

Beyond CYB, Beyond ORG, Beyond NEURO, Beyond EVOLVERA

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William Gibson once pointed out during an interview that he does not write about the future, but rather about the present. He also noted that he prefers to base his so-called futuristic universes on the invariant qualities of human nature, or on trends which are potentially, if not actually, present in contemporary society. Although some would disagree with this assertion on the grounds that Gibson's *Neuromancer* singlehandedly created a new genre and must therefore be regarded as revolutionary and futuristic, a closer inspection of the book reveals that its greatest success may not necessarily be the detailed descriptions of the technological infrastructure of the Sprawl. The technology is simply a means to make a statement about the driving force that motivates all cultural progress.

CYB

The first level of this driving force reveals itself as a desire to build technological constructs in order to help humans deal with the challenges imposed by their physical existence. As the most ancient and basic form of existential modification, this motivation has consequently had the most extensive effect on Gibson's Sprawl. The invention of the wheel marks the beginning of the narrative of engineering, the Industrial Revolution marks the point of no return - an era which affirmed the fact that technology was destined to become an integral part of society - and Gibson's Sprawl marks a point where technology has gone astray and has consequently become, more than anything, a hypertext of human history - a patchwork of contraptions from various ages.

The door swung inward and she led him into the smell of dust. They stood in a clearing, dense tangles of junk rising on either side to walls lined with shelves of crumbling paperbacks. The junk looked like something that had grown there, a fungus of twisted metal and plastic. He could pick out individual objects, but then they seemed to blur back into the mass : the guts of a television so old it was studded with the glass stumps of vacuum tubes, a crumpled dish antenna, a brown fiber canister stuffed with corroded lengths of alloy tubing. An enormous pile of old magazines had cascaded into the open area, flesh of lost summers staring blindly up as he followed her back through a narrow canyon of impacted scrap. He heard the door close behind them. He didn't look back.

ORG

The second level constitutes a desire to modify one's organic existence, internally or externally. Through the ages, many societies have preferred to express religious beliefs, aesthetic preferences or social hierarchies through the application of bodily modifications. These efforts have ranged from such simple procedures as getting one's ears pierced to such extensive, and possibly intimidating, measures as getting tattoos which cover

one's entire body. Although such modifications have mostly constituted changes in one's appearance (and possibly in one's mode of consciousness, more on that later) the twentieth century has seen organic changes which further incorporate functional advantages. The last few years of the twentieth century identifies an era in which an extensive range of medical problems can be solved through the use of certain technological procedures directly on one's body. The most basic level of such applications appears to be organ transplants, a more advanced level is the use of artificial organs, such as utilizing an artificial heart or contact lenses as a substitute for their organic counterparts, and the final level is cloning technology, which is currently going through rigorous beta testing. The characters in Gibson's *Neuromancer* make extensive use of the second and third levels of bodily modification, not necessarily to solve medical problems but occasionally to augment their organic existence with certain additional functionalities. For instance, Armitage, after having sustained potentially lethal damage during his escape from Siberia, is essentially reconstructed through the use of cloning technology. Molly's retractable blades and inset mirrored lenses, on the other hand, are efforts to surpass conventional bodily limitations in a society which thrives on Darwin's "survival of the fittest" rule. As David Cronenberg notes, during an interview regarding his latest movie, *Crash* :

The theme of transformation as a physical event fascinates me because we undergo the natural transformations that any animal undergoes, but then we interfere with it : we wear glasses, have our teeth done, our nose straightened. As humans, we try to transcend the body by transforming it. For us there is no natural. It's all a force of will. Everything that exists in the sense of ethics or philosophy comes from us. It doesn't come from the aliens or god - it's a reflection of us. As we change, those things change as well. You can see it in the increasing popularity of mutilation, piercing, tattooing, scarification. There's a growing refusal to be bound by the apparent limits of what the body is. There's an attempt to transcend it by transforming it - transmutation. McLuhan talked about people putting on cars the way we put on clothes. But now we're talking about absorbing and embedding technology and having it become a part of us, literally.

NEURO

The third level denotes a desire to modify one's intellectual existence. Acting on physical entities is rendered redundant when one can modify one's perception of them. The invention of text marks the beginning of this form of modification, since one can store, retrieve and communicate information in ways not necessarily constrained by one's physical existence. The invention of the printing press, the telephone, the radio, the television, the synchronous text-based chat protocol, the videoconferencing system, and the VR paradigm, have all contributed to elevating one's consciousness to previously inaccessible levels. Another method to pursue the same cause has been the use of neurochemicals. Drugs, stimulants, amphetamines, and the like, which directly act on one's nervous system, have long been used in transcending cognitive boundaries and thereby experiencing alternative modes of consciousness. The characters in Gibson's *Neuromancer* use both methods extensively, occasionally getting addicted to them. For instance, Case considers decking, perhaps the ultimate form of information technology, a way of life. He decks for hours on end without resting, eating, showering or sleeping. His excursions into the matrix are intense experiences of information and sensory overload. The speed at which he travels through countless data constructs gives him a sense of euphoria not unlike the pleasure he garners from the use of betaphenethylamine. Molly, during her break-in to the Sense/Net pyramid, uses endorphin pills in order to be able to ignore the pain from her wounds. Even the sexual encounter between Case and Molly seems to be an experience of intense multi-channel sensory and information overload, as detailed in [Elizabeth Rodwell's comment](#). Speed gives you a high, whether you're speeding through the matrix or injecting speed into your bloodstream.

EVOLVERA

The final level, which humanity is currently trying to come to grips with, is a desire to recreate the dynamics of evolution. EVOLVERA is distinctly different from ORG, however. The artificially grown organic regions on Armitage's body constitute utilizing natural evolution in functional contexts (technology : ORG). The creation of Wintermute, however, denotes the creation of a non-organic entity that shares with organic entities the qualities of adaptability, pattern recognition, the survival instinct and possibly original thought (technology : EVOLVERA). Gibson's later books explore this theme even further - nanobots construct entire buildings from scratch during a single night in Idris. In Gibson's future, everything functions in a bottom-up fashion just as things do in nature. The matrix is a recreation of a natural habitat - the kill-or-die maxim exists in the form of cut-the-ice-or-get-flatlined, as Dixie knows all too well. In said natural habitat, virtual entities learn, adapt and evolve - Case's info-self is distinct from his organic self. His info-self has adapted in a way as to enable him to filter the information overload, navigate effectively through countless data constructs and use appropriate offensive measures against target ice. Similarly, Wintermute changes tactics as the story unfolds, it does not so much plan as it improvises, as adaptive entities are wont to do. In a manner of speaking, the technology in Gibson's *Sprawl* is on the verge of admitting that nature does things best. Although the implemented technologies still cannot be considered perfect recreations of evolutionary dynamics, they're getting there. Humanity in 1998, however, still suffers from the Frankenstein syndrome. A veritable pity.

In conclusion, the technological and cultural infrastructure of Gibson's *Sprawl* unfolds on four chronological levels :

1. CYB, construct the machine
2. ORG, modify the organism
3. NEURO, alter the consciousness
4. EVOLVERA, recreate the evolutionary dynamics

To be perfectly comprehensive, however, we might also like to note the reason as to why the Rastafarians constitute part of the narrative, as pointed out by [Erica Dillon's commentary](#). My feeling is that Gibson included references to the Zionites in order to keep his list complete, that is, in order to include the zeroth technology, the VOX - recount the tale. The Rastafarians utilize oral culture in order to emulate all other technologies. For instance, when Case is surprised at Aerol's fascinating story about how a baby burst from his forehead, Molly explains :

"It's the Ganja... They don't make much of a difference between states, you know ? Aerol tells you it happened, well, it happened to *him*. It's not like bullshit, more like poetry. Get it ?"

The Rastafarians respect the imagination and the harmony in their verbal exchanges. They use body language and touch one another extensively in order to communicate more effectively.

"Case nodded dubiously. The Zionites always touched you when they were talking, hands on your shoulder. He didn't like that."

They don't respect Wintermute due to its power or its intelligence. They instead believe Wintermute simply because it sang them a "righteous Dub". The Zionites yearn for hyperconsciousness, as does all of humanity. They have simply chosen to pursue this goal through the application of the VOX, rather than evolving through

the four other technologies. They wish to attain a state of communion with one another and with the universe at large, and they respect oral culture due to their belief that it will help them achieve this goal.

"Hey, Aerol", Case called, an hour later, as he prepared for a practice run in the freefall corridor. "Come here, man. Wanna show you this thing". He held out the trodes.

Aerol executed a slow-motion tumble. His bare feet struck the steel wall and he caught a girder with his free hand. The other held a transparent waterbag bulging with blue-green algae. He blinked mildly and grinned.

"Try it", Case said.

He took the band, put it on, and Case adjusted the trodes. He closed his eyes. Case hit the power stud. Aerol shuddered. Case jacked him back out. "What did you see, man ?".

"Babylon", Aerol said, sadly, handing him the trodes and kicking off down the corridor.