

Neuromancer and the Fetishization of Information

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1998

I wonder now if there is a "consensual hallucination" that is the internet. This was always one of the most fascinating ideas - the geography of data, the artificial hierarchization we have imposed as a bibliographical society on the information we possess, represented visually, sonically, spatially. Mountains of data, towers of directories. Drawers and folders and icons. These are representations and metaphors with which we are already familiar. We share the schema -- all of our files are in folders and directories now. Alphabetized on disk or organized visually on our "desktops". This is the beginning.

In Gibson, the Matrix is like an infinitely maneuverable city. The Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority a "stepped scarlet pyramid" and the Mitsubishi Bank a green cube off in the distance, making a skyline. The surface is a chessboard. This is the next metaphor, and it's already made its way, visually, into handfuls of movies, such as *Lawnmower Man* and the abysmal *Johnny Mnemonic*.

When I say this is a metaphor, I mean that there is a relation, but an incomplete one. To define a simile - one thing is like another; one thing is as another. They are not alike, but only similar or related. A disembodied and boundless city is maybe an apt metaphor for the way that some of us conceive of information storage in the modern world. Everything connected in a vast openness that belies the physical limitations of paved streets in terms of accessibility, but it all has its borders too. To penetrate into that scarlet pyramid requires something more than *getting there*.

But the dreams I had years ago when I first read the book, vivid enough for me to remember now, were not about just romping through this videogame world of swirling colors and shapes, travelling without moving, blasting ICE with programs like cannons. The dreams were about the information. In *Neuromancer* and Gibson's other books, when information is garnered from some source on the matrix, the reader sees it as written text, as words on the screen that was Case's (to use one example) retina, or as descriptions of visual scenes. But the way I imagined it, that was the way of the past. In the future of connectivity and information, the data enters you as instantaneous knowledge. This was the sublime, what made the matrix in my mind surpass the level of televisions or computer screens. To experience information like a rush, like sex in its ferality and primalness, like a drug in the inevitability, the strange distance and infinite closeness of its distortions. Overwhelming, encompassing and yet ephemeral and searchable.

The idea of the mind surpassing and obviating the body is fascinating to me. It's as if, in our culture today, there are competing aesthetics - the beauty of the body and the beauty of information. In all the worlds of Sci-Fi, Cyberpunk and CyberNoir, so to speak, these aesthetics intertwine -- the cyborg represents the technological body, beautiful and informed. All the right connections. Gibson's cybernetic samurai Molly typifies this, her mirrored silver eyes a testament to the confused beauty of body and machine. But here I have just made a gaffe - machine and information are two different things. We can see fetishization of the machine in J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, but we cannot see the fetishization of information. In *Neuromancer*, the two seem to either co-exist or be confused. The fetish of information is supplanting that of the machine -- the character of Ratz, the old bartender at the Chatsubo with [the Russian arm](#), is a reminder of the old guard. The new guard are the Panther Moderns, their anarchy aside, with their skulls filled with sharp spikes of software like metal mohawks. Their *enhancements* are not *replacements* like Ratz's arm. They are designed to augment. But not to augment the

body. No -- to augment the mind. The spikes are knowledge. Molly's eyes have screens on which she can display information. She can see in the dark. Though there is confusion between whether it is her body itself that is beautiful or the capabilities of it, and hence a confusion between the aesthetics of the body / machine and that of information / the machine, hopefully it is the matrix that appears before Case's senses that is ultimately the most seductive.

Case is the one who tells us - the body is just meat. It is the aesthetic of the Cowboys, the ones who jack in and leave their bodies an inanimate heap in order to access the universe of information, the realm of the sublime that hides behind a wall outlet and lies beyond ordinary experience. Gibson gives us competition between the longings of the body and those of the mind. Case is useless as a human being when he is unable to jack in, on a path towards utter self-destruction. Which is more important - the physical world or the matrix ? Though writing a visionary world, Gibson cannot distance himself ultimately from the body. As readers, it is what we are familiar with - it makes everything else accessible. Without Case's and Molly's carnal desires, the pain of her wounds, the physicality of his speed addiction, it would be hard to grasp anything else. Gibson is possibly making a contrast between the world of the physical and the world of the matrix, of pure knowledge and access. But, then again, maybe this is a subtle illusion. Though they are separate worlds, what brings them together in *Neuromancer* is desire. Ambitions are the same, emotions are the same when jacked in. Case is always looking for his edge, his anger, because that's what allows him to perform. Without that yearning, that desire, he is useless in either world. Bodies exhibit desire, but the mind is its true vehicle and this desire is what integrates the two worlds, the two aesthetics, of Gibson's fiction. *The carnality of sex is the carnality of the mind's power to access and penetrate and possess - the fetishization of information* is realized through Case and the parallels between sex with Molly and the penetration of electronic defenses, a relation intensified by Case's ability to switch instantaneously between the matrix and the feeling of Molly's body.

And so I am meditating on the nature of desire. Like all fetishes, the fetish of information ties eroticism into an object. One desires a nonsexual object in a sexual way. That's not what the fetish of information is, though - it's a unique fetish in that, while information and access to it has been commodified to a greater extent now than ever before, the information itself is something that can be possessed like no physical object. Books, an earlier form, if you want to look at it that way, of commodified information, had to be physically grasped to be used. But books are not information, just carriers. Information can penetrate us. We are the sum of what we know and what we can access. Our senses and the processing machinery of our brains are what make us. Consciousness as a tool for dealing with information. Physical feelings are the result of our minds processing information. Our desires are our craving information and access. When I am in love, I want to experience my lover, have access to her, unite with her. Mutual possession, total access - my desire is to know and understand and through that to achieve an assimilation of experience. Sex is much more than an intertwining of bodies and the rush of orgasm - in the intensity of it, you know your partner. Spiritually and emotionally you create a bond of intimacy. *Intimacy is to know*. The most famous of all euphemisms for sex is the biblical -- he knew his wife. Sense experience and information are the same, and in the fetish of information, our emotions are reactions to both and inseparable as such.

In *Neuromancer*, Case is sexually attracted to the matrix -- to the interface between sense experience and information :

A year [in Chiba City] and he still dreamed of cyberspace, hope fading nightly... He'd see the matrix in his sleep, bright lattices of logic unfolding across that colorless void... The Sprawl was a long strange way home over the Pacific now, and he was no console man, no cyberspace cowboy. Just another hustler, trying to make it through. But the dreams came on in the Japanese night like livewire voodoo, and he'd cry for it, cry in his sleep, and wake alone in the dark, curled in his

capsule in some coffin hotel, his hands clawed into the bedslab, temperfoam bunched between his fingers, trying to reach the console that wasn't there. (4-5)

But this is just the beginning. Gibson prefigures the fetishization of information -- he makes it possible and slyly walks around it without diving in completely. The seeds were there, though. The matrix brings together the physical and the informative into a realm of virtuality where the distinctions between modes of desire can be blurred. In the matrix, there exists the possibility for the gratification of information and access to be realized physically and erotically.