

Human Robots

Francesca Wodtke

There's no such thing as a human robot, right ? Well, I mean, there is, but that's hardly the kind of robot we're dealing with in Molly and Case. That's the **OED's** definition B, reserved for dull people : "a person whose work or activities are entirely mechanical; an automaton". What we're talking about in *Neuromancer*, is something like (OED's definition A coming up) "a machine (sometimes resembling a human being in appearance) designed to function in place of a living agent, esp. one which carries out a variety of tasks automatically or with a minimum of external impulse".

Somehow, in *Neuromancer*, Gibson defies this law of robots, making Case and Molly distinctly human. I'm not blaming him. Humans are always more interesting to read about than robots : they have sex, they have accidents, they get into trouble, they converse with others and the distinguishing difference is that they care about it. One need only consider the film *Blade Runner* : I couldn't care less about the outcome of the replicants until Roy begins to show human compassion at the end of the film. Rachel, likewise is a dull character until we see Deckard make attempts to transform her : will she eventually develop human nature ?

You see, because we're human beings, that's what we're interested in.

The cracks and gaps in the armor of Case and Molly are all too noticeable. If Case is a robot, albeit an imperfect one, what can we make of his drug addiction ? He has been wired up and "trained by the best" [5], so why rely on substances to survive ? By the end of the first chapter he has talked of K, speed and ecstasy, and done them all more times than there are hours in a week. But isn't drug taking a distinctly human activity ? If we administered ecstasy to a dog, he might experience the physiological effects, but I doubt if he would suddenly become more affectionate (fun thought though, isn't it). In the same way, I feel that because Case is a robot, he really shouldn't experience the "euphoric high" that humans feel somehow it seems inappropriate. Unless of course, he is a human, in which case it's OK.

As a reader, I've always tried to identify with the characters. I can't do that with robots, but with human robots yes, it works, because human robots are just humans in disguise. Even Molly, who at the beginning of the book, appears so very alien shows deeper human depth. She's carefully hidden behind her eyes, the eyes which in so many other books are the windows through to the soul, carefully hidden behind her ruthlessness, behind her agility and strength and streamlined beauty. So carefully constructed is she, that when she breaks her leg [64], it seems as if an impossibility has occurred. We had grown to feel that Molly could endure anything, that she might even prefer the sensation of pain. And to discover that she has blood flowing through her veins, just like an ordinary human being, makes us feel as if we've been conned by some kind of a sick joke. Of course Molly is human. What, did you think her veins were filled with gasoline ?

I would argue that Gibson made a wise choice in creating human robots. In fact, robots so human that Case couldn't be more correct in his assertion that although Molly thinks she knows him, she couldn't be further from the truth :

"Funny, Case."

"What's funny ?"

"It's like I know you. That profile he's got. I know how you're wired."

"You don't know me, sister." [30]