An Interview with William Gibson

Larry McCaffery
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About the book

The greater problem is the date of the book. Certainly many of the writers have expanded their craft since 1991, but the bigger issue is that the date marks (more or less) the end of the cyberpunk explosion. Since most of the interviews were conducted in the late '80s, around the peak of cyberpunk, some of the interviews focus on this phenomenon when not involved in the author's particular works. To understand the arguments and criticisms presented, it is necessary for the reader to have a significant grasp of the stagnation of early '80s SF; the significance and genesis of the cyberpunk explosion; what cyberpunk is and is not (specifically : the reader must know that cyberpunk is not the media image of computer cowboys with wetware, mirrorshades, leather, a bad attitude and a teen-angst stance); and the reader needs to understand the humanist vs. cyberpunk debate (the distinction has largely been obliterated in the last decade). If the reader does not have this basic framework, much of the criticisms leveled are esoteric - or worse, they are totally incomprehensible.
-- Sean P. Melican, August 21, 2000.

Interview

In 1984 William Gibson's first novel, *Neuromancer*, burst onto the science fiction scene like a supernova. The shock waves from that explosion had an immediate impact on the relatively insular SF field. *Neuromancer* became the first novel to win the triple crown - Hugo, Nebula, and Philip K. Dick awards - and, in the process, virtually single-handedly launched the cyberpunk movement. *Neuromancer*, with its stunning technopoetic prose surface and its superspecific evocation of life in a sleazed-out global village of the near future, has rapidly gained unprecedented critical and popular attention outside SF.

Prior to the publication of *Neuromancer*, Gibson had published only a half-dozen stories (since collected in *Burning Chrome* [1986]). Although several of these display flashes of his abilities - and two of them, *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Burning Chrome*, introduce motifs and elements elaborated upon in the later novels - clearly *Neuromancer* was a major imaginative leap forward for someone who had not even attempted to write a novel previously. The sources of all the white light and white heat being generated by this new kid on the block are immediately apparent from the opening words of the novel : "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel". Dense, kaleidoscopic, fast-paced, full of punked-out, high-tech weirdos, *Neuromancer* depicts with hallucinatory vividness the desperate, exhilarating feel of life in our new urban landscapes.

A number of critics have pointed out Gibson's affinities with certain earlier innovative SF authors : comparisons with Alfred Bester's early novels, with Philip K. Dick's midperiod fiction, and with Samuel R. Delany's *Nova* (1968); Gibson's reliance on the cut-up methods and quickfire stream of dissociated images characteristic of William S. Burroughs and J. G. Ballard are also noted. But equally significant are the influences from sources either wholly outside SF - the hard-boiled writing of Dashiell Hammett, 1940s film noir, the novels of Robert Stone - or only nominally connected with the field - the garishly intense, nightmarish urban scenes and pacings in the work of rock musicians like Lou Reed; or the sophisticated blend of science, history, pop culture, hip

lingoes, and dark humor in Thomas Pynchon's work.

What made *Neuromancer*'s debut so auspicious, however, was not its debts to earlier authors, but its originality of vision, especially the fresh, rush-of-oxygen high of Gibson's prose, with its startling similes and metaphors drawn from computers and other technologies, and its ability to create a powerfully resonant metaphor - the cyberspace of the computer matrix - where data dance with human consciousness, where human memory is literalized and mechanized, where multi-national informations systems mutate and breed into startling new structures whose beauty and complexity are unimaginable, mystical, and above all nonhuman. Probably as much as any first novel since Pynchon's *V.* (1963), *Neuromancer* seemed to create a significant synthesis of poetics, pop culture and technology.

Although often overlooked by critics and reviewers in this regard, *Neuromancer* is also deeply rooted in human realities. Gibson's presentation of the surface textures of our electronic age re-creates the shock and sensory overload that define our experience of contemporary life, of having grown up with VCRs, CDs, terrorists broadcasting messages on fifty-channel video monitors, designer drugs, David Bowie and the Sex Pistols, video games, computers. Both disturbing and playful, he also explores much deeper questions about the enormous impact of technology on the definition of what it means to be human. After reading *Neuromancer* for the first time, I knew I had seen the future of SF (and maybe of literature in general), and its name was William Gibson.

Gibson's second novel, *Count Zero* (1986a), is set seven years in the future of *Neuromancer*'s world, and to some degree it retains the earlier novel's focus on the underbelly world of computer cowboys, black market drugs and software. But the pace is somewhat slower, allowing Gibson more time to develop his characters - a mixture of eccentric lowlifes and nonconformists who find themselves confronting representatives of egomaniacal individuals whose vast wealth and power result directly from their ability to control information. More tightly controlled and easier to follow than *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* is nevertheless as extraordinarily rich in suggestive neologisms and other verbal pyrotechnics; it's also a fascinating evocation of a world in which humanity seems to be constantly outshone by the flash and appeal of the images and machines that increasingly seem to push people aside in their abstract dance toward progress and efficiency.

When we spoke in August 1986 at his home in Vancouver, British Columbia, William Gibson was working on the screenplay for *Aliens III* and on his third novel, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), which completes his cyberspace trilogy. *Mona Lisa Overdrive* expands some of the implications of the two earlier novels - for instance, the interface between the human social world and cyberspace is now sufficiently permeable that humans can actually die in cyberspace; Angie Mitchell (who appeared in *Count Zero*) is able to tap into the matrix without a computer; and, once again, we witness people (including Molly from *Neuromancer*) struggling against having their bodies and imaginations manipulated by international corporations who control information and images to suit their own purposes. While these overlaps seem to make *Mona Lisa Overdrive* less startlingly original than the earlier works, Gibson's experiments with prismatic storytelling methods, his ongoing stylistic virtuosity, and his presentation of characters possessing deeper emotional resonances all point to a growing maturation and versatility.

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Larry McCaffery : There are so many references to rock music and television in your work that it sometimes seems your writing is as much influenced by MTV as by literature. What impact have other media had on your sensibility ?

William Gibson : Probably more than fiction. The trouble with "influence" questions is that they're usually

framed to encourage you to talk about your writing as if you grew up in a world circumscribed by books. I've been influenced by Lou Reed, for instance, as much as I've been by any "fiction" writer. I was going to use a quote from an old Velvet Underground song - "Watch out for worlds behind you" (from "Sunday Morning") - as an epigraph for *Neuromancer*.

LM : The breakdown of distinctions - between pop culture and "serious" culture, different genres, different art forms - seems to have had a liberating effect on writers of your generation.

WG : The idea that all this stuff is potentially grist for your mill has been very liberating. This process of cultural mongrelization seems to be what postmodernism is all about. The result is a generation of people (some of whom are artists) whose tastes are wildly eclectic - people who are hip to punk music and Mozart, who rent these terrible horror and SF videos from the 7-11 one night and then invite you to a mud wrestling match or a poetry reading the next. If you're a writer, the trick is to keep your eyes and ears open well enough to let all this in but also, somehow, to recognize intuitively what you should let emerge in your work, how effective something might be in a specific context. I know I don't have a sense of writing as being divided up into different compartments, and I don't separate literature from the other arts. Fiction, television, music, film - all provide material in the form of images and phrases and codes that creep into my writing in ways both deliberate and unconscious.

LM : Our culture is being profoundly transformed by technology in ways most people are only dimly starting to realize. Maybe that's why the American public is so fascinated with SF imagery and vocabulary - even people who don't even know what SF stands for are responding to this stuff subliminally, in ads and so on.

WG : Yeah, like *Escape from New York* never made it big, but it's been redone a billion times as a rock video. I saw that movie, by the way, when I was starting *Burning Chrome* and it had a real influence on *Neuromancer*. I was intrigued by the exchange in one of the opening scenes where the Warden says to Snake : "You flew the wing-five over Leningrad, didn't you ?" It turns out to be just a throwaway line, but for a moment it worked like the best SF, where a casual reference can imply a lot.

LM : In theory MTV could be an interesting new art form, a combination of advertising and avant-garde film, though it seems to be getting worse.

WG : We don't get MTV up here, but from what I've seen of it in the States, there was initially a feeling of adventure that you don't find in the established forms. But you're right - it's getting worse. So is most SF.

LM : How conscious are you about systematically developing an image or a metaphor when you're writing ? For example, the meat puppet image in *Neuromancer* seems like the perfect metaphor for how the soft machine of our living bodies is manipulated by outside forces. I assume you arrived at that metaphor from listening to the cow-punk band Meat Puppets.

WG : No, I got it from seeing the name in print. I like accidents, when an offhand line breezes by and you think to yourself, Yes, that will do. So you put it in your text and start working with it, seeing how it relates to other things you've got going, and eventually it begins to evolve, to branch off in ways you hadn't anticipated. Part of the process is conscious, in the sense that I'm aware of working this way, but how these things come to be embedded in the text is intuitive. I don't see how writers can do it any other way. I suppose some pick these things up without realizing it, but I'm conscious of waiting for them and seeing where they lead, how they might mutate.

LM : Sounds like a virus.

WG : It is - and only a certain kind of host is going to be able to allow the thing to keep expanding in an optimal

way. As you can imagine, the structure of a book like *Neuromancer* becomes very complicated at a certain point. It wasn't complicated in the "admirably complex" way that you find in Pynchon's novels, but simply in the sense that all these odds and ends started to affect and infect one another.

LM : Does knowing that most readers won't recognize many of these references bother you ? Obviously, they don't have to know that "Big Science" is a song by Laurie Anderson in order to catch the drift of what you're suggesting; but if they do know the song, it might broaden the nature of their response.

WG : I enjoy the idea that some levels of the text are closed to most readers. Of course, writers working in popular forms should be aware that readers aren't always going to respond to subtleties - thought that isn't as weird as finding out that people are missing the whole point of what you think you're doing, whether it's thinking you're being ironic when you're not, or being serious when you're trying to make fun of something. When I was in England in February, I noticed that the response to my work was markedly different; people were referring to me as a humorist. In England they think what I'm doing is funny - not that I'm only being funny, but they can see that there's a certain humor in my work.

LM : Clearly, in *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Burning Chrome* you were laying the foundation for what you would do later on in *Neuromancer*.

WG : Yes, although I didn't think in those terms when I wrote those stories. Actually, *Johnny Mnemonic* was the third piece of fiction I wrote, and the only basis I had for gauging its success was that it sold. *Burning Chrome* was written later on, and even though it got more attention than anything I'd done before, I still felt I was four or five years away from writing a novel. Then Terry Carr recruited me to write a book, which turned out to be *Neuromancer*. He was looking for people he thought had some promise - he'd offer them contracts and say, "Do you want to write a book ?" I said "Yes" almost without thinking, but then I was stuck with a project I wasn't sure I was ready for. In fact I was terrified once I actually sat down and started to think about what I meant. I didn't think I could fill up that many pages; I didn't even know how many pages the manuscript of a novel was "supposed" to have. It had been taking me something like three months to write a short story, so starting a novel was really a major leap. I remember going around asking other writers things like, "Assuming I double space everything, how long is a novel ?" When somebody told me 300 pages, I thought, My God !

LM : What got you going with the book ?

WG : Panic. Blind animal panic. It was a desperate quality that I think comes through in the book pretty clearly : *Neuromancer* is fueled by my terrible fear of losing the reader's attention. Once it hit me that I had to come up with something, to have a hook on every page, I looked at the stories I'd written up to that point and tried to figure out what had worked for me before. I had Molly in *Johnny Mnemonic*; I had an environment in *Burning Chrome*. So I decided I'd try to put these things together. But all during the writing of the book I had the conviction that I was going to be permanently shamed when it appeared. And even when I finished it I had no perspective on what I'd done. I still don't, for that matter. I always feel like one of the guys inside those incredible dragons you see snaking through the crowds in Chinatown. Sure, the dragon is very brightly colored, but from the inside you know the whole thing is pretty flimsy - just a bunch of old newspapers and papier-mache and balsa struts.

LM : The world you evoke in *Neuromancer* struck me as being a lot like the underworld we find in the work of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett - sleazy, intensely vivid, full of colorful details and exotic lingoes that somehow seem realistic and totally artificial.

WG : It's probably been fifteen years since I read Hammett, but I remember being very excited about how he had pushed all this ordinary stuff until is was different - like American naturalism but cranked up, very intense, almost surreal. You can see this in the beginning of *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), where he describes all the

things in Spade's office. Hammett may have been the guy who turned me on to the idea of superspecificity, which is largely lacking in most SF description, SF authors tend to use generics - "Then he got into his space suit" - a refusal to specify that is almost an unspoken tradition in SF. They know they can get away with having a character arrive on some unimaginably strange and distant planet and say, "I looked out the window and saw the air plant". It doesn't seem to matter that the reader has no idea what the plant looks like, or even what it is. I think Hammett may have given me the idea that you don't have to write like that, even in a popular form. But with Chandler - I never have read much of his work, and I never enjoyed what I did read because I always got this creepy puritanical feeling from his books. Although his surface gloss is very brilliant, his underlying meaning is off-putting to me.

LM : The other reason I thought of Hammett has to do with your rich, poetic vocabulary - the futuristic slang, the street talk, the technical and professional jargon.

WG : I suppose I strive for an argot that seems real, but I don't invent most of what seems like exotic or strange in the dialogue - that's just more collage. There are so many cultures and subcultures today that if you're willing to listen, you can pick up different phrases, inflections, and metaphors everywhere. A lot of the language in *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* that people think is futuristic is probably just 1969 Toronto dope dealer's slang, or biker talk.

LM : Some of the phrases you use in *Neuromancer* - "flatlining" or "virus program" - manage to evoke some response beyond the literal.

WG : They're poetry ! "Flatlining", for example, is ambulance driver slang for "death". I heard it in a bar maybe twenty years ago and it stuck with me. A drunken, crying ambulance driver saying, "She flatlined". I use a lot of phrases that seem exotic to everyone but the people who use them. Oddly enough, I almost never get new buzzwords from other SF writers. I heard about "virus program" from an ex-WAC computer operator who had worked in the Pentagon. She was talking one night about guys who came in every day and wiped the boards of all the video games people had built into them, and how some people were building these little glich-things that tried to evade the official wipers - things that would hide and then pop out and say, "Screw you !" before vanishing into the framework of logic (listening to me trying to explain this, it immediately becomes apparent that I have no grasp of how computers really work - it's been a contact high for me). Anyway, it wasn't until after the book came out that I met people who knew what a virus program actually was.

LM : So your use of computers and science results more from their metaphoric value or from the way they sound than from any familiarity with how they actually operate.

WG : I'm looking for images that supply a certain atmosphere. Right now, science and technology seem to be very useful sources. But I'm more interested in the language of, say, computers than I am in the technicalities. On the most basic level, computers in my books are simply a metaphor for human memory : I'm interested in the hows and whys of memory, the ways it defines who and what we are, in how easily memory is subject to revision. When I was writing *Neuromancer*, it was wonderful to be able to tie a lot of these interests into the computer metaphor. It wasn't until I could finally afford a computer of my own that I found out there's a drive mechanism inside - this little thing that spins around. I'd been expecting an exotic crystalline thing, a cyberspace deck or something, and what I got was a little piece of a Victorian engine that made noises like a scratchy old record player. That noise took away some of the mystique for me; it made computers less sexy. My ignorance had allowed me to romanticize them.

LM : What many readers first notice in *Neuromancer* are all the cyberpunk elements - exotic lingoes, drugs, cyber-realities, clothes, and so on. In many ways, though, the plot is very traditional : the down-and-out gangster who's been jerked around and wants to get even by pulling the big heist. Did you make a conscious decision to attach this punked-out cyber-reality to the framework of an established plot ?

WG : When I said earlier that a lot of what went into *Neuromancer* was the result of desperation, I wasn't exaggerating. I knew I was so inexperienced that I would need a traditional plot armature that had proven its potential for narrative traction. I had these different things I wanted to use, but since I didn't have a preset notion of where I was going, the plot had to be something I already felt comfortable with. Also, since I wrote *Neuromancer* very much under the influence of Robert Stone - who's a master of a certain kind of paranoid fiction - it's not surprising that what I wound up with was something like a Howard Hawkes film.

LM : First novels are often the most autobiographical. Were you drawing on a lot of things from your own past in *Neuromancer* ?

WG : *Neuromancer* isn't autobiographical in any literal sense, but I did draw on my sense of what people are like to develop these characters. Part of that came from accessing my own screwed-up adolescence; and another part of it came from watching how kids reacted to all the truly horrible stuff happening all around them - that unfocused angst and weird lack of affect.

LM : Did the book undergo significant changes once you knew the basic structure was in place ?

WG : The first two-thirds was rewritten a dozen times - a lot of stylistic changes, once I had the feel of the world, but also a lot of monkeying around to make the plot seem vaguely plausible. I had to cover up some of the shabbier coincidences, for example. Also, I never had a very clear idea of what was going to happen in the end, except that the gangsters had to score big.

LM : Do you look for specific effects when you revise your prose ?

WG : My revisions mainly involve looking for passages that "clunk". When I first started to write, I found that in reading for pleasure I'd become suddenly aware that a beat had been missed, that the rhythm was gone. It's hard to explain, but when I go over my own writing I look for places where I've missed the beat. Usually I can correct it by condensing my prose so that individual parts carry more weight, are charged with more meaning; almost always the text gets shorter. I'm aware that this condensation process winds up putting off some readers. "Genre" SF readers say that *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* are impossibly dense, literally impossible to read; but other SF readers who ordinarily have no patience for "serious" fiction seem to be turned on by what I'm doing. Now that I've gained some experience writing, revisions take up less of my time; in fact, it's become easier to hit a level I'm satisfied with and stay there. One of the big problems with *Neuromancer* was that I had so much stuff - all this material that had been accumulating - that it was hard to get it into a manageable book.

LM : Has Thomas Pynchon had an influence on your work ?

WG : Pynchon has been a favorite writer and a major influence all along. In many ways I see him as almost the start of a certain mutant pop culture imagery with esoteric historical and scientific information. Pynchon is a kind of mythic hero of mine, and I suspect that if you talk with a lot of recent SF writers you'll find they've all read *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) several times and have been very much influenced by it. I was into Pynchon early on - I remember seeing a New York Times review of *V.* when it first came out - I was just a kid - and thinking, Boy, that sounds like some really weird shit !

LM : What was the inspiration for your cyberspace idea ?

WG : I was walking down Granville Street, Vancouver's version of "The Strip", and I was looking into one of the video arcades. I could see in the physical intensity of their postures how rapt the kids inside were. It was like one of those closed systems out of a Pynchon novel : a feedback loop with photons coming off the screens into the kids' eyes, neurons moving through their bodies, and electrons moving through the video game. These kids

clearly believed in the space games projected. Everyone I know who works with computers seems to develop a belief that there's some kind of actual space behind the screen, someplace you can't see but you know is there.

LM : From a purely technical standpoint, the cyberspace premise must have been great to hit on simply because it creates a rationale for so many different narrative "spaces".

WG : When I arrived at the cyberspace concept, while I was writing *Burning Chrome*, I could see right away that it was resonant in a lot of ways. By the time I was writing *Neuromancer*, I recognized that cyberspace allowed for a lot moves, because characters can be sucked into apparent realities - which means you can place them in any sort of setting or against any backdrop. In some ways I tried to downplay that aspect, because if I overdid it I'd have an open-ended plot premise. That kind of freedom can be dangerous because you don't have to justify what's happening in terms of the logic of character or plot. In *Count Zero*, I wanted to slow things down a bit and learn how to do characterization. I was aware that *Neuromancer* was going to seem like a roller coaster ride to most readers - you've got lots of excitement but maybe not much understanding of where you've been or why you were heading there in the first place. I enjoyed being able to present someone like Virek in *Count Zero*, who apparently lives in any number of "realities" - he's got the city of Barcelona if he wants it, and an array of other possibilities, even though he's actually a pile of cells in a vat somewhere.

LM : Philip K. Dick was always writing about people like Virek who have so many "reality options", so many different reproductions and illusions, that it's difficult to know what reality is more real - the one in their heads or the one that seems to exist outside. That's a powerful notion.

WG : Yeah, it is powerful - which is why it's such a temptation to keep pushing once you've got a concept like cyberspace that creates an instant rationale. I probably was a little heavy-handed in *Count Zero* with Bobby's mother, who's hooked on the soaps, who lives in them, but it was just too much to resist. Everybody asks me about Dick being an influence, but I hadn't read much of his work before I started writing - though I've imagined a world in which Pynchon sold his early stories to Fantasy and Science Fiction and became an alternate Dick.

LM : One of the issues your work raises is the way information - this "dance of data", as you refer to it - not only controls our daily lives but may be the best way for us to understand the fundamental processes that control the universe's ongoing transformation. It seems significant that mostly SF writers are tuned to this.

WG : Information is the dominant scientific metaphor of our age, so we need to face it, to try to understand what it means. It's not that technology has changed everything by transforming it into codes. Newtonians didn't see things in terms of information exchange, but today we do. That carries over into my suspicion that Sigmund Freud has a lot to do with steam engines - both seem to be similar metaphors.

LM : The various ways you use the dance metaphor in *Neuromancer* suggests a familiarity with the interactions between Eastern mysticism and modern physics.

WG : I was aware that the image of the dance was part of Eastern mysticism, but a more direct source was John Shirley, who was living in the East Village and wrote me a letter that described the thing about proteins linking. That's just another example of how pathetically makeshift everything looks from inside the papier-mache dragon. It was the same thing with the voodoo gods in *Count Zero* : a copy of National Geographic was lying around that had an article about Haitian voodoo in it.

LM : Back in the '60s and early '70s, most of the important New Wave SF took a pessimistic stance toward technology and progress. Although your work has sometimes been described as glorifying technology. I'd say it offers a more ambivalent view.

WG : My feelings about technology are totally ambivalent - which seems to me to be the only way to relate to

what's happening today. When I write about technology, I write about how it has already affected our lives; I don't extrapolate in the way I was taught an SF writer should. You'll notice in *Neuromancer* that there's obviously been a war, but I don't explain what caused it or even who was fighting it. I've never had the patience or the desire to work out the details of who's doing what to whom, or exactly when something is taking place, or what's become of the United States. That kind of literalism has always seemed silly to me; it detracts from the reading pleasure I get from SF. My aim isn't to provide specific predictions or judgments so much as to find a suitable fictional context in which to examine the very mixed blessings of technology.

LM : How consciously do you see yourself operating outside the mainstream of American SF ?

WG : A lot of what I've written so far is a conscious reaction to what I felt SF - especially American SF - had become by the time I started writing in the late '70s. In fact, I felt I was writing so far outside the mainstream that my highest goal was to become a minor cult figure, a sort of lesser Ballard. I assumed I was doing something no one would like except for a few crazy "art" people - and maybe some people in England and France, who I always assumed would respond to what I was doing because I knew their tastes were very different and because the French like Dick a lot. When I was starting out, I simply tried to go in the opposite direction from most of the stuff I was reading, which I felt an aesthetic revulsion toward.

LM : What sorts of '70s SF did you have in mind ? All those sword-and-sorcery books or the hard SF that people like Jerry Pournelle, Gregory Benford, and Larry Niven were writing ?

WG : Some of my resistance had to do with a certain didactic, right-wing stance that I associated with a lot of hard SF, but mainly it was a more generalized angle of attack. I'm a very desultory reader of SF - I have been since my big period of reading SF when I was around fifteen - so my stance was instinctual. In the '70s, during the years just before I seriously thought about writing SF, it seemed like the SF books I enjoyed were few and far between. Just about everything I picked up seemed to slick, and, even worse, uninteresting. Part of this has to do with the adolescent audience that a lot of SF has always been written for. My publishers keep telling me the adolescent market is where it's at, and that makes me pretty uncomfortable because I remember what my tastes ran to at that age. One new factor around 1975 was that writers started getting these huge advances for SF books, and I said to myself, Hey, you can get big money for SF. But by the time I started writing SF, those big advances had dried up, because a lot of them had gone to books that had lost money. I had a sense of what the expectations of the SF industry were in terms of product, but I hated that product and felt such a genuine sense of disgust that I consciously decided to reverse expectations, not give publishers or readers what they wanted.

LM : How would you describe the direction of your work ?

WG : When I first started writing, what held me up for a long time was finding a way to introduce the things that turned me on. I knew that when I was reading a text - particularly a fantastic text - it was the gratuitous moves, the odd, quirky, irrelevant details, that provided a sense of strangeness. So it seemed important to find an approach that would allow for gratuitous moves. I didn't think that what I was writing would ever "fit in" or be accepted, so what I wanted was to be able to plug in the things that interested me. When Molly goes through the Tessier-Ashpool's library in *Neuromancer*, she sees that they own Duchamp's Large Glass. Now that reference doesn't make sense on some deeper symbolic level; it's really irrelevant, a gratuitous move. But putting it there seemed right - here are these very rich people on this space station with this great piece of art just gathering dust. In other words, I liked the piece and wanted to get it into the book somehow.

LM : Precisely these personal "signatures" create a texture and eventually add up to what we call a writer's "vision". You can see this in Alfred Bester, whose books remind me of yours.

WG : Bester was into flash very early. When *Neuromancer* came out, a lot of reviewers said that I must have written it while holding a copy of *The Demolished Man* (1953). Actually, it had been some time since I'd read

Bester, but he was one of the SF authors who had stuck with me, who seemed worthy of imitating, mostly because I always had the feeling he had a ball writing. And I think I know exactly what it was that produced that sense : he was a New York guy who didn't depend on writing SF to make a living, so he really just let loose; he didn't have to give a damn about anything other than having fun, pleasing himself. If you want to get a sense of how groovy it could have been to be alive and young and living in New York in the '50s, read Bester's SF. It may be significant that when you read his mainstream novel (which is pretty hard to find over here, but it's released in England as *The Rat Race*), you can see him using the same tools he used in those two early SF books - but somehow it doesn't work. Bester's palette just isn't suited for convincing you that you're reading about reality.

LM : This business about realism often seems misleading. You said that Bester's books gave you a sense of what it felt like to be in New York at a certain time - that's realism, though different from what you find in Zola, Balzac or Henry James; it's the realism that cyberpunk supplies, that sense of what it really feels like to be alive in our place, at our time.

WG : My SF is realistic in that I write about what I see around me. That's why SF's role isn't central to my work. My fiction amplifies and distorts my impressions of the world, however strange that world may be. One of the liberating aspects of SF when I was a teenager was precisely its ability to tune me in to all sorts of strange data and make me realize that I wasn't as totally isolated in perceiving the world as being monstrous and crazy. In the early '60s, SF was the only source of subversive information available to me.

LM : Some of that spirit of subversiveness, that sense of the strangeness of the ordinary, is finding its way into mainstream quasi-SF novels : Ted Mooney's *Easy Travel to Other Planets* (1981), Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro* (1985), Steve Erickson's books, and recent work by Robert Coover, Margaret Atwood, Max Apple, and Stanley Elkin.

WG : Funny you should bring up Mooney's novel, because I was very jealous of the attention it got. *Easy Travel* is a brilliant book, but I remember thinking, "Here's this guy using all these SF tropes and he's getting reviewed in Time". I was struck with how categories affect the way people respond to your work. Because I'm labeled a "SF writer" and Mooney is a "mainstream writer", people may never take me as seriously as they do him - even though we're both operating on some kind of SF fringe area.

LM : Your work and Mooney's share a hyperawareness that people are being affected in all sorts of ways - psychologically, perceptually - by the constant bombardment of sounds and other data. And you're both willing to experiment stylistically to find a means suitable for presenting the effects of information overload.

WG : I'm very prone to what Mooney calls "information sickness", and I'm having increasing trouble dealing with it. Without doing this too consciously, I had set up my life to minimize input. But now that I've started to make it - even relatively modestly in an obscure field like SF - I've been bombarded with all kinds of stuff. People are coming to my home, stuff arrives in the mail, the phone is ringing. I've got decisions to make about movies and book jackets.

LM : One of the common, maybe simplistic comments you hear about information overload is that the result is a kind of psychological confusion or dislocation. We have all this stuff coming in but we can't seem to put anything together so that it means anything. We're only slightly better off than Mooney's characters, with their paralysis and convulsions.

WG : But sometimes you find you can have fun with these dislocations. When I said I was prone to information sickness, I meant I sometimes get off on being around a lot of unconnected stuff - but only certain kinds of stuff, which is why I'm having trouble handling the input right now. I have a friend, Tom Maddox, who did a paper on my work. He's known what I've been up to for a long time - he says I display "a problematic sensitivity to

semiotic fragments". That probably has a lot to do with the way I write - stitching together all the junk that's floating around in my head. One of my private pleasures is to go to the corner Salvation Army thrift shop and look at all the junk. I can't explain what I get out of doing this. I mean, I used to have to spend time there as a survival thing, and even now I'll go in and find something I want.

LM : You said you weren't really reading much SF when you started out as a writer. What got you started writing SF ?

WG : A series of coincidences. I was at the University of British Columbia, getting an English B.A. - I graduated in '76 or '77 - because it was easier at the time than finding a job. I realized I could get the grades I needed as an English major to keep getting the grants I needed to avoid getting a job. There were a couple of months during that period when I thought very seriously about SF without thinking I was ever going to write it - instead, I thought I might want to write about it. I took courses with a guy who talked about the aesthetic politics of fascism - we were reading an Orwell essay, "Raffles and Miss Blandish", and he wondered whether or not there were fascist novels - and I remember thinking, "Reading all these SF novels has given me a line on this topic - I know where this fascist literature is !". I thought about working on an M.A. on this topic, though I doubt that my approach would have been all that earthshaking. But it got me thinking seriously about what SF did, what it was, which traditions had shaped it and which ones it had rejected. Form/content issues.

LM : Were there other literature classes that might have influenced your thinking about SF ?

WG : Most of the lit classes I took went in one ear and out the other. However, I remember a class on American naturalism, where I picked up the idea that there are several different kinds of naturalist novels : the mimetic naturalist novel - the familiar version - and the crazed naturalist novel - the kind Hammett writes, or Algren's *Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), where he tries to do this realistic description of Chicago in the '40s but his take on it is weirder than anything I did with Chiba City in *Neuromancer*. It's full of people with neon teeth, characters with pieces of their faces falling off, stuff out of some bad nightmare. Then there's the overt horror/pain end of naturalism, which you find in Hubert Selby's books. Maybe related in some way to these twisted offshoots of naturalism are the books by William Burroughs that affected SF in all kinds of ways. I'm of the first generation of American SF authors who had the chance to read Burroughs when we were fourteen or fifteen years old. I know having had that opportunity made a big difference in my outlook on what SF - or any literature, for that matter - could be. What Burroughs was doing with plot and language and the SF motifs I saw in other writers was literally mind expanding. I saw this crazy outlaw character who seemed to have picked up SF and gone after society with it, the way some old guy might grab a rusty beer opener and start waving it around. Once you've had that experience, you're not quite the same.

LM : Has the serious attention you've gotten from the SF world made you feel any less alienated ?

WG : Yeah - everyone's been so nice - but I still feel very much out of place in the company of most SF writers. It's as though I don't know what to do when I'm around them, so I'm usually very polite and I keep my tie on. SF authors are often strange, ill-socialized people who have good minds but are still kids.

LM : Who among the current writers do you admire or feel some connections with ?

WG : Bruce Sterling is certainly a favorite - he produces more ideas per page than anyone else around. Mare Laidlaw had a book called *Dad's Nuke* that I really enjoyed. And John Shirley, of course. I also admire Greg Bear's work, even though his approach is much more hard SF oriented than mine. Recently I came across some quasi-SF books by Madison Smartt Bell - *The Washington Square Ensemble* (1983) and *Waiting for the End of the World* (1985) - which are wonderful, brilliant.

LM : What about Samuel Delany ? His work seems to have influenced your generation of SF authors in

important ways.

WG : There's no question about his importance, and he's obviously influenced me. Those books he was writing when he was twenty-one or whatever were my favorite books when I was fifteen and plowing through all that SF. I'm pretty sure I didn't know at the time that Delany wasn't much older than I was, but I think the fact that I was a kid reading books by a slightly older kid had something to do with my sense that his books were a lot fresher than anything else I could find.

LM : You're usually considered the leading figure of the cyberpunk movement. Is there such a thing, or was the movement dreamed up by a critic ?

WG : It's mainly a marketing strategy - and one that I've come to feel trivializes what I do. Tying my stuff to any label is unfair because it gives people preconceptions about what I'm doing. But it gets complicated because I have friends and cohorts who are benefiting from the hype and who like it. Of course, I can appreciate that the label gives writers a certain attitude they can rally around, feel comfortable with - they can get up at SF conventions, put on their mirrored sunglasses, and say, "That's right, baby, that's us !".

LM : That was exactly the scene at the recent SFRA conference in San Diego. John Shirley, decked out in a leather jacket and shades, wound up in a screaming match with the hard SF "Killer B's" - Brin Bear, and Benford - who have their own identity, their own dress code.

WG : Michael Swanwick wrote an article about the split between the cyberpunks and the humanists. He referred to John Shirley as John-the-Baptist-of-Cyberpunk, roaming the wilderness trying to spread the new gospel. Even though I don't agree with everything Swanwick wrote, I do think John has always had this evangelical side to him - though into spiked dog collars. No one was ready for his insane novels, which are unfortunately very hard to find. There just wasn't anything else like that being written then - no hook or label like cyberpunk, no opening - so they were totally ignored. If those books were published now, people would be saying, "Wow, look at this stuff ! It's beyond cyberpunk". Really, though, I'm tired of the whole cyberpunk phenomenon. I mean, there's already bad imitation cyberpunk, so you know it can only go downhill from here. All that really happened was that a bunch of work by some new authors landed on some publisher's desks at the same time. People didn't know what to make of us, so they gave us this tag.

LM : The cyberpunk/humanist opposition seems way off base to me. There are a lot of scenes in both *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* that are very moving from a human standpoint. Beneath the glittery surface hardware is an emphasis on the "meat" of people, the fragile body that can get crushed so easily.

WG : That's my "Lawrentian" take on things. It's very strange to write something and realize that people will read into it whatever they want. When I hear critics say that my books are "hard and glossy", I almost want to give up writing. The English reviewers, though, seem to understand that what I'm talking about is what being hard and glossy does to you.

LM : One of the scenes that sticks out for me is the one near the end of *Neuromancer* where Case is on thata beach with the woman. It's a powerful and sad moment even though - or maybe because - we know he's in cyberspace imagining all this.

WG : It's great to hear someone react that way to that scene, because that passage was the emotional crux of the book, its center of gravity. I'd like to think that the novel is balanced in such a way that the scene shows how distorted everything has become from several different perspectives.

LM : Another scene that has a peculiar emotional charge is the one where Case is trying to destroy the wasps' nest. What makes the nest seem so primal, so scary ?

WG : The fear of bugs, for one thing ! That scene evolved out of an experience I had destroying a very large wasps' nest. I didn't know what was inside, didn't know they were "imprinted" that way, so when the nest broke open I was astounded and scared by all the wasps. It probably also helped that I got stung several times.

LM : Do you consciously build a metaphor like the wasps' nest so that it resonates in different ways, or is the process buried in your unconscious ?

WG : Once I've hit on an image, a lot of what I do involves the controlled use of collage; I look around for ways to relate the image to the rest of the book. That's something I got from Burroughs's work, and to a lesser extent from Ballard. I've never actually done any of that cut-up stuff, except for folding a few pages out of something when I'd be stuck or incredibly bored and then checking later to see what came out. But I could see what Burroughs was doing with these random methods, and why, even though the results weren't always that interesting. So I started snipping things out and slapping them down, but then I'd air-brush them a little to take the edges off.

LM : Isn't that approach out of place in a field like SF, where most readers are looking for scientific or rational connections to keep the futuristic fantasy moving forward credibly ?

WG : As I said earlier, I'm not interested in producing the kind of literalism most readers associate with SF. This may be a suicidal admission, but most of the time I don't know what I'm talking about when it comes to the scientific or logical rationales that supposedly underpin my books. Apparently, though, part of my skill lies in my ability to convince people otherwise. Some of the SF writers who are actually working scientists do know what they're talking about; but for the rest of us, to present a whole world that doesn't exist and make it seem real, we have to more or less pretend we're polymaths. That's just the act of all good writing.

LM : Are you interested in developing a futuristic, Faulknerian Yoknapatawpha County in which everything you write will be interconnected in a single fictional world ?

WG : No - it would look too much like I was doing one of those Stephen R. Donaldson things. People are already asking me how many of these books I'm going to write, which gives me a creepy sensation because of the innate sleaziness of so much SF publishing. When you're not forced to invent a new world from scratch each time, you find yourself getting lazy, falling back on the same stuff you used in an earlier novel. I was aware of this when I was finishing *Neuromancer*, and that's why, near the end, there's an announcement that Case never saw Molly again. That wasn't directed so much at the reader as at me. If you had told me seven years ago that I would write a SF trilogy, I would have hung myself in shame. Posthaste.

LM : The obsession today with being able to reproduce a seemingly endless series of images, data, and information of all sorts is obviously related to capitalism and its drive for efficiency; but it also seems to grow out of our fear of death, a desire for immortality. The goals of religion and technology, in other words, may be closer than we think.

WG : I can see that. But this isn't something that originated with contemporary technology. If you look at any of the ancient temples, which were the result of people learning to work stone with the technology available to them, what you'll find are machines designed to give those people immortality. The pyramids and snake mounds are time machines. This kind of application of technology seems to run throughout human culture.

LM : You didn't start college until the mid-1970s. What were you doing during the late '60s and early '70s ?

WG : Virtually nothing. My father was a contractor back in the '40s; he made a bunch of money installing flush toilets for the Oak Ridge projects and went on to the postwar, pre-Sun Belt building boom in the South. He died

when I was about eight, and my mother decided to move the family back to this little town in Virginia where they had both come from. I stayed there until I was sixteen or seventeen, a bookish, geekish, can't-hit-the-baseball kind of kid. Then I went to boarding school in Tucson, where I was exposed to urban kids and where I encountered the first wave of hippies pouring over the land from San Francisco. They were older than I was, and they were really into some cool stuff. Eventually, I got kicked out of boarding school for smoking pot. I went back to Virginia, but my mother had died and my relatives weren't particularly sympathetic to my style. So I spent some time bumming around. I more or less convinced my draft board that they didn't want me; in any case, they didn't hassle me, and in 1968 I left for Toronto without even knowing that Canada would be such a different country. I wound up living in a community of young Americans who were staying away from the draft.

LM : Was it pretty much an underground scene ? Did it contribute to your novels ?

WG : I'm sure it did, in terms of supplying me with some of the offbeat language I use. But to describe it as an "underground scene", would seem funny to anyone who knew me and what was going on. It was really pretty tame compared to what was happening in a lot of places; it was a soft-core version of the hippie/underground street scene, nothing heavy. I did have the small-town kid's fascination with watching criminal things. No question, though, that it made a lasting impression on me. Those were portentous days. Nobody knew what was going to happen.

LM : You weren't giving much thought at that point to being a writer ?

WG : Only occasionally. Like a lot of other people, I felt I was living in an age in which everything was going to change very radically, so why make career plans ? When things didn't get different, except maybe worse, I retreated. I went to Europe and wandered around there for a year - I had enough income from my parents' estate to starve comfortably. I came back to Canada because my wife, Deb, wanted to finish a B.A., and we moved to Vancouver so she could attend UBC. When Deb began work on an M.A. in linguistics, I realized that higher education was a good scam. If I hadn't wandered into SE, I'd be totally unemployable.

LM : Are you interested in trying your hand at non-SF soon, maybe breaking out of the SF ghetto into the mainstream's mean street ?

WG : I am, because I'm afraid of being typecast if I make SF my permanent home. But what seems important right now is finding my way out of what I'm doing without losing a sense of what it is I'm doing. I don't want to go back and start over. I have glimpses of how this might be done, but it's a lateral move that has become increasingly difficult to make. It's taken as gospel among SF writers that to get out of SF once you've made a name in it is virtually impossible : "The clout isn't transferable".

LM : That's ironic, given all the mainstream writers doing quasi-SF. Not to mention the Latin American fabulists.

WG : I envy the Latin American writers because they can do what they want. In America, it seems like these influences mostly travel in one direction - mainstream writers borrow from SF, but SF writers seem locked into provincialism. When I was in England, I thought it was interesting that their community of SF writers was enthusiastic about Latin American fabulism. But few people in the equivalent American SF community seem remotely familiar with it.

LM : What can you tell me about your next novel ? Have you started work on it yet ?

WG : I'm supposed to be working on it, but as you can see by this household's sublime sense of peace and order, it's tough going right now. It's called *Mona Lisa Overdrive* and it's not a linear sequel to *Count Zero* - in fact, it bears the same relationship to *Count Zero* that *Count Zero* did to *Neuromancer*, in that each book takes place

seven years after the previous one. You glimpse some of the same people, but fourteen years is a long time in a world like this, where things change so fast you can hardly recognize anything from minute to minute. When I was doing *Count Zero*, I had initially intended to pursue what was going to happen to Mitchell's daughter; that seemed like an interesting thread to follow. But I was so anxious to finish the book, so tired of working on it, that I talked myself out of making any judgments about it. It nagged at me, though; I kept wondering what happened to her. She's a permanent interface with the voodoo gods and she's also obviously going to be the next Superstar. Somehow, though, that wasn't enough to get me going. Then I spent a weekend at the Beverly Hills Hotel with some producers, an eye-opening trip. Coming back on the plane, it struck me that for the first time I had actually gotten to see some of the stuff I had been writing about. I had another book I was supposed to start, but when I got back to Vancouver I phoned the agents and told them I wanted to do *Mona Lisa Overdrive* instead.

LM : The Japanese settings you've used, notably in *Neuromancer* seem right in all sorts of ways. Was any of that based on personal experience ?

WG : *Terry and the Pirates* probably had more to do with it than personal experience. I've never been to Japan, but my wife has been an ESL teacher for a long time, and since the Japanese can most afford to send their teenagers over here to study English, there was an extended period when this stream of Japanese students turned up in Vancouver - I'd meet them a week off the plane, see them when they were leaving, that sort of thing. Also, Vancouver is a very popular destination for Japanese tourists - for example, there are special bars here that cater exclusively to the Japanese, and almost no one else goes into them because the whole scene is too strange. I'm sure I got a lot of this in when I wrote *Neuromancer*. Of course, the Japanese have really bought the whole cyberpunk thing. It's as if they believe everything Bruce Sterling has written about it ! It's frightening. But one of the things they seem to like about my work is that I don't try to invent Japanese names - I got the street names from a Japan Air Lines calendar. And I got lucky with the geography. I didn't even know where Chiba was when I wrote *Neuromancer* - all that stuff about it being on a peninsula and across a bay came out of my head - so I was really sweating when the book came out. But then I got a map and there was Chiba - on a peninsula ! on a bay ! Life imitates art. The only culture I've seen firsthand that might have influenced *Neuromancer* was Istanbul, which had a big impact on me even though I was only there for a week or so. Another place that affected my writing was the East Village, which John Shirley introduced me to in 1980. Nothing had prepared me for what I encountered when I stepped out into the street. The buildings were papered with Xerox art as high up as people could reach. From the point of view of somebody who'd been living in a place like Vancouver, the whole scene was total chaos and anarchy. It was weird and frightening and interesting all at the same time.

LM : Do you sometimes wish you lived in New York or Los Angeles so you could draw on the strangeness more directly ?

WG : If I lived in a place like that, I'd write about unicorns. I'll leave well enough alone for now.