

The Cyberpunk Aesthetic in Gibson's Neuromancer Trilogy

The Cyberpunk Project

Throughout the *Neuromancer* trilogy, Gibson examines the implications of technological manipulation on conceptions of the self, self-presentation, and aesthetics. Early in *Count Zero* we come upon a casual mention of elective cosmetic surgery used to enable the person who undergoes it succeed in the game of life by making them fulfill a social ideal of the beautiful. Turner, the mercenary adventurer who in some ways parallels Armitage in the first volume, remarks to himself that his companion does not fit the usual stereotype :

The woman beside him stirred in her sleep.

He raised himself on one elbow to look at her. A stranger's face, but not the one his life in hotels had taught him to expect. He would have expected a routine beauty, bred out of cheap elective surgery and the relentless Darwinism of fashion. An archetype cooked down from the major media faces of the previous five years. [*Count Zero*, 3]

In addition to providing another instance of Gibson's reliance upon Darwinian natural selection as a social, rather than simply biological, principle, this passage also serves several purposes -- it helps advance the plot, adds to Turner's characterization, and suggests that those people (like Turner) who will interest the reader do not buy into standard commodified notions of physical beauty. Early in *Neuromancer* Gibson had taken this prototypically romantic emphasis on intensity and authenticity much farther when his description of Ratz emphasizes the aesthetic of honest ugliness.

The bartender's smile widened. His ugliness was the stuff of legend. In an age of affordable beauty, there was something heraldic about his lack of it. The antique arm whined as he reached for another mug. It was a Russian military prosthesis, a seven-function force-feedback manipulator, cased in grubby pink plastic. "You are too much the artiste, Herr Case". Ratz grunted; the sound served him as laughter. [4]

Case turned his head and looked up into Wage's face. It was a tanned and forgettable mask. The eyes were vatgrown sea-green Nikon transplants. Wage wore a suit of gunmetal silk and a simple bracelet of platinum on either wrist. He was flanked by his joeboys, nearly identical young men, their arms and shoulders bulging with grafted muscle. [*Neuromancer*, 21]

Booths lined a central hall. The clientele were young, few of them out of their teens. They all seemed to have carbon sockets planted behind the left ear... The counters that fronted the booths displayed hundreds of slivers of microsilicon, angular fragments of colored silicon mounted under oblong transparent bubbles on squares of white cardboard. Molly went to the seventh booth along the south wall. Behind the counter a boy with a shaven head stared vacantly into space, a dozen spikes of microsilicon protruding from the socket behind his ear. [*Neuromancer*, 57]

The one who showed up at the loft door with a box of diskettes from the Finn was a soft-voiced boy

called Angelo. His face was a simple graft grown on collagen and shark-cartilage polysaccharides, smooth and hideous. It was one of the nastiest pieces of elective surgery Case had ever seen. When Angelo smiled revealing the razor-sharp canines of some large animal, Case was actually relieved. Toothbud transplants. He'd seen that before. [*Neuromancer*, 59]

The Panther Modern leader, who introduced himself as Lupus Yonderboy, wore a polycarbon suit with a recording feature that allowed him to replay backgrounds at will. Perched on the edge of Case's worktable like some kind of state of the art gargoyle, he regarded Case and Armitage with hooded eyes. He smiled. His hair was pink. A rainbow forest of microsofts bristled behind his left ear; the ear was pointed, tufted with more pink hair. His pupils had been modified to catch the light like a cat's. Case watched the suit crawl with color and texture. [*Neuromancer*, 67]