" (310). What is disclosed by this collocation of images is how, throughout *Neuromancer*, the metropolis is troped by cyberspace, and vice versa, in a series of substitutions that finds each element operating as the deep structure and regulatory frame of the other. In other words, we can understand cyberspace by reference to the city and we can understand the city by reference to cyberspace.

It will be unsurprising, then, to learn that the work of dedifferentiation can also be detected in the generic form of the novel itself. Apart from the chronotope of science fiction, to which, as Gibson admits, *Neuromancer* stands in something of an antagonistic relationship, the whole novel finds its matrix in various pulp fictions, including those of the cowboy-frontier, spy, private detective, and gangster genres, as well as in a more specific relationship to Thomas Pynchon. Such mongrelization extends through *Neuromancer* down to the primacy of the neologism itself, which is, perhaps, most clearly represented in the compound "cyberspace."⁶ We are, then, in a sense returned to the issue of coordination, for, in its aggregation of forms, *Neuromancer* fails to afford a single generic point, other than itself, from which to establish its meaning. For Jameson this is symptomatic of a wider problem:

From the generic standpoint, what interests us here is the way in which the former genres (thrillers, spy films, social

exposés, science fiction, and so on) now conflate in a movement that re-enacts the dedifferentiation of the social levels, and by way of their own allegorization: so that the new post-generic genre [works] are allegories of each other, and of the impossible representation of the social totality itself. (*Geopolitical Aesthetic* 5)

The irony of reading the form of *Neuromancer* as a symptom of the impossibility of negotiating the overdetermined social spaces of late capitalism is that cyberspace represents an attempt to overcome just such an impossibility in the first place. Indeed, it is, as we shall see, the supreme example of a machinery of de-differentiation.

This feature of the novel proceeds in large measure from the fact that *Neuromancer's* primary register is a visual one, a characteristic that finds a particular resonance in the fact that it is also a "visionary" text. As the suffix "-mancer" suggests (from the Greek *manteia*, meaning "sooth-saying"), the novel proclaims its divinatory project from the title onwards, one that shows Gibson sketching an intuitively suasive portrait of the near future. Part of the suaveness of this account lies in the content-level detail he has picked up from postmodernity and recast, like geomantic earth, within another configuration that is, nevertheless, recognizably cognate with our own period. Features, such as the company names and the hegemony of Japanese-American culture, right up to the obsession with the technologization of nature itself, are granted a sanction of plausibility from the reader precisely because they are extensions of existing practices. Indeed, anticipation in its own right is just such a practice, if not *the* dominant one of late capitalism, as the necessity of accelerating turnover time has occasioned a wholesale discounting of the future into the present. This, in turn, has spawned a mass expectancy industry concerned with forecasting and forging market trends, and using, more often than not, the very computer technology that forms the subject matter of *Neuromancer*.

Speculation is also a defining characteristic of the imaginary mode. As Lacan comments, "The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation" (4), for the anaclitic child prefigures in an image the full development of its motor-nervous system and thus achieves a kind of self-mastery. Such a child, in other words, is something of a *neuro* (nerves)—*mancer* (of the future). In terms

strikingly akin to these, Marshall McLuhan has famously written of humanity's progress toward self-mastery by way of the annihilation of space-time: "After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western World is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned" (3–4).⁷ In this image of the extension of our central nervous system we can witness the problems of the imaginary amplified to global proportions. Once again the task of self-mastery is imperiled by its own success, exposing itself to the Kantian jeopardy of a boundless subjectivity that is pure self and that thereby fails to secure its own objective conditions of existence. In this respect, the "consensual hallucination" of cyberspace can be understood as a kind of collective solipsism in which the aspirations of bourgeois individualism are given free reign and end up being strangled on the leash. For Terry Eagleton these temporal and spatial projections are of a piece with each other:

The fantasy of total technological omnipotence conceals a nightmare; in appropriating Nature you risk eradicating it, appropriating nothing but your own acts of consciousness. There is a similar problem with predictability, which in surrendering phenomena into the hands of the sociological priests threatens to abolish history. Predictive science founds the great progressive narratives of middle-class history, but by the same stroke offers to undermine them, converting all diachrony to a secret synchrony. (*Ideology* 74)

The tension that Eagleton alights upon here between the diachronic and the synchronic is endemic to all anticipatory projects and, as such, it enables us to read them in two seemingly contradictory ways.

While conceding with Eagleton that the imaginary mode fosters a secret synchronization, I maintain that it equally expedites a form of diachronization by affording the nascent subject the possibility of narrativization. The anticipation of the mirrored infant enables it to impute to its current position a teleology it would otherwise lack, "decisively project[ing]," as Lacan remarks, "the formation of the individual

into history" (4). We may understand this to mean resituating our own present as cause rather than effect, which is to say as "history." For Jameson, this is the generic function of science fiction, which, in presenting us with its possible futures, thereby "transform[s] our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come. It is this present moment [...] that upon our return from the imaginary constructs of SF is offered to us in the form of some future world's remote past, as if posthumous and as though collectively remembered" (Jameson, "Progress Versus Utopia" 152). In *Neuromancer* it may be argued that this historicizing process offers itself up more clearly in the guise of redemption, or at least (given the dystopian qualities of Gibson's near future) the cool comforts of survival after the mutually assured destruction of the Cold War, which was threatening to heat up at the time of the novel's production.

In the light of this, as Steven Connor notes, anticipation has come to acquire a regenerative potency as a narrative strategy: "If one form of the novel of history is concerned with investigating the new relations to the past required by the dramatic changes of the late twentieth century, another form is concerned with the possibility of narrating a future, and with the assailed potential of narrative as such in a world in which absolute finality and closure, which had hitherto been available to human life through narratives, now threatened to bring to an end the narrative of human history" (199–200).

There is a sense in which the speculative novel does run the risk of effecting closure upon the narrative of history, and, as Eagleton points out above, of smuggling in synchrony under the assumption of diachrony. For, like the narcissistic infant captivated by its own image, there is a danger of imagining the future in terms of the present and thereby of forming a closed circuit of representation. *Neuromancer's* all too persuasive future would seem to attest to this predicament, but in doing so it also bears testament to a collective enfeeblement of the utopian imagination. We are so thoroughly immersed in the here-and-now, that we are, as it were, inured to the future as much as we are inoculated against the past. For Jameson, science fiction's function is to disclose this limited horizon, because in "setting forth for the unknown, [it] finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits" ("Progress

Versus Utopia" 153). The limits of the postmodern imaginary are always those of the "self." One of the more notable expressions of this predicament is, for Eagleton, the triumphal pronouncements of the end of history—pronouncements that he takes to task in a suitably speculative register:

It is not out of the question that, in the apparent absence of any "other" to the prevailing system, any utopic space beyond it, some of the more desperate theoreticians of the day might come to find the other of the system in itself. They might, in other words, come to project utopia onto what we actually have, finding in, say, the mobilities and transgressions of the capitalist order, the hedonism and pluralities of the marketplace, the circulation of intensities in media and disco, a freedom and fulfilment which the more puritanical politicians among us still grimly defer to some ever-receding future. They might fold the future into the present and thus bring history slithering abruptly to a halt. (*Illusions* 18–19)

One of the more curious manifestations of the temporal folds that have been produced by *Neuromancer* is its effects on the development of technology. The novel's central innovation is, for example, discussed as if it were actually in existence, as Julian Stallabrass points out: "[C]yberspace as a technological development has a strange status, not only because it has not been realized, but also because it is a concept that has its origins in fiction, particularly in the cyberpunk novels of William Gibson" (5). So persuasive is Gibson's vision that the first virtual reality machine was named after cyberspace, British Telecom are developing a "neuro-camera" under the label "Soul Catcher" (from the title of Chapter 37 in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*), and Timothy Leary (self-proclaimed virtual technology guru before his death) described Gibson as the author of the "underlying myth, the core legend, of the next stage of human evolution" (Woolley 36–37).⁸ The new machines of virtuality are, in other words, in an analogous position relative to *Neuromancer*, as the imaginary infant is to the image in the mirror.

The enfeeblement of the utopic faculty may itself be read as a symptom of the encroachment of immediacy upon the postmodern subject. The geographies of enclosure, which are already at work in the

contemporary metropolis, are emblematic of this condition, and it is one that, as Jameson remarks, threatens the very practice of symptomology in the first place: "The new space that emerges involves the suppression of distance (in the sense of Benjamin's aura) and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places, to the point where the postmodern body [...] is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed" (*Postmodernism* 412–13). Such a "suppression of distance," of course, is precisely the organizing principle of cyberspace, whose topeme is, as we have already noted, the container. Indeed, according to Gibson, cyberspace as a concept was intended to suggest: "the point at which media [flow] together and surround us. It's the ultimate extension of the exclusion of daily life. With cyberspace as I describe it you can literally wrap yourself in media and not have to see what's really going on around you" (qtd. in Woolley 122).

We may read this statement as an acknowledgement of the function of cyberspace as an imaginary resolution of the real problems of coordination that have been identified as so perplexing to the postmodern subject. For Bukatman this is a reason for celebration, because, in its "open acknowledgement of the supersession of individual bodily experience" (149), cyberspace offsets the impoverishment of the self with a kind of cognitive compensation: "[C]yberspace certainly hyperbolizes the space of the city, projecting the metroscape into an exaggerated representation that accentuates its bodiless vertigo, but it permits the existence of a powerful and controlling gaze" (150). The power of this gaze lies in its ability to unify and thereby domesticate the city's heterogeneous spatial practices. In this respect, we might concede that it is cyberspace, and not Case, that assumes the mantle of the "private eye" which for Raymond Williams is the emblem of urban rationalism.

Nowhere is the status of the cyberspace subject more clearly realized as what Bukatman terms a "pure gaze" (151) than in the climactic run of the novel when Case employs a program called Kuang to hack into an Artificial Intelligence: "The Kuang program spurted from a tarnished cloud. Case's consciousness divided like beads of mercury, arcing above an endless beach the color of the dark silver clouds. His vision was spherical, as though a single retina lined the inner surface of a globe that contained all things, if all things could be counted" (304). Perhaps

the most significant part of this astounding image is the subjunctive mood of the last clause and its qualification of the totalizing claim made in the previous statement. The one "thing" that cannot be counted in this scenario is, of course, Case himself, reduced as he is to the status of a pure gaze. For Žižek this situation is exemplary of both the fantasy-gaze and, in a final irony for a postmodern text, the Cartesian *cogito*:

Cogito designates [the] very point at which the "I" loses its support in the symbolic network of tradition and thus, in a sense which is far from metaphorical, ceases to exist. And the crucial point is that this pure *cogito* corresponds perfectly to the fantasy-gaze: in it, I find myself reduced to a non-existent gaze, i.e., after losing all my effective predicates, I am nothing but a gaze paradoxically entitled to observe the world in which I do not exist (like, say, the fantasy of parental coitus where I am reduced to a gaze which observes my own conception, prior to my actual existence, or the fantasy of witnessing my own funeral). (*Tarrying* 64)

In this respect, cyberspace, we might say, is a computerized *cogito*; a fantasy construct in which the "I" is absorbed by the "eye" and the subject is reduced to observing reality from behind his/her retina. Looking at everything from all sides, the cyberspace gaze embodies what Miran Božovič describes as "the unbearable experience of the absolute point of view" (166).⁹ Such an experience remains, however, an ideological one, because of the manner in which, as Stallabrass argues, "[a] number of old bourgeois dreams are encompassed in the promise of this technology: to survey the world from one's living room, to grasp the totality of all data within a single frame, and to recapture a unified knowledge and experience" (4). Stallabrass here reminds us that if cyberspace serves as a kind of cognitive map of the city (that is as a way of representing and reordering the relationship between the subject and the metropolis), then this is merely a level of mediation; it is, to recall Jameson, a "representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentred global network of the third stage of capital itself" (*Postmodernism* 38).

We may understand this assertion more clearly by reference to one of the most graphic descriptions of cyberspace in *Neuromancer*:

Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. Up your scale. Each pixel a million megabytes. At a hundred million megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parks ringing the old core of Atlanta (57)

Like capital itself, all qualities are transmuted into quantities here, recalibrated as a universal form of data and thus domesticated within "a single frame." The recodification of data as absolutes, what Stallabrass affirms as "its transformation into readily understood visual forms" (8), is what finally betrays the imaginary provenance of cyberspace. At the time of *Neuromancer's* production, that is before 1984, computers were still essentially a literary technology, documenting data in terms of figures and words. On Gibson's screens, however, data is represented pictorially and, as such, it represents a retreat from the differential values of the symbolic into the absolutism of the imaginary. For Stallabrass this amounts to a utopian gesture: "Such quantitative modes of thought presuppose an identity between concept and object, word and thing, and privilege mathematical logic as alone capable of grasping the essence of things. The invention of cyberspace is, then, the attempt to create a world where to perceive is the same as to understand, where 'objects' are entirely adequate to their concepts, and are even, through their dematerialization, identical with them" (31). What such a space ultimately represents, however, is a world without lack, a "Shangri-da" we might say, in which the constitutive insufficiency of the symbolic is fatally replenished by the transparency of the image. Lacking any point of mediation, representation thus collapses back into reality and the subject disappears from the signifying chain, finally failing to enjoy the ostensive paradise that it has dreamt about for so long. For it is lack, this challenge to the empire of the self, that indexes and expedites the constitution of subjectivity in the first place. As Ernesto Laclau argues, "I am a subject precisely *because* I cannot be an absolute consciousness, because something constitutively alien confronts me" (21).

The realization of Gibson's cyberspace, then, has devastating effects. In trying to concatenate the relationships between the individual and the totality, cyberspace subjects the latter to the imaginary dynamic of the former. The operations of this dynamic result in the subjectification of the totality, and both it and the individual subject merge into an absolute. The consequence of this is that, lacking any point of opacity in the signifying chain, the subject also disappears. All that is left is the existing symbolic network, a kind of imaginary symbolic, petrified and no longer subject to change. Of course, this fact has a deeply ideological force. For if we accept that cyberspace functions as a form of cognitive mapping, it does so only insofar as it fixes the relationship between the individual and the totality of late capitalism in a permanent embrace. The imbrication of Case and the technologies of the matrix may be said to represent something of this outcome, one in which subjectivity is reduced to a function of the system in a manner reminiscent of the most pessimistic critiques of capitalism. Indeed, at one level, the novel seeks to elaborate just this recuperation of Case to a socially acceptable status. Whilst he starts *Neuromancer* as "just another hustler, trying to make it through" (11), he ends it by having his criminal record erased, undergoing a "complete flush out" (134) of his blood, and being in possession of a valid passport, as well as a large sum of legal money. Such a fairy-tale ending represents nothing more than the inscription of Case within the social imaginary of late capitalism. He becomes, quite literally (in the last image of the novel), part of the system. What remains to be seen is whether the cyber-technologies that scientists are developing in line with those of *Neuromancer* produce the same effects. If they do, of course, then like the human population in the film *The Matrix* (which is also a minor allegory on the same theme), we will never know.

Notes

1. Of all Jameson's analyses of postmodernity his comments on space have been subject to the most trenchant critiques. On Jameson's conception of cognitive mapping, Doreen Massey, for example, remarks that "while space is posed as unrepresentable, time is thereby, at least implicitly and at those moments, *counterposed* as the comforting security of a story it is possible to tell. This of course clearly reflects a notion of the difference

between time and space in which time has a coherence and logic to its telling, while space does not" (83). Echoing this point, Steve Pile suspects "that the lack of dynamism in Jameson's model stems from his underlying sense of space as being a passive backdrop to social relationships" (247). Similarly, Sean Homer finds that "[d]espite [Jameson's] ostensible intentions, space has once more become defined negatively in relation to time" (145). While it is undoubtedly true that Jameson proposes a certain level of difficulty in coordinating oneself in postmodern space, it by no means follows that this is an implicit valorization of time. Indeed, as he states explicitly in *Postmodernism*, there is no easy way to separate the two categories and what he therefore means by the "spatial turn" of postmodernism is the distinction "between two forms of interrelationship between time and space rather than between those two inseparable categories themselves" (154). Jameson's critique of postmodern space is thus bound to a critique of a postmodern temporality that "has forgotten how to think historically" (ix). In the light of this, we may understand Jameson's call for cognitive mapping as an attempt to produce a form of representation that is able to articulate the relationship between the individual and the general, the particular and the universal, as they are mediated by the socio-economic and cultural productions of both space and time. It is an attempt, in other words, to think the totality, and therefore its "representational failure" does not stand for a willful castigation of space; indeed, as Jameson points out, "once you knew what 'cognitive mapping' was driving at, you were to dismiss all figures of maps and mapping from your mind and try to imagine something else" (*Postmodernism* 409).

2. Perhaps the most salient manifestation of such inertia can be found in the form of the computer. For Jameson, "this new machine" does not, unlike "the older machinery of the locomotive or the airplane, represent motion," rather it "can only be represented *in motion*" (*Postmodernism* 45). This is exactly how *Neuromancer* portrays the new technology, often by recourse to the kinetic idiom of older machinery, such as, for example, when Case has "the strange impression of being in the pilot's seat in a small plane." Speed, under such conditions, is merely experienced as "the sensation of speed," thereby giving rise to the paradoxically "worrying impression of solid fluidity" (302) that troubles Case on one of his runs.
3. *Neuromancer*, however, does hint that Turkey will soon succumb to the capitalist imaginary and the homogenization of space. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the hotel where the protagonists stay here: "Their room might have been the one in Chiba where he'd first seen Armitage. He went to the window, in the morning, almost expecting to see Tokyo Bay" (108).

4. Lacan notes that "the formation of the *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium—its inner area and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest" (5).
5. A lesson first learned, of course, by Gertrude Stein who described Oakland in the same terms.
6. Gibson's explanation of the incipience of "cyberspace" is suitably inflected within the indeterminate rubric of irony: "Assembled word *cyberspace* from small and readily available components of language. Neologic spasm: the primal act of pop poetics. Preceded any concept whatever. Slick and hollow—awaiting received meaning" (qtd. in Stallabrass 5). What, of course, is not ironic about this description is how it attests to the value of the signifier in the market place. It is perhaps only the plasticity of "postmodernism" that can compare in this respect for sheer marketing success.
7. McLuhan's triumphalism is poignantly undercut some twenty years later by Jameson's befuddlement: "The newer architecture therefore—like many of the other cultural products I have evoked [. . .] —stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions" (*Postmodernism* 39). Of course, just as Jameson was making this plea, Gibson was refining his own response to this crisis in the form of the reticulated networks of cyberspace, which, in one of its definitions, is "actually a drastic simplification of the human sensorium" (*Mona Lisa* 71).
8. Gibson has registered his unease at this proclivity for epochal astrology, stating that "I sometimes get the feeling that technical people who like my work miss several layers of irony" (qtd. in Woolley 37). Critics of cyberspace technology tend, like Mark Slouka, to be alarmed by it because it helps to accentuate "our growing separation from reality" (1). For Žižek, however, this alarm merely indexes an over-proximity to the "secret" of reality, which is its very virtuality:

[T]he experience of virtual reality should [. . .] make us sensitive to how the "reality" with which we were dealing *always-already* was virtualized. The most elementary procedure of symbolic identification, identification with an Ego Ideal, involves [. . .] an identification with a virtual image: the place in the Big Other from which I see myself in the form in which I find myself likeable (the definition of Ego Ideal) is by definition virtual. Is not virtuality, therefore, the trademark of every, even the most elementary, ideological identification? When I see myself as a "democrat," a "communist," an

"American," a "Christian," and so on, what I see is not directly "me": I identify with a virtual place in the discourse. And in so far as such an identification is constitutive of a community, every community is also *stricto sensu* always-already virtual. (*Indivisible* 194)

9. It is unbearable because, as Žižek notes elsewhere, "self-consciousness is the very opposite of self-transparency: I am aware of myself only insofar as outside of me a place exists where the truth about me is articulated" (*Tarrying* 67). The "absolute point of view," in other words, occasions the disappearance of the subject. In this respect, Žižek argues that

what brings about the "loss of reality" in cyberspace is not its emptiness (the fact that it is lacking with respect to the fullness of the real presence) but, on the contrary, its very excessive fullness (the potential abolition of the dimension of symbolic virtuality). Is not one of the possible reactions to the excessive filling-in of the voids of cyberspace therefore *informational anorexia*, the desperate refusal to accept information, in so far as it occludes the presence of the Real? (*Plague* 155)

Works Cited

- Borch-Jacobsen, Mikkel. *Lacan: The Absolute Master*. Trans. Douglas Brick. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991.
- Božovič, Miran. "The Man Behind His Own Retina." *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid To Ask Hitchcock)*. Ed. Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 1992. 161–77.
- Brennan, Teresa. *History After Lacan*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Bukatman, Scott. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodernist Science Fiction*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Connor, Steven. *The English Novel in History: 1950–1995*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- . *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Gibson, William. *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. London: Harper, 1994.
- . *Neuromancer*. London: Harper, 1993.
- Homer, Sean. *Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Polity, 1998.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992.

- . *The Ideologies of Theory 1971–1986: Volume 1 – Situations of Theory*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- . "On Raymond Chandler." *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*. Eds. Glen W. Most and William W. Stone. San Diego: Harcourt, 1983. 122–48.
- . *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- . "Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Science Fiction Studies* 9:2 (1982): 147–58.
- . "Science Fiction as a Spatial Genre: Generic Discontinuities and the Problem of Figuration in Vonda McIntyre's *The Exile Waiting*." *Science-Fiction Studies* 14 (1987): 44–59.
- . *The Seeds of Time*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge, 1977.
- Laclau, Ernesto. *Emancipations*. London: Verso, 1996.
- Massey, Doreen. "Politics and Space/Time." *New Left Review*, 196 (1992): 65–84.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media*. London: Routledge, 1964.
- Patton, Paul. "Imaginary Cities: Images of Postmodernity" *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*. Eds. Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995. 112–21.
- Pile, Steve. *The Body and The City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Slouka, Mark. *War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality*. London: Abacus, 1996.
- Sponsler, Claire. "Cyberpunk and the Dilemmas of Postmodern Narrative: The Example of William Gibson." *Contemporary Literature* 33:4 (1992): 625–44.
- Stallabrass, Julian. "Empowering Technology: The Exploration of Cyberspace." *New Left Review* 211 (1995): 3–32.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*. London: Verso, 1996.
- Woolley, Benjamin. *Virtual Worlds: A Journey in Hype and Hyperreality*. London: Penguin, 1993.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Indivisible Remainder: Essays on Schelling and Related Matters*. London: Verso, 1996.
- . *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997.
- . *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Zukin, Sharon. "The Postmodern Debate Over Urban Form." *Theory, Culture and Society* 5:2–3 (1988): 431–46.