

Gibson's Invisible City

Laura Lee
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In William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the city is an indiscriminate sprawl of virtual projections and imaginary boundaries. In comparison with Italo Calvino's work "Invisible Cities", Gibson's book presents the urban environment as a topology of signals and nodes, a design that is structured from these nodes internally and then crystallizes as a matrix. We see how the "city" becomes a mental projection of those within it through the creation of virtual worlds, where cyberspace becomes a house of sorts, a house of the mind. In its etymological roots, "building" means "to be, to exist, to grow". Inasmuch as cyberspace comes to represent human perception in the digital age, we see how Gibson's urban sprawl comes to define Case's coming-of-age in the cyberworld. His growth, which results in the "self-awareness" achieved by the end of the book, results from his own cognitive mapping of his environment, as he travels through virtual worlds, encounters other human entities, and is psychologically stimulated by these encounters.

The architectural construct of cyberspace represents the human structuralization of human consciousness and experience. The fact that cyberspace in Gibson's book involves other entities beyond human understanding demonstrates Gibson's take on the shift in power structures in this world from humans to alien entities. In "Literary Architecture" (Frank) we see how humans perceive their environments in terms of boundaries they create in perceptions :

"Man's main difference is that he imagines his consciousness or experience to be bounded in particular space, (walls, bodies, time) while what is outside his personal realm he imagines to be boundless."

The fact that Gibson's cyberspace stretches beyond the realm of human consciousness creates a world of heightened anxieties. The signals and signs that characterize the cyberspace are given and received without knowing the "receiver" or "giver" of those signals. In *Neuromancer*, alien invasion promises danger and anxiety of uncalculable degree to humans that dwell in this architecture, which becomes throughout the novel, an architecture of fear and despair. Calvino's novel describes the new interactions within these invisible cities :

"At times all I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape... the dialogue of two passersby meeting in the crowd, and I think that, setting out from there, I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them."

In a world that has grown out of the human proportion, characters are engulfed by alien encounters and constant stimulation from mysterious realms of projection. Perhaps the most poignant of all experiences within this invisible system, is the potential of losing the capability of human interaction and happiness in this connection with others. In Calvino's book, he describes Raissa, the city of Sadness :

"In Raissa, the city of sadness, there runs an invisible thread that binds one living being to another for a moment, then unravels, then is stretched again between moving points as it draws new and rapid patterns so that at every second, the unhappy city contains a happy city unaware of its own existence.

Gibson's dystopic world is one in which characters are continually isolated from one another, where invisible "threads" do in fact exist, though they are untractable. Describing cyberspace as a shared experience, we are equally aware, that the relation of one to the system is [isolationist](#). As millions might read the same novel, and interact with the text, these millions are sharing the experience of reading that text at the same time as being isolated from one another. This "invisible thread" binds each participant in cyberspace to similar experience, but it is not shared experience :

"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." [p. 51]

Finally, we see how the system changes the perception of "love idols" within *Neuromancer*. It's a pathetic display of the concept of love in this cyberworld, as characters are unable to connect or even conceptualize the objects of their affection. On page 139, where Riviera describes Molly, we see how the act of love or attraction is a solitary act, with love as a mental construct :

"Riviera opened his eyes... 'I couldn't quite hold her, hold her in my mind. But I wanted to hold her, hold her more and more...' His voice carried perfectly in the hush of the restaurant... 'I decided that if I could visualize some part of her, only a small part, if I could see that part perfectly, in the most perfect detail...' Molly's body. Case stared, his mouth open. But it wasn't Molly; it was Molly as Riviera imagined her."

The scene ends as Riviera's dreamgirl, his imagined Molly, tears him to shreds with her fingerblades, thus ending with an ironic quote : "there was an inverted symmetry : Riviera puts the dreamgirl together, the dreamgirl takes him apart" (p. 141). Though humorous, the scene clearly describes the pathetic nature of these individuals in conceiving and attaining love.

Gibson's cyberspace is akin to Calvino in its implied but invisible connections within the system. It is interesting to look at the dystopic city in view of character's attempts to connect to other humans, through Case's ghostly sightings of the ever-evasive Linda Lee, through the constantly appearing and disappearing dwellers of these worlds. I can see how this book is a modern day version of George Orwell's *1984*, where love is scant and individuals lose their private identity to "merge with the system". Besides, in an ever-increasing invisible power structure, or in Gibson's case, information structure, who can we love but ourselves and the images we create ?