

The Many Paths of Cyberspace: William Gibson's *The Sprawl* as Prototype for Structural,
Thematic, and Narrative Multilinearity in New Media

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Dedication

I dedicate this work of scholarship to my wife Melissa, my family, and my friends, who have believed in me during this process more than I could believe in myself and kept prayed for my endurance and success. I am grateful to my wonderful committee chair, Dr. Marybeth Baggett, who has given me much needed direction and has been exceedingly patient with my continual setbacks, and I am very thankful for the support and aid from my readers, Dr. Mark Harris and Dr. Yaw Adu-Gyamfi.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I pray that this work be used for His kingdom, and that I may ever be humbled by the power of His truth and love.

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Abstract

William Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy helped set a new direction for science fiction, but his work is also a valuable tool for examining changes in the approach both readers and writers began to take to literature as the text medium began its rapid evolution with the introduction of electronic hypertext. In this examination of Gibson's fiction, a pattern of multilinear truth emerges, showing how Western culture fully embraced Postmodern approaches to truth claims as a default, how even a pre-electronic text can exhibit hypertext-like aspects, and how this shift in interpretive response to literature is important for Christians in order to fully engage the culture. This thesis first establishes the historical background into which the cyberpunk genre appeared and Gibson started his literary career, with careful consideration for stylistic, aesthetic, and philosophical influences to Gibson's fiction. The discussion then shifts to an analysis of the physical multilinear aspects of Gibson's setting and characters, the multilinearity of existential subjects such as being and reality, and finally the discussion turns to a narratological examination of the structure of Gibson's plot and storytelling elements. Upon examining these multilinear aspects, the hypertext-like nature of Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy makes his work a useful tool to examine the roots of the modern internet-age approach to text literature and the truth-claims that text literature contains. Reflecting on Gibson's work this way, Christians who seek to understand how the current default approach has changed since the introduction of electronic texts can more easily understand why a traditionally effective strategy of ministry has less impact today.

Key Words: William Gibson, Cyberpunk, Hypertext, Science Fiction, Marie-Laurie Ryan, Narratology

Chapter 1:

Cyberpunk's Influences and Narratological Frameworks for the Evaluation of Gibson's the
Sprawl as a Prototype of Multilinearity in Literature

“We participate, you and I, in the death of print-as-we-knew-it, and should experience thereby an exquisite frisson of ecstasy and dread. So soon, we plunge toward a world in which the word ‘library’ simply means something on the other end of a modem.” (Author’s Afterword to the online edition of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, n. pag.)

As with most popular genres, science fiction¹ has undergone numerous revisions and redefinitions since its evolution out of the late 1800’s exploration of scientific concepts through creative fiction. But cyberpunk, itself only a particular styling of science fiction, did something different from expected. The genre had a consistent cycle of new stylistic movements which gradually or sometimes quickly became relegated to academic study as new writers subverted and displaced them, but this constant trend changed after cyberpunk² rode out its initial wave of popularity by the end of the 80’s. At this time, the collective of science fiction writers seemed to

¹ While the exact nature and characteristics of science fiction are still often debated, the *Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction*. offers a broad enough definition to be useful: “A genre (of literature, film, etc.) in which the setting differs from our own world (e.g. by the invention of new technology, through contact with aliens, by having a different history, etc.), and in which the difference is based on extrapolations made from one or more changes or suppositions; hence, such a genre in which the difference is explained (explicitly or implicitly) in scientific or rational, as opposed to supernatural, terms” (Prucher “science fiction”).

² This term was originally coined by Bruce Bethke in his short story “Cyberpunk” in 1980, but it was not applied to a movement of literature until after Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. According to Prucher, Cyberpunk is “a subgenre of science fiction that focuses on the effects on society and individuals of advanced computer technology, artificial intelligence, and bionic implants in an increasingly global culture, especially as seen in the struggles of streetwise, disaffected characters” (“cyberpunk”).

forget the old way of genre-wide shifts and instead wandered off on their own myriad paths. As such, the literary landscape of science fiction is far too diverse to identify a particular stylistic movement, except to say that there is very clearly not an individual strain. Instead of moving as one movement, science fiction splintered. While publishers need little other motivation to create marketing sub-genres than for the potential profit from niche interests in fiction, there is very clearly something much broader at work here. The availability of a nearly infinite variety of diverse content to consume, in all forms of media, is a norm of modern techno-centric society. Electronic media are evolving, reconstituting, and transforming everything about literature, and this phenomenon largely goes unnoticed. As a precursor to this movement, however, William Gibson's first trilogy, beginning with *Neuromancer*, can be used as a guide to understand these transformative developments in science fiction and Western society since the cyberpunk movement's debut because of the multilinear³ aspects of its structure, themes, and narrative.

As the first cyberpunk writer, William Gibson did not merely characterize his fictional world with fantastic, imagined technology, but imagined that our lives would merely become one with the fruits of our headlong scientific pursuits. The cyborg, an essential combination of man and machine, mind and metal, did not only catalyze a new wave of science fiction but created the atmosphere that prepared the world to transition from a postmodern⁴ default to a new chimera of

³ The term Multilinearity or multi-linearity is derived from Mathematics, in which it describes multiple possible lines which may be drawn by a function depending on different variables. As related to hypertext, a term allegedly coined in 1963 by Ted Nelson for the model of embedding references to further information at the time proposed for computer technology, multilinearity further describes the ability of hypertext and other hypermedia to offer multiple linear paths of progression through content. According to George Landow in his foundational work *Hypertext*, hypertext nodes within media "create text that is experienced as nonlinear, or, more properly, as multilinear or multisequential" (3-4). For my purposes, the term "multilinearity" will serve to describe the active experience of hypertext's many individual paths rather than as a description of topography or of an abstract network.

⁴ Postmodernity is here used in the sociological sense as advanced by Jean Baudrillard, describing "a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals" (Baldick "postmodernism"). In the literary sense, I will attempt to demonstrate through the discussion of Gibson's work that the shift in the science fiction genre through cyberpunk

postmodern philosophy and futurist⁵ dreams. Among the group of writers, steeped so long in their heritage of traditional science fiction and bored with the new artistic statements of the 60s wave of political writers, Gibson saw the emergence of technology not as a prophetic sign of doom but instead as a descriptor of a new expression of human nature. Western culture's next movement would not be singular, but progressive, not another pendulum swing to an opposite pole but a new mutation of philosophy which branches into countless combinations of old and new ideas. With the very basis of language and literature changing, Gibson's work acts as a guide to the transition of the world from a linear approach to text to one that is fragmented and multilinear.

William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, in this sense, acts as a prototype. The characters are hardly heroes but actors on a vast, chaotic stage, being only minor participants in a gigantic contest for survival, and the headlong charge of progress pushes beyond anyone's ability or desire to control. Survival is no longer a goal, but a pressure, and it consumes everything and becomes everything. In this environment, there is no direct path to anything, and every path is a valid path as long as it ends with even a tangentially relevant conclusion. Even as a printed text before the prevalence of electronic text media, Gibson's *Neuromancer* and following works are filled with elements that do not simply subvert definition as in the deconstructive mode but

has been away from a nihilistic absence of specific meaning toward an attempt to approach meaning through the acceptance of the reality of technological progress and its effect on the human condition. In this way, Gibson acts as deconstructor and reintegrator by establishing spectrums of meaning to replace traditional binaries rather than simply denying the binary relationships. This enables him to point to specific meaning through abstractions, as in the case of questioning the idea of personhood while allowing the individual characters to seek their own place in the spectrum of human and machine or male and female.

⁵ Here the term "futurist" does not refer to futurism, the Italian 20th century artistic movement, but "future studies" or "futuology," the recent interdisciplinary exploration in the last twenty years of the sociological effects of emerging technology on humankind. Ray Kurzweil is a prominent voice in this field, head of Google's specialized research and development of artificial intelligence, and author of *The Age of Spiritual Machines* in which he describes his predictions of the eventual exponential development of computer technology to the point of sentient artificial intelligence which will rival and then outmode humanity.

endorses an attitude of acceptance for a vast gradient of meaning. Narrative structures fold inward on themselves and become nested⁶, offering experience from multiple plains of existence for characters within the world of the Sprawl, Gibson's near-future Earth. The overall effect is a model for what would come later, after the cyberpunk writers established themselves, and after the movement was spent, inspiring new splinters of literary exploration as the world moved away from old patterns of change.

Part 1:

Gernsback to Gibson: Reformation of Science Fiction Before and After the New Wave Writers

Before Gibson's narrative structures and multilinearity of theme and structure can be properly contextualized, a brief history of the science fiction genre which birthed Gibson's writing environment is important to show the state of SF before and after his first novel. As an avid reader and consumer of science fiction, Gibson grew up experiencing a significant cross-section of both traditional and avant-garde SF authors, piecing together his own ideas about the purpose and function written media should undertake.

In 1926, Hugo Gernsback, often included with Jules Verne and H.G. Wells as one of the "Fathers of Science Fiction," popularized the genre with the mass market through his *Amazing Stories* "scientifiction" magazine. The goal was to explain hard-science concepts to common people through entertainment so that the public would be more supportive of and less fearful of ground-breaking scientific pursuits. Gernsback's success kicked off the popular science fiction market and brought in writers of pulp-fiction novels with their new mainstream audience, but the genre quickly became saturated with hack writers. John W. Campbell Jr. attempted a counter-

⁶ This term will be used in the metaphorical sense as in the traditional Russian matryoshka doll, with one structure or element being housed in or embedded in another, describing both visual and logical structures.

revolution of the genre to bring it back to the realm of literature through his own magazine, *Astounding Science Fiction*. This began the Golden Age of science fiction from 1938 to 1946, in which writers such as A. E. van Vogt, Isaac Asimov, and Robert A. Heinlein published their classic novels. After this, the New Wave of writers took over during the 50s, 60s, and 70s with novels such as William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, establishing postmodernist and deconstructionist themes and techniques as the artistic norm. This new batch of experimental writers was much more closely concerned with "soft" sciences than the "hard" science of Gernsback or Campbell, and explored the psychological, sociological, and anthropological elements of futuristic worlds. Based in the hipster culture, the New Wave established itself as decidedly technophobic, seeing emerging technological paths, especially the increase of materialist consumer technology, as essentially damaging to the human race. However this tendency to demonize technological progress partly reversed itself as technology came to the hands of the new generation through the advent of personal computing, which later became the darling of the cyberpunk culture which found its heart in William Gibson's short story "Burning Chrome." What was once terrifying new technology became normal and capitalized such that the next generation of science fiction readers and writers found it less foreign and more atmospheric. Technology was once a savior of mankind, then its killer, but now only a normal evolution of the species.

In "The Gernsback Continuum," Gibson satirizes Gernsback's generation of technological utopianists who envisioned worlds made better by the progress of science. Using the futurist architecture of "World of Tomorrow"-styled buildings as a focal point, Gibson's short story envisions the 1980s world as the Golden Age SF writers desired it, and mocks their naivety. Neither an Orwellian prison camp nor a luxurious land of modern convenience, the

world Gibson saw in his own life was just recovering from the draft-dodging, napalm-bombing times of the hippie movement and the Vietnam War, and the near future wasn't looking like it would come close to either the dreams or nightmares of Gibson's science fiction predecessors. The rocket age had come and gone without flying cars or moon vacations, and all that was left was a dilapidated shell of chrome. The high technology of the previous generation had become debris, and Gibson saw no reason that this trend should not continue. From this point in his development as a writer, "Johnny Mnemonic" and the rest of Gibson's short stories collected in his anthology *Burning Chrome* set the stage for his debut novel to cut a new path for science fiction by further demonstrating Gibson's general attitude of shirking the noble expectations of the coming age, instead seeing the progress of the human condition as moving through a progressively more complicated labyrinth of technological landfills.

Critical reception was at first very kind to Gibson, giving him the three most notable awards available to science fiction writers, and praising him for such a visionary work, especially for a first novel. Yet the critics also pointed out *Neuromancer's* weaknesses, namely that his plot and characters were relatively shallow when compared to his minutely detailed and elaborately constructed milieu, evidenced by how the aesthetic ideas about cyberspace, as well as the designation, were lifted and used within the cyberpunk genre and without. Gibson went on to follow these trends, coauthoring *The Difference Engine* as a steampunk novel and *Virtual Lights* as a representation of near-future "nowpunk" (as Bruce Sterling ironically named it for focusing on current-day considerations), but his greatest influence remains with *Neuromancer*, the archetypal cyberpunk novel.

Science fiction has had a relatively short history; but throughout its existence it has been a driving point of social change, constantly predicting and reacting to new technological progress

and shifts in culture. William Gibson's debut novel *Neuromancer* captured both the spirit of the Golden Age of traditional SF and the avant-garde edge of its New Wave. The technopoetical prose of Gibson's work, with its heady atmosphere of adrenaline and amphetamines, was a shot in the arm for SF's tired, self-referential reactionism that forced SF writers into a cycle of purposefully rejecting their predecessors' works in order to try something new. The result was a reinvention of the SF genre from the cold, empirical looking glass of scientists and academics to a condensation of discontent, a post-modern-esque critique of post-modern cynicism, offering bleak yet believable depictions of the modern world with the trappings of hope for the future beyond the physical, even if the world was falling apart. The aesthetic and philosophical shifts introduced by *Neuromancer*, inspired by Manny Farber's "White Elephant Art and Termite Art," not only spurred the cyberpunk movement into prominence within SF, but also kicked the genre into direct interaction with pop-culture. Science fiction became the spirit of our age, and because of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, there's a little cyborg in all of us.

When William Gibson's first full-length book was published in 1984, *Neuromancer* was heralded by some academics and science fiction writers as the arrival of a new paradigm in the genre, one that would depose the tired New Wave, replacing its experimental visions with new narrative forms and more importantly, new readership. But the definition of science fiction and its purpose have been debated since its beginning, and had undergone a new bout of redefinitions during the 60s and 70s. Darko Suvin, editor for *Science Fiction Studies* and renowned SF critic, described a popular definition in 1971 in "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," saying that science fiction begins with a framing scientific hypothesis, but arguing that it should be defined as "the literature of cognitive estrangement," defined further in this article as a method of offering new ways of thinking about human society (372). This role of science fiction was,

according to literary critics like Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. later in his analysis of the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Donna Haraway, “not a genre of literary entertainment only, but a mode of awareness, a complex hesitation about the relationship between imaginary conceptions and historical reality unfolding into the future” (388). Writers such as William S. Burroughs, Philip K. Dick, and Ursula K. Le Guin during this era certainly exemplified this directive, offering non-traditional and often taboo perspectives, structures, and themes that challenged the popular narratives of history past, present, and future.

However, much of this tumult in the definition of science fiction was parallel to the broader literary community’s attempts to define Western culture’s philosophical alignment. In "Simulacra and Science Fiction," Baudrillard argues that the world of postmodern and global commodity culture is dominated by the order of "simulation simulacra ... [whose] aim is maximum operationality, hyperreality, total control"; among other things, this has resulted in the death of the "good old SF imagination":

True SF, in this case, would not be fiction in expansion, with all the freedom and ‘naiveté’ which gave it a certain charm of discovery. It would, rather, evolve implosively, in the same way as our image of the universe. It would seek to revitalize, to reactualize, to rebanalize fragments of simulation—fragments of this universal simulation which our presumed ‘real’ world has now become for us.

(311)

Breaking, reforming, molding, and melding these pieces to form a new, better, or simply different kind of science fiction was the goal of SF’s New Wave writers, and Gibson’s writing came to the discussion just as this wave’s force was running out.

With the post-modern haze of skepticism still clinging to the margins of the science fiction genre, the once new literary movement was not so much dead as sinking and recombining “with other like elements to form again part of the generative stew of art and culture” (Federman 123). The changes within the genre which were catalyzed by *Neuromancer*’s entry into it were not a push, but a shove into a new epoch. Even before critics had a box to put it in, “Gibson’s novel, whether or not it fit comfortably into any particular “movement,” had hit a cultural nerve” (Hollinger 256-7). The Avant-pop movement, specifically thrust into motion by cyberpunk’s rising cultural relevance, according to Kregel “enhances and upgrades postmodernism in the sense that it fully realizes its [stylistic practices]” (59). These stylistic practices, as in the inherent recognition of multiple planes of existence simultaneously through the frequent interaction with cyberspace, have fully cemented science fiction into mainstream pop-culture, and therefore have manifested in every emerging media: movies such as *The Matrix*, taking the Wakowski Siblings’ hero Neo through a transcendent journey between the real and virtual worlds; video games, which frequently establish not only the gritty aesthetic tradition of cyberpunk but the reality of literal multiple realities; the internet culture itself with its ability and tendency to address hypertext as a matter of mere formatting. All of these forms exhibit the influence of Gibson’s work through their integration of cyberpunk ideas.

But the filtering of *Neuromancer*’s core concepts, aesthetics, and philosophy into pop-culture is not the only influence the novel, in its starting the cyberpunk movement, has had on western culture. The feminist movement, politically and literarily, has found a home in science fiction since the New Wave of science fiction in the 60s and 70s. However, after the Vietnam War had ended and there was no more slaughter to decry, conflict arose around the introduction of transgendered writers into feminist associations. Donna Haraway, finding inspiration in the

works of Gibson and other writers of cyberpunk, declared a new direction for feminists and Marxists in her famous article “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in which she utilizes the cyborg as “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (1) to which they all could identify. This article and the academic discussion it inspired catalyzed a coalescing of social movements which engendered a shift towards a mainstream discussion of gender politics.

Parallel to this political development, postcyberpunk sub-genres have emerged, so called due to their similarity in aesthetics to Gibson’s movement, but with broader and multifaceted interests. These genres suggest, according to Heureka, “relativism, multisignificance, an unbiased assessment of the power of technology and . . . a discourse that refuses to explore the cybernetic phenomena with a binary simplicity” which is neither nihilistic nor dystopian (142). This has led, along with the political conglomeration of gender politics, to an open discussion of the implications of science and technology for the future of mankind in a post-human sense, asking the same basic questions of existence as Gibson’s *Neuromancer* – what does it mean to be human, where is the real boundary between the reality and imagination, or myriad other critical breaking points of dualistic philosophy when faced with transhumanism -- but with a much broader sense of the questions’ implications for current-day social issues.

The eminent diffusion of Gibson’s influence on contemporary culture has made this discussion not only mainstream but default. The rapid, uncontrolled progress of technology, once a distant and delicate premise, is now a given reality, and the dreamlike vision of Gibson’s cyberspace has become as essential to science fiction imagination as themes of warfare or romance. With the further integration of technology into the daily life of common people, into media, culture, and social interactions as well as literature, the relevance of Gibson’s work becomes more evident, the fiction becoming more than science fact, but mundane reality.

Part 2:

Termite Aspect and Postmodern/Modernist Inflections of Gibson's Writing

As a reader of science fiction of all types from a young age, Gibson had a broad grounding for his exposure to what the SF community had to offer before he tried his own hand. In an interview for *The Mississippi Review* in 1988, Gibson was asked by Larry McCaffery about his motivations for writing *Neuromancer* and his earlier short stories: "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... my stance was instinctual... I would say I simply tried to go the opposite direction from most of the stuff... which I felt such aesthetic revulsion towards" (228). This attitude led Gibson to seek alternate frameworks with which to approach his own fiction and led to the formation of his signature style. The celebrated elements in his first novel *Neuromancer* were its dark tone, gritty milieu, and harshly-rendered anti-heroes, all clothed in beautiful and dense description which utilized technological jargon in nearly poetic verse. Turning aside the New Wave's aversion to high technology, Gibson's book was filled with technical language and authentic-sounding predictions of technologies based on the current generation, operating within reasonably hard-science boundaries without the Golden Age's utopian idealism.

Given his first chance to publish a novel but only given a year to write it so that it could be featured in a special "new authors" series, Gibson completed his debut work with a sense of animal panic. This frantic rush apparently focused his brilliance, as the resulting work was widely acclaimed as being the start of something new in the dated SF community. Gibson's skeptical attitude toward the utopian/dystopian discussion in the Golden Age of traditional SF novels carried through into *Neuromancer*, using morally ambiguous characters who survived in a

harsh underworld dominated by international corporations who have systematically marginalized national governments. Gibson's use of high-tech, low-life antiheroes with the catchphrase "the street finds its own use for things," sidestepped the traditional role of the scientist hero while simultaneously avoiding the intentionally political and artistic mouthpiece characters used by the hipster New Wave. *Neuromancer* shifted the focus from the hero's identity to the class of people he belonged to, and the environment he interacted with. Gibson's protagonist, Case, is a "console cowboy," a hacker who specializes in stealing information from carefully and heavily fortified sources inside the virtualized environment of cyberspace. Gibson's descriptions of Case's interactions with this particular aspect of his milieu earned him the lion's share of his reputation as a visionary, as the world of cyberspace became the collective dream of his generation, appearing to have directly influenced the development of the internet and its emergent culture from a loosely-knit collection of misfits to a virtual society seeking absolute freedom of expression. Similarly, Gibson's computer characters, super-intelligent artificial super beings that merge and dissolve into cyberspace itself to become a sort of machine god, helped to change the way the public approached the developing technology of artificial intelligence.

A prime example of Gibson's signature technopoetics is in his explanation of his virtual world, as seen by his protagonist when he absently flips to a children's educational television show:

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. . . (Gibson 51)

The imagery of the internet as a physical place, a realm of pure data, is common and emblematic of contemporary internet-saturated society, ingrained in all social interactions consciously and unconsciously. This concept, dreamed before and after Gibson's novel but never before so artistically rendered with such visceral, engaging clarity, stuck in the minds of readers and authors until it slowly became reality. But the idea of cyberspace, as revolutionary as it was to the pre-internet science fiction, was not this novel's only legacy. From the page to special effects-augmented medium of film, *Neuromancer's* tone, aesthetics, and themes of uncontrolled progress of humanity toward the singularity of man and machine have become the default of not only science fiction, but of the interactions, transactions, and expectations of postmodernity. Gibson's cyberspace has become our dream, and his *Sprawl*, our world.

During his short academic career at the University of British Columbia, Gibson read an essay, "White Elephant Art and Termite Art" by film critic Manny Farber, which greatly affected not only his writing, but the injection of new aesthetics into the science fiction genre, and further, into Western culture. Not only does he draw from Farber's complicated sentence structure and dense metaphor, but Gibson was deeply affected by Farber's response to the philosophical assault to traditional notions of art and the New Wave's ironic failure to defy those notions while attempting to subvert art traditions' cultural implications. Farber's indictment became the foundation for Gibson's approach to his science fiction predecessors:

Most of the feckless, listless quality of today's art can be blamed on its drive to break out of a tradition while, irrationally, hewing to the square, boxed-in shape and gemlike inertia of an old, densely wrought European masterpiece... suffering

from this burnt-out notion of a masterpiece-breaking away from its imprisoning conditions toward a suicidal improvisation. (Farber 134)

Farber's subversive approach to traditional, self-aware art (what he termed disparagingly as "White Elephant Art" for its habit to style itself as a masterpiece to be admired) gave Gibson a way to avoid the staleness of passé SF and embrace a brave alternative: "termite art," Farber's brand of artistic expression that "stands opposed to elite aesthete culture, embraces freedom and multiplicity... pieces that gnaw away at their own boundaries" (Olsen 291). Instead of being trapped in the mold of either the sterile tradition or the self-important artiste, Gibson was able to sculpt his own aesthetic toward uniqueness without having to firebomb tradition.

Farber's concept of termite art in *Neuromancer* is evident in Gibson's first description of Molly Millions. Coming home to his rented sleeping capsule in a cheap Japanese-style pod hotel, Gibson's main character Henry Case first meets the cyborg:

She sat with her back to the wall, at the far end of the coffin. She had her knees up, resting her wrists on them; the pepperbox muzzle of a flechette pistol emerged from her hands... She wore mirrored glasses. Her clothes were black, the heels of black boots deep in the temperfoam... She shook her head. He realized the glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag... She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails. She smiled. The blades slowly withdrew. (Gibson 24-5)

This is the quintessential cyborg, Gibson's "street samurai," blending hardcore street with fantastical technology. His first novel, like his cyborg, is extreme, harsh, dysphonic, melded in a graceful artistry of jury-rigging. Olsen summarizes this brilliant conglomeration in his (at the time) cutting-edge and hypertexted article (here condensed without the excessive parenthetical commentary):

Gibson obviously employs various extrapolations of technology or pseudotechnology but he also appropriates . . . not only the universes of fantasy and science fiction, but also those of the detective novel . . . , the western . . . , the spy thriller . . . , and the realist novel . . . By mongrelizing discursive worlds, Gibson mongrelizes the beliefs about existence those discursive worlds suggest.

(Olsen 291-3)

This is all accomplished in the face of the Gernsbackian tradition of "scientifiction," the Golden Age's defining dictate to teach hard science fact through fiction. It is after all, as Alkon points out, "very hard to understand how a four-centimeter (1.6 inch) retractable blade along with even a highly miniaturized motor-mechanism could be implanted without impeding the ability to bend the fingers at their first joints," although if asked Gibson could no doubt offer a satisfyingly science-ish answer (79). Gibson's blending of many genres and styles gives his presentation of such technological marvels, the gadgetry that was once the focus of traditional SF, mystical properties that nonetheless do not blunt the realistic edge of his fiction. This effect, blurring and eroding lines while maintaining a solid whole, is what makes Gibson's work solidly Termitic. This focus allows Gibson to redefine his own boundaries of genre, style, and influences instead of following the pendulum swing of science fiction back toward raw, elephant-like traditionalism.

Part 3:

Narratological Framework and Critical Tools for Analyzing Multilinear Aspects of William Gibson's *The Sprawl* Trilogy and Selected Works

Gibson's writings did not spawn from a vacuum, but the noticeable uniqueness of his spin on both traditional and new narrative forms is what brought him so much attention in his first novel. The transitional nature of Gibson's *Neuromancer* and following works is not diminished by his being heavily influenced by other writers, and it would also be a mistake to approach Gibson's work from a perspective of it being defined solely by its heredity. The reaction of science fiction authors since the cyberpunk movement to what Gibson and his group started is evidence enough that there was something in his work that everyone was waiting for, a crucial shaking-up of the box of tricks such that a new formula popped out, much to everyone's relief. At the same time, Gibson's work correlates with a technological transformation during the dawn of the Information Age, the emergence of the internet, and the influences of electronic media which have shaped the 21st century in ways far beyond the imaginings of cultural critics of the 20th. Just as the television did not manage to banish the written word into the annals of history, the introduction of electronic text did not abolish the paper kind, even if the idea of a paperless society caught the imagination of the marketing industry. The concept of text, however, is affected by the possibility of new ways of reading, as developments in computer technologies allow for different ways to read other than the standard left-to-right, top-to-bottom standard which physical text applies (Charney 1). Websites, for example, may contain text which defies this standard completely, allowing multiple paths to information which allow for on-demand access of ideas without reference to linear structure. As Charney puts it: "hypertext has

the potential to change fundamentally how we write, how we read, how we teach these skills, and even how we conceive of text itself” (2).

But critics like Postman insisted on the necessary loss of meaning between media which have different parameters and limitations:

[T]he decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television...[has created a] change-over [that] has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse, since two media so vastly different cannot accommodate the same ideas. As the influence of print wanes, the content... must change and be recast in terms that are most suitable to [the predominant media].” (Postman 8)

Postman’s fear is wrapped up in his agreement with Marshall McLuhan’s statement that “the medium is the message” (8), and that just as the Native Americans could not discuss philosophy via smoke signals, the shift of western culture away from linear text toward visual media meant that there was also a shift in the default approach to truth. Postman considers this transaction to be extremely negative, generating “dangerous nonsense” (16), truncating meaning and trivializing every important discipline of the mind that falls prey to the glowing lights of new media.

But science fiction has concerned itself a great deal, often quite solemnly, with the newest technologies on the horizon, often attempting to plumb the mysteries of the future’s possible directions for dangers as well as promises. Also, as a genre of text literature, science fiction has also been grounded firmly in linear text media. After all, the introduction of television did not make the text cease to exist, but it certainly changed how text works. SF has clearly changed how it chooses to represent reality or fantastic subjects over its history, but has the shift

away from “typographical” culture as Postman calls it changed how SF has represented truth? In his own analysis of SF, Jean Baudrillard found three modes of simulacra, or representations of objects or concepts which may or may not have an original referent: naturalistic simulacra, which are “based on image, imitation, and counterfeiting” of “the ideal institution... of a nature in God’s image;” productional simulacra, which concern themselves with “world-wide application, continuous expansion, [and] liberation of indeterminate energy” and operate mostly in unreal but plausible forms or are existent but not fully realized; and finally, simulation simulacra, which are based on “information, the model, [and] cybernetic play” and aim at “hyperreality” or models based in ideas and potential beyond our reality (309). Among the first mode, Baudrillard finds “the imaginary of the utopia” in which “the separation from the real world is maximal”. In the second mode, Baudrillard fits traditional science fiction, “SF in the strict sense,” which could refer to the Gernsbeckian scientifiction and other pre-New Wave fiction. But for the third mode, Baudrillard cannot find a direct corollary, saying only that “[the] probable answer is that the ‘good old’ SF imagination is dead, and that something else is beginning to emerge . . . [where the] distance, even the one separating the real from the imaginary, begins to disappear” (309). Science fiction of the first mode requires a distance from the real world which is enforced by materialistic reality itself: the experience of a utopian world requires reflection upon natural experience in order to decode the commentary or other contained meaning. Its referent is, as Baudrillard put it, God’s nature (or the blackest of negative alternatives), transcendent and ideal, as in the difference between Plato’s *The Republic* and George Orwell’s *1984*. The second order, more comfortable in its application of both realistic scientific concepts and ideological transcendence, is still firmly grounded by its reliance on familiarity in order to present future or secondary perceptions of the world. Again comparative in

nature, the second order of simulacra are necessarily based in the experience of reality in order to have a reference point. But the third mode tends to collapse the other two such that there is no true referent for the emulation. Do works in the third mode simulate the ideal, or do they simulate the real? The variance does not cause the work to oscillate, but instead promotes an acceptance of both in the hyperreal because there is no longer any ability to extrapolate fictional possibilities from reality if both the reality and the fiction are coexistent (310). In other words, a hologram of a rose⁷ cannot really be called a reproduction if an original, material rose never existed in the first place.

Science fiction which follows this model, as I will contend Gibson's does, destabilizes the referent/simulacrum binary by representing both realistic circumstances and hyperreal elements (or what I will call fantastic elements in Chapter 3 based on Todorov's term), simultaneously establishing and defying traditional narrative structures and forms, all the while creating a consistent whole. Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy are in effect representative and original, derived and unique. His world contains the fantastic among very real possibilities, ideal and material realities which challenge mankind even now, and follow the path of both linear text media in fundamental ways while simultaneously integrating hypertextual multilinearity in ways

⁷ This image is taken from William Gibson's short story "Fragments of a Hologram Rose," in which Gibson developed further his ideas about the fictional full-sensorium recording technology in called Apparent Sensory Perception (later referred to as SimStim). The "hologram rose" refers to a postcard the protagonist Parker, who edits ASP tapes for a living and is addicted to them himself, receives from an ex-girlfriend. Unable to cope with the reminder, he promptly shreds the postcard. The shredded rose becomes a symbol of Parker's longing for self: "A hologram has this quality: Recovered and illuminated, each fragment will reveal the whole image of the rose. Falling toward delta [sleep], he sees himself the rose, each of his scattered fragments revealing a whole he'll never know . . . Each fragment reveals the rose from a different angle, he remembered, but delta [sleep] swept over him before he could ask himself what that might mean" (*Burning Chrome* 44). The hologram rose is a corollary for Baudrillard's third mode of simulacra, representing in this story the ideal self that Parker could become, but does not. Even in the pieces, Parker can see what he could be, and that leads him to despair. In this story, and where this concept of the person or being longing for the potential ideal form arises elsewhere in Gibson's fiction, is not only a demonstration of Gibson's deviation from traditional science fiction but a reminder of man's deep longing for the divine and his attempts to replace the object of that longing with material substitutes.

which challenge its own textual roots. Is it the rose, or is it the hologram? The easiest way to find out is to piece together those parts of Gibson's work which transcend the medium.

Marie-Laure Ryan offers a specifically useful toolset for this discovery of Gibson's transmedial⁸ elements, and while her work is certainly not the ultimate of all Narratological discourse, her conscious application of Narratological methodology to cyberpunk texts and those technologies which have their ancestry in the cyberpunk novels has made her a leading voice in applying narrative analysis to hypertext media. In his review of her work, Nicholas comments how Ryan "unites old and new media using postmodern narrative devices that penetrate and disrupt embedded hierarchical narrative plots... [and] in so doing, [shows] how much such devices relate to our negotiations of both fiction and reality" (810-11). She does this in order to understand the Baudrillardian complexities of non-traditional media, to uncover and categorize the roles of narrative and structure in inherently unstructured and divergent media from electronic hypertexts to video games. To frame her project of discussing narrative's transcendence of media, Ryan refers in her introduction to *Narrative Across Media* to French semiotician Claude Bremond's reflection on story, translated here by Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse*:

[Story] is independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet, that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it.

⁸ "Transmedial" is an adjectivization of the term "transmedia" used heavily in Narratological discourse to describe the changes (primarily in narrative forms) while crossing between different media, such as text, television, and film. I will use the term "transmedial" to describe the effect of Gibson's work's transitional nature, being of the linear text medium but exhibiting characteristics of different media such as film, visual art, and hypertext, which is an evolution of the linear text medium which was accelerated into prominence by the introduction of electronic hypertexts.

These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow; and it could be the same story.

(Bremond qtd. in Ryan 1).

Clearly, Postman's warning still applies: the unconscious absorption of new technologies holds the danger of unwitting amputation of possible meaning. But if Ryan's tools can be used to find the difference between the hologram and the rose, then Gibson's work can be used as a guide to the transformation of text media from the typographical culture of Postman's day to the hyperreal SF reality of the Internet Age. Just as stories were once told among cultures without the technology of writing, the transformation of ideals, and of the perception of truth have dramatically changed with the effect of technological progress yet again. The approach to truth has been subverted and converted by a slew of new media which have never before existed, and a step to understanding a lost world which no longer recognizes the authority of the written word is to understand how truth transcends the media, and what parts of our collective conscience have been cut off from meaning as a result of our generation's most recent amputation.

Chapter 2:

Multilinear Aspects of the Physical World of The Sprawl

They came to a broad rectangular pool where carp nuzzled the stems of some white aquatic flower. She kicked a loose pebble in and watched the ripples spread.

“That’s Wintermute,” she said. “This deal’s real big, looks to me. We’re out where the little waves are too broad, we can’t see the rock that hit the center. We know something’s there, but not why. I wanna know why.” (Neuromancer 95)

Gibson’s novels change dramatically from his debut with *Neuromancer*, shifting focus from high-intensity action packed into every page to a more relaxed and confident stride in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. But a static presence that allows Gibson to control the speed and tone of his novels comes through his environments. The decaying concrete and rusted metal of *the Sprawl*, a massive super-city made up of the United States’ largest East Coast cities, the sterile honeycomb of the orbital space station Villa Straylight, and even the cool, empty desert landscape of Arizona all serve to temper and sometimes pressurize the violent, frantic, and often tangled actions of characters throughout all three novels. With each environment comes a unique branch of human evolution: hypercapitalist salarymen who live and die for massive corporations, heavily-modified street samurai and cyberspace hackers who sell their services to anyone with the right amount of money, and consumerist wastrels doing everything they can just to keep up with the latest media sensations. Each social stratum exists in conflict with its environment, with many who fall under the microscope of Gibson’s storytelling leading anything but peaceful, normal lives. Absent a biblical God which could legitimately and authoritatively

bring order and stability to a world of seemingly spiritual beings, characters are left to struggle with the physical world without a hope that there truly is a transcendent supernature to hope for. These naturalistic environments appear at first to be operating as a Marxist would expect, defining the parameters for meaning for the characters who struggle in their confines, but the characters' self-actualization process is a transaction, and each character has as much effect on his or her environment as the environment has on them, causing the most successful of these adaptors to short circuit the process and define their own boundaries. The environment drastically affects the behavior and adaptations of its inhabitants, and the inhabitants respond by altering the very foundations of their world in a transactional way that reflects the dynamic flux of hypertext and the multilinear spectrum of meaning which animates Gibson's texts.

This chapter will concern itself mainly with identifying elements within the waking, physical world which shape *the Sprawl*'s characters' lives and create the philosophical and thematic background to the fantastic discussions of the texts. The elements which will be specifically analyzed are the sub-cultures and social strata of each book, and the architecture and hostile pressures of specific settings in each story in order to define the relationship between these elements. These pieces in total create a foundational deconstruction of the formal boundaries of binary subjects which allows Gibson's work to operate on multiple layers simultaneously and form a multilinear narrative, partly by how Gibson's world both demonstrates elements of Marxist influence and defies it, just as he defies the boundaries of genre and influence in his pursuit of termite art. Maurie-Laure Ryan's definition of narrative from her article "Will New Media Provide New Narratives?" gives a framework for discussing the interaction of Gibson's characters with environments, which simultaneously adapt to the actions of characters:

A narrative text is one that brings a world to the mind (setting) and populates it with intelligent agents (characters). These agents participate in actions and happenings (events, plot), which cause global changes in the narrative world. Narrative is thus a mental representation of causally connected states and events that captures a segment in the history of a world and its members.

(*Narrative Across Media* 337).

Gibson's characters are uniquely stratified, constantly shifting, and constantly retrofitting themselves to adapt to changes in the environment, and consequently the environment changes its pressures based on the effect of free-agent characters who apply pressure to the environment. This interplay allows Gibson to work between the necessary ambiguity of a post-modern text and the concrete duality of many binary forms, such as the man-machine construction of cyborgs. The effect is a de-centered narrative made up of many threads which operate independently, co-dependently, or sometimes combine. This feature of Gibson's writing also helps to show its reflection of Ryan's essential properties of digital media, specifically the reactivity and interactivity of texts (338).

The most immediately recognizable elements of Gibson's world which affect the experience of all other facets are the physical-world objects and relationships encountered by his characters. Everything in Gibson's world exists as a flash in the pan, an immediate, eternally evolving mix and mash of influences both externally, from other works into Gibson's, and internally, as sub-cultures "rise overnight, thrive for a dozen weeks, and then vanish entirely" (*Neuromancer* 58). Techno-fetishism is a basic tenet of the world of *the Sprawl*, and the cityscapes and other environments refuse to offer a firm foundation for the mind to find its bearings. Characters find no center to this world, because it has none. The environments of

Gibson's texts force characters to adapt or die, and in that adaptation, Gibson's characters also transform the environment, further pushing the cycle to ever-increasing rapidity and intensity.

Architectural and Environmental Pressures:

Gibson's world is a menagerie of extreme mutations, creating over-specialized adaptations to harsh environments which offer no solid ground for identity. As his characters strive to create or discover their own identities, they meet three powerful forces from their environments which threaten to destroy them if they do not adapt:

1. Selective Pressure⁹: Much like the Darwinian theory of macro-evolution, the inhabitants of Gibson's environments must change over time to contend with the dangers of their world or else they will cease to exist, either as a victim of other actors or as casualties of the world itself.
2. Gomification¹⁰: Borrowing from the Japanese concept of gomi, or "junk," Gibson presents the process of decay as a new opportunity for self-creation. Themes of urban decay, corruption, and the slow, inevitable entropy of all things are present throughout Gibson's novels, but the way his environments and characters react to and are shaped by this process helps to provide definition whereas it would not be readily available through implicit truth and structure.
3. Decentering Pressure: The very shape and form of Gibson's cities, landscapes, and living spaces often evade any ordered center. Sprawling urbanization and lack

⁹ Meaning here the pressure of natural selection on individual organisms to either adapt or die, where the fit survive and the weak fall.

¹⁰ Gibson first used the term "gomi" in his short story "The Winter Market," referring to a character named Rubin who is known for his hobby of turning garbage into works of art and elaborate robotics as a "gomi no sensei" – a "master of junk."

of centralized planning has forced chaos into solid form, and characters in Gibson's novels have either to eke out an existence without externally-applied structure or else to impose their own structure on the environment.

These three forces work in concert to challenge characters and provide them opportunities to resist or adapt, creating a discourse of relative truth which allows them a post-modern opportunity to author their personhood.

Selective Pressure:

The clearest and most evident of these three forces is in the harshest selective pressure of the most notable city environments of Gibson's world, which are nearly all completely unplanned and unable to cope with their own growth. The largest of them, the BAMA (Boston-Atlanta Metro Axis) sprawl which covers most of the East Coast region of the United States, is an indefinite collection of random structures with no center or basis for stable mental alignment. Gibson's famous opening line, "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel," describes the artificial sky projected on the inside surface of a geodesic sphere in Chiba, but these large dome structures cover large parts of *the Sprawl* as well, creating internal atmospheres and day-night cycles which do not match with the outside world (*Neuromancer* 1). The environment itself does not lend to linearity in any sense, and so it forces its inhabitants to exist without an underlying structure and order. Joyce Goggin analyses the effects the architecture of *Neuromancer* has on the text's narrative in her article "*Neuromancer* and the Question of Architectural Space," noting that "neither the cityscapes nor the domestic spaces of *Neuromancer* offer its denizens a sense of cohesive identity or macro-narrative from which a construct of the self could be extrapolated" (Goggin 6). This effect is supported and qualified

with Gibson's many cityscapes including the much-unchanged and more apparently mundane city of London in the third book *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, but Gibson's gritty, high-octane supercities are the clearest operators of direct pressure on his characters.

In *Neuromancer*, the first hostile environment we see is Chiba City, a Japanese no-man's-land of deregulated pharmaceutical, cybernetic, and medical experimentation. The city is full of black clinics and drug dealers, all made possible by a distinct lack of governmental oversight due to the gradual confiscation of power by gangs and multi-national corporations. It exists this way, Case decides, because "burgeoning technologies require outlaw zones," and so the city did not exist for its denizens but as "a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself" (*Neuromancer* 11). The flow of humanity through Chiba's streets is in constant flux, pushed by the growing demands of technology for more servants and victims. Case, as a man merely trying to buy time carving a niche living while he tries to find a way to fix his physical inability to work as a hacker, is only a microbe in the blood of a much larger organism, and at any moment he could be swallowed up by something bigger and never be seen again. The city serves as a powerful antagonist, promising eventually to kill Case if he gives it enough time. The problem is that Case is starting to lose his grip, having only barely carved out a fragile existence in a business where "neither the buyer nor the seller really needed him," and he is beginning to sense the city bearing down on him (11). Case can only save himself once he is given back his ability to transcend his physical limitations and have control over his environment through cyberspace. As such, Case's growth as a character is contingent on his adaptation to his environment.

The counterpoint to the professional and excellent Case in *Neuromancer* is Bobby Newmark, who describes his home city of Barrytown, New York, on the outskirts of *the Sprawl* as a massive collection of government projects full of families living on public welfare and

minimum-income subsidies: “Big playground swept away like a concrete sea; the Projects rose beyond the opposite shore, vast rectilinear structures softened by a random overlay of retrofitted greenhouse balconies, catfish tanks, solar heating systems, and the ubiquitous chicken-wire dishes” (39). The oppressive sameness and sloth of this part of the Gibson’s urbanized world provide little useful for establishing a person’s identity in relationship with the world, and the only way for characters like Bobby to adapt is to leave for a higher-pressure environment in which to distinguish themselves. But even in these higher-pressure environments, characters who are completely adapted often create structure out of this external pressure of chaos.

Gomification Pressure:

Many of the cyberpunk supercities in Gibson’s novels are either Japanese, run by Japanese multi-national mega-corporations called zaibatsus, or are Japanesque in their structure and influence¹¹. Much of Gibson’s fascination with Japanese urban cityscapes revolves around their technological advancement in the 80s and the neon-and-steel vibrancy of their booming economy. But with the rising industry and consumerism of Japan came a significant growth in industrial garbage. This phenomenon can first be found in Gibson’s short story “The Winter Market,” in which Takayuki Tatsumi argues he “deconstructs the sense of temporal sequence through a reinterpretation of Japanesque fragments, in the process skillfully sampling the essence of what is cyberpunk” (45). Gibson’s weaving together of sociological fragments from Eastern and Western culture is one of the primary mechanisms for his texts’ multilinearity, and this

¹¹ Zaibatsu, which translates literally as “financial clique,” were pre-World War II state-endorsed vertical monopolies which held major control of the economy in Japan. After the fall of the Japanese emperor, the zaibatsu were largely dissolved or re-organized during the American occupation period, but remained partially intact and continue to this day to have broad influence. Gibson expanded on this idea with his multi-national, vertically controlled mega-corporations controlled by families or ideological groups such as the antagonistic Tessier-Ashpool or Josef Virek companies or the passively aggressive Maas-Neotek and Hosaka Corporations.

mechanism is also largely responsible for the particularly gritty combination of Wild-West and decaying urban jungle milieus which pervades his stories. In “The Winter Market,” Gibson’s character Rubin makes his living by creating sculptures out of junkyard scrap and discarded technology. Rubin’s nickname is “Gomi no Sensei,” which translates from Japanese to “Master of Junk,” in the tradition of Japan’s history of generating and finding new uses for its society’s refuse. The narrator offers this historical context:

The Japanese, a century ago, had already run out of *gomi* space around Tokyo, so they came up with a plan for creating space out of *gomi*. By year 1969 they had built themselves a little island in Tokyo Bay, out of *gomi*, and christened it Dream Island. But the city was still pouring out its nine thousand tons per day, so they went on to build New Dream Island, and today, they coordinate the whole process, and new Nippons rise out of the Pacific. (*Burning Chrome* 127, italics his)

Rubin represents Gibson’s world’s deep obsession with retrofitting the old to fit new purposes, operating the natural force of mutation and evolution on a technological level. To Rubin, the *gomi* is not mere garbage, but a medium full of potential, the “air he breathes, something he’s swum in all his life” (127). Gibson’s characters in the *Sprawl* trilogy likewise swim in a world of *gomi*, and are themselves like *gomi*. The active pressure of the city’s decay requires the active retrofitting of broken and normally useless technology and people to create new possibilities, creating new space out of *gomi* for new *gomi*. Tatsumi observes that through this interplay Gibson is suggesting that “not only inanimate objects but also human beings are interchangeable as *gomi*” (46). The “interchangeability” of characters depends on their direct agency in the world, often determined by how much they have retrofitted themselves to survive in the

pressures of the environment. Since the effect of the environment plays so heavily into Gibson's characters' construction of their identity, it would appear that this model is heavily Marxist, but such a label oversimplifies the relationship. While characters build themselves out of the fragmental gomi of their society, they are not defined primarily by their social order, nor are they defined by their challenge to the power structure. Characters who construct their identities through progressive accumulation and retrofitting of gomi are sidestepping the system altogether, carving their own identities out of the elements leftover by the rest of society. Because of this difference, the process of adaptation to the pressure of gomification cannot be said to merely play into the social power structure, but instead participate in its creation based on how well they adapt to this pressure.

Many characters adapt to the pressure of gomification by surrounding themselves with junk, making it a part of their identities. The Finn, a rat-like, seedy, and often dangerous technology peddler in *the Sprawl*, makes his living from selling the old tech continually cast off by a society addicted to the cutting edge. Case describes his first encounter with the Finn's strange shop in *Neuromancer*: "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 narrow canyon of impacted scrap" (*Neuromancer* 48). The Finn builds his identity from the gomi he surrounds himself with, and he creates an environment which gives him an advantage. Later in *Count Zero*, company hit-men trying to track down an exotic hacking program attempt to kill The Finn in his den, but because they confronted him in his own constructed place he kills them all easily. The Finn appears later in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* as a ROM construct, a digital artificial intelligence recording of his

personality, in the physical shape a totem-like contraption in a dark alleyway; in this evolution, The Finn has become the gomi with which he used to surround and protect himself.

Foreign milieus which lack the super cities' forward hurtle toward high technology provide different forms of gomification pressures than Chiba or *the Sprawl*. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Kumiko Yanaka, the daughter of a Yakuza crime lord, describes London from the perspective of the Japanese:

London's relationship to gomi was more subtle [than the Sprawl's] . . . the bulk of [London] *consisted* of gomi, of structures the Japanese economy would long ago have devoured in its relentless hunger for space in which to build. Yet these structures revealed, even to Kumiko, the fabric of time, each wall patched by generations of hands in an ongoing task of restoration. The English valued their gomi in its own right, in a way she had only begun to understand; they inhabited it. (161).

As one who grew up sheltered in a culture which birthed Gibson's conception of gomi, Kumiko is best able to differentiate between each environment's pressure of decay, and she is best able to identify how characters define themselves based on this pressure. Japan had gomi as its foundation, but grew and moved on. London cherished the remnants of its history, the debris of the past, and became entrenched in it. And the Sprawl, according to Kumiko, utilized gomi as "a rich humus, a decay that sprouted prodigies in steel and polymer," having the luxury of enough landmass to even have such a thing as a Sprawl (161). The gomification pressure of these environments forces characters to utilize cultural and technological detritus, become it, or integrate it in order to survive and produce meaning in their lives.

Decentering Pressure:

A very different environment from Gibson's megacities comes in the form of the Freeside Achepelago, a giant spindle-shaped space station resort built by the infamous Tessier-Ashpool clan. Freeside is a "brothel and banking nexus, pleasure dome and free port, border town and spa," like "Las Vegas and the hanging gardens of Babylon, an orbital Geneva," and home to the Tessier-Ashpool family, "inbred and most carefully refined" (*Neuromancer* 101). The extreme capitalism of this environment, which actively extorts and manipulates its customers, is ripe for Marxist critique, showing a clear power structure which has established power through centuries-entrenched wealth and power. However, the transactional nature of the Tessier-Ashpools' own process of self-actualization again defies this structure, and as the story progresses, the façade of their unapproachable dominance is discarded to reveal the madness and powerlessness underneath. Seeking to create an illusion of freedom, however, the Tessier-Ashpools designed the station to be free from any real controls or powers of earth, and so Freeside is able to operate as both a vacation retreat for moneyed individuals and a safe place for warring business factions to meet, which allows the family the ability to meet these segments of society on their own terms. The corporate clan's founders Marie-France Tessier and John Harness Ashpool built the station as an enclave for their family, using cloning and cryogenic stasis to extend their lives for hundreds of years as they slowly developed technology intended to grant themselves true immortality. The plots of both *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* take characters to the space station, and it stands as a contrast to the decaying urban environments of earth only in the façade it employs: the decay of Freeside is localized, focused, and equally disruptive, but exists within the heart of the space station in the Villa Straylight, the actual home of the Tessier-Ashpool clan. These inbred, maddened people are more bankrupt of meaning in

their own existence that they are forced to construct their own world beyond the earth to escape the reality of their powerlessness before death, and their actions demonstrate their insatiable need for spiritual transcendence in a naturalistic world. Even in the manicured resort of the Freeside proper, the complete lack of underlying order creates many hostile forces which compel characters to adapt and react if they are to survive, and this new environment demonstrates Gibson's characters' individualized coping mechanisms which they have developed to adapt to previous environments.

Gibson's character Molly Millions gives a concise observation of the Freeside portion of the station: "It's just a big tube and they pour things through it . . . [t]ourists, hustlers, anything. And there's fine mesh money screens working every minute, make sure the money stays here when the people [go back to the surface]" (*Neuromancer* 124). All of the same pressures exist here as they did in Chiba or *the Sprawl*, but now with a glistening sheen of consumerism. But Case fashions a much more unsettling picture of the station, remembering once breaking open a wasp nest back in *the Sprawl*:

Horror. The spiral birth factory, stepped terraces of the hatching cells, blind jaws of the unborn moving ceaselessly, the stages progress from egg to larva, near-wasp, wasp. In his mind's eye, a kind of time-lapse photography took place, revealing the thing as the biological equivalent of a machine gun, hideous in its perfection. Alien. (*Neuromancer* 126).

Case's vision of the station as a hive shows that even pristine structure and graceful mechanism, two aspects of order and structure that the other environments so far have not had, can still be the birthplace of monsters. As Lance Olsen puts it, "Tessier-Ashpool's home is a 'parasitic structure' . . . [sucking] life out of Freeside in the same way the high orbit clan sucks life out of its

corporate deals, humans who attempt to cross it, and even each other” (*William Gibson* n. pag.). The Straylight Villa, a partitioned section on the tip of the station, only further brings this point to bear. The Tessier-Ashpools designed it as a cloister to protect them until they developed a means to become truly immortal, but the decades of life and slow progression of failures lead to a decay of the once glorious family, and this decline is reflected in the state of the Villa once Gibson’s protagonists find their way there, as Case observes: “Straylight was crazy, was craziness grown in the resin concrete they’d mixed from pulverized lunar stone, grown in welded steel and tons of knick-knacks, all the bizarre impedimenta they’d shipped up the well to line their winding nest” (*Neuromancer* 202).

The structure which the Tessier-Ashpool family had forced on their environment still reflected their broken madness, which feeds back into the slow decay of the family itself. Olsen further goes on to describe the nature of the Villa as a constructed environment for the Tessier-Ashpools:

Straylight is often associated with a gothic pirate's den, a fairy-tale witch's castle, and biblical Babylon itself. It is also a labyrinth, a mythic form that stands for initiation and education as well as solitude and ambiguity . . . It carries distant associations with the accursed house of Atreus as well, enclosing a doomed clan filled with ruthless betrayal, deceit, madness and murder.

(*William Gibson Olsen* n. pag.).

Even in its description as a hive, the internal structure belies its residents’ madness, containing an impossible collection of disparate objects and images which cannot be separated into specific thought processes or meanings. As such, Gibson’s characters are walking in the lair of beasts, and even with the underlying structure missing from the surface cities of Earth, there is still no

useful center from which to develop a reference point of truth. Like Chiba, *the Sprawl*, and the other cities of Gibson's novels, even though Freeside appears to have a centralized structure imposed by a free agent, the station still acts as a decentering force on characters within it, including the creators themselves. Because of this, even as the Tessier-Ashpools have managed to completely define their physical environment, they are no closer to attaining true meaning than characters with less power and influence.

Subcultures and Social Strata

The players on the stage of Gibson's harsh world are varied and divided mostly by how they respond to the stimuli of their surroundings, and how they choose either to surrender to or to resist the pressures of the world or other actors. The social strata of Gibson's texts appear to have a similar polar structure of haves and have-nots familiar to modern Western politics, but the distinction between social groups in Gibson's world goes far beyond mere economic inequality. Most of these groups are partially defined by their economic realities, but because these characters can have so much power over their own social structures, the influence of the structure on their identities is variable. Gibson's characters all have a significant similarity that does not translate homogeneously to our own experience: each of these groups operates without a central spire of grounded truth except their own individual experience. With no central structure to work from in order to create their own identities, each individual will either surrender to the pressures of his environment and be destroyed, or else will change himself or the environment itself in order to prevail over these pressures of decay. While there are several milieus and backdrops that offer unique challenges to Gibson's characters in their struggles, the environmental pressures described earlier work universally from the constant of a lacking central structure of truth, such

that the transaction of each character with his or her environment can be measured more or less directly to demonstrate how each social category of character in Gibson's text represents the hypertext-representative nature of his *Sprawl* trilogy.

Characters who act in intentionally disruptive, reactive, and counter-culture ways are defined by how they resist the environment's selective pressure. Like avatars of individuality and post-modern redefinition, they choose to fight their circumstances through direct resistance, often recklessly. These characters are the proto-typical cyberpunks who define the genre with their bizarre clothing styles, truncated gang speech, and obsession with the cutting edge of technology. But characters who represent individual interests also constitute the more normal individuals who seek agency in defining their own path through their world. These characters are the primary protagonists of Gibson's novels and most directly represent the individual process of transaction between characters and the world of *the Sprawl*. Often junked and gomi-fied by their circumstances, the progress of these characters is in redefining themselves. In Gibson's statement that "[t]he street finds its own use for things," he is directly referencing the process of these characters' journey to self-identity as well.

Henry Dorsett Case, the protagonist of *Neuromancer*, is perhaps the most iconic character of cyberpunk SF due to his status as a "console cowboy," a specialized hacker who utilizes a proto-laptop, somewhat like a virtual reality system, known as a cyberspace deck to connect his consciousness to the other-worldly space of the Matrix and break into hardened computer systems. Console cowboys are fighters on a non-physical plane, often quite physically weak and so specialized as to be almost useless in pursuits other than cyberspace hacking. His resistance to the world is almost entirely non-physical, but his specialization gives him power and identity. When Case's ability to connect to the Matrix is completely stripped by an employer he tried to

steal from, Case is completely without recourse, and quickly spirals in Chiba as he continually fails to find a clinic or specialist equipped to give him back his livelihood. Likewise, other console cowboys are defined completely by their environment, unable to exist without the opportunity and ability to hack. They are both integrated into the environment and excluded from it through their resistance.

As a response to the three pressures from Gibson's environments, tribalist gangs, and social groups appear and recede rapidly, often violent and strangely creative in their roleplaying and integration of technology and chaotic forces, or separatist in their approach to resistance. According to Case, "entire sub-cultures could rise overnight, thrive for a dozen weeks, and then vanish entirely" (*Neuromancer* 58). This rapid rate of fad-like extreme differentiation is unlike the individualist phenomenon demonstrated by console cowboys like Case in that these gangs often go to incredible lengths to become synonymous, modifying their appearance to match extremely limited ideal forms and even performing extensive physical alterations through plastic surgery and cybernetics in order to fit into their desired social group. This extensive conformity, while often petty and short-lived, still offers some structure to keep the decentering force at bay, and the grouping often offers the individuals better survival chances from the selective pressure of Gibson's intense cyberpunk super-cities. These characters therefore trade individual identity for social identity, briefly achieving structure and definition by which they can self-actualize. However, due to the fluidity of this definition, these groups are constantly forced to discard these group identities and create new ones, preventing them from being fully defined by their social order. Both hacker characters Case and Bobby routinely deal with gang factions in their daily lives, often feeling a consistent threat of physical violence, but even Bobby, the less street-hardened and capable of the pair, after leaving his home in the projects, admits that at least "the

gangs gave you some structure,” even if it only amounted to “reasons” one gang member killed another, but that “the ultimate reasons behind it were crazy” (*Count Zero* 40). The “reasons” are really only excuses based on a complete lack of structurally-defined truth, and since each individual is forced into a multilinear response to the environmental pressures and must choose their own path through self-creation, even what little structure they manage to create does not provide real meaning.

Gangs play a prominent role in Gibson’s discourse between characters and environment, especially in the first novel *Neuromancer* where the protagonists team up with a group of high-tech junkies who have taken on elaborate surgical modifications to look like cats, complete with pointed ears, canine tooth implants, and even modifications to the eyes to “catch the light like a cat’s” (*Neuromancer* 67). This crew, calling themselves the Panther Moderns—postmodern in every aspect—cite chaos as their “mode and modus,” their “central kick” (67). They are dangerous and often extremely unpredictable, even in cases where characters are apparently allied with them, such as in *Neuromancer*’s plotline during the theft of a dead hacker’s personality construct in which the Moderns create a vast and extremely deadly faux terrorist attack which incites riots and extreme fear, all as a mere distraction from the theft. These groups provide some level of structure and identity lost from the decentering effect of the city, but also act as their own selective pressure, and their constant modification and retrofitting of themselves and their technology shows how these gangs have adapted to the three pressures.

A similar group to Gibson’s gang social groups, although much larger and much more structured, are the mega-corporations of the *Sprawl* trilogy. They war against each other and essentially own or rule everything, outmoding national governments across the world by simply overriding them through sheer influence and power. Called “zaibatus” after the Japanese for

“financial clique,” they are more akin to a family or feudal society than a simple business organization. Case again provides the clearest description:

The zaibatsus, the multinationals that shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers. Viewed as organisms, they had attained a kind of immortality. You couldn't kill a zaibatsu by assassinating a dozen key executives; there were others waiting to step up the ladder, assume the vacated position, access the vast banks of corporate memory. (*Neuromancer* 203)

While the zaibatsus cannot be killed due to their amorphous, immortal nature as a collection of replaceable individuals, they are still vulnerable to the same inability to completely define their environment as the gangs and individuals of Gibson's world. The zaibatsus' ability to affect their environments and to adapt to changes in these environments is on a scale larger than the individuals, but Gibson's novels also have several characters who operate like the zaibatsus by shaping the environment and becoming direct hostile pressures in the environment while still maintaining personal identities.

Like lords over kingdoms, these characters transcend their environments and create their own identities through forcing their own structure on the world, opposing and subverting other lords and zaibatsus, and oppressing anyone weaker or less connected and entrenched. These are apex-predators of Gibson's selective system, and while they rule long, they are often slain by other stronger forces. However, as long as they succeed in controlling and wielding their environments, these lords and moguls can stay in power. In contrast to Case's description of zaibatsus as transhuman, immortal organisms, Case notes that after the death of Tessier-Ashpool's founder that there is something finally destroyed: “T-A was an atavism, a clan . . . [h]e remembered the litter of the old man's chamber, the soiled humanity of it, the ragged spines

of the old audio disks in their paper sleeves. One foot bare, the other in a velvet slipper . . . If Straylight was an expression of the corporate identity of Tessier-Ashpool, then T-A was crazy as the old man had been (203). Case strikes upon the main difference between them: unlike the zaibatsus which are dedicated above all else to the success and future of the company, Ashpool was concerned with one thing only: achieving immortality for himself and his broken family. With the madness of continued failure set in, he gave up, and in that moment, he and the rest of the Tessier-Ashpool clan were doomed. 3Jane, the surviving and active daughter of the clan, continues in her efforts to attain immortality into the second and third books, but she is also inevitably destroyed by her own goal, a goal that again has nothing to do with the continued existence of anything outside of herself.

Conclusion:

The physical world of *the Sprawl* is clearly based on a transactional discourse rather than a solid framework of underlying progression, but the fact that Gibson's characters define themselves and their environments as a continual process means little unless this process is connected to Gibson's larger representation of the transition from linear text to a new multi-linear process of literature. Because of this, Gibson's physical world of the Sprawl defies easy categorization as a Marxist macrocosm. In Andrew Milner's analysis of urban dystopia in science fiction film, he offers context for dystopian urban environments which helps tie Gibson's interplay between characters and their physical environment to the dynamism of transmedial play in his novels:

In the late 20th-century Western culture and society entered into a third 'post-industrial' or 'multinational' stage, founded on electronics rather than electricity,

information and ‘hyperreality’ rather than production and productivism¹² . . . [and] these transformations were themselves the effect of mutations in the nature of capital . . . This ‘late capitalism’ is increasingly mass-mediated, asocial and transnational rather than national in scope¹³ . . . [As a result of this scope,] postmodern media culture becomes so ‘imprinted on human subjectivity and existential experience’ . . . [that] identity itself is increasingly understood as constructed and hence indeterminate¹⁴; . . . referentiality becomes so attenuated that the ‘signifier becomes its own referent’, the ‘sign no longer designates anything at all’¹⁵, the real is superseded by the hyperreal, and intertextuality per se becomes the characteristically postmodern aesthetic effect¹⁶ (265).

Gibson recognized that the 20th century shifts in culture changed not just the economic circumstances of people in multinational, industrialized society, but also the very basis for their identities in a complex relationship. Extending this problem to a future setting naturally involved further separating his characters from the ability to derive meaning from their environments, which lead to Gibson’s creation of the Sprawl and other decentering, gomi-fied settings in his novels. The transaction between characters and their world becomes the only way by which those characters can solidify meaning from that environment, and so the transactional process of

¹² This shift is the basis for Gibson’s transitional movement in cyberpunk from a far-future reality to a near-future exploration of current-day concepts and technologies, and how Gibson’s text is able to essentially transcend its own medium and reflect the transition to multilinear text media.

¹³ The transformation of capitalism described here is the impetus for Gibson’s multi-national mega-corporations, and here we can see that Gibson’s corporations are deeply connected to the transaction between character and environment.

¹⁴ For our purposes, identity in Gibson’s work is reactive and interactive, often based on environmental pressure.

¹⁵ Because of this attenuation, Gibson’s characters’ completely lack an environmental center by which they can appropriate their own identities.

¹⁶ Here Baudrillard’s third mode of simulacra comes into play; characters and environments have no basis in a solid, structural reality and instead are shaped and created and destroyed through discourse, and all “signifiers become [their] own referent[s].” All identities are self-created and therefore reactionary, not inherent.

identity is derived from the environment's multilinearity. As a result, the text of Gibson's trilogy takes on the same multilinear aspects, such that while Gibson's text provides literal words on a page, the physical reality represented by that text is in itself hypertexted, indeterminate, and hyperreal. His character's identities are all referential rather than inherent, and all traditional absolutes are gomi to be reshaped and retrofitted to a new purpose.

The media constraints of text literature are weakened by Gibson's challenge to Darko Suvin's more traditional definition of Science Fiction as a "cognitive estrangement" focused on "novum"¹⁷ . . . validated by cognitive logic" (qtd. in Milner 1). The discourse of definition between character and environment in Gibson's work pushes the bounds of logic, while still remaining consistent and coherent. But even while these physical elements deconstruct Suvin's definition, the fantastic elements effectively shatter it. The combined effect is that despite Neil Postman's assertion via McLuhan that "the medium is the message," Gibson's texts defy the natural bounds of their medium and point to a later deconstruction of natural linearity in text media. With the transaction of Gibson's characters with their environment to establish their identities, Gibson's text creates a new identity by defying its medium and genre.

¹⁷Novum being Latin for *new thing*, an idea which does not exist in the reader's reality. Suvin's novum serve to create a new scenario which disrupts the reader's assumptions and allows the text to make a purposeful statement. It is important to Suvin's definition that the novum be plausible enough by realistic scientific concepts that they do not strain believability, however, Gibson's environments and characters are strange enough to be both plausible but also strain believability significantly, and as such Gibson's work defies Suvin's definition of science fiction already, without considering the fantastic elements which will be discussed in later chapters.

Chapter 3:

Multilinear Aspects of Existential Subjects

Her father, long ago, in Arizona, had cautioned her against jacking in. You don't need it, he'd said. And she hadn't, because she'd dreamed cyberspace, as though the neon gridlines of the matrix waited for her behind her eyelids.

There's no there, there. They taught that to children, explaining cyberspace.

(Mona Lisa Overdrive 48-9)

The referential discourse of Gibson's characters with their environment creates a scenario in which Gibson's world transforms and adapts as its actors change in reaction to environmental pressures, but this discourse is nearly relegated to background static when compared to the destabilization of concrete reality by myriad fantastic elements in Gibson's work. While the physical elements of the Sprawl books frame multilinearity in the text's own referential system as text medium, the fantastic¹⁸ aspects of Gibson's world are what truly separate his work from the traditional mode and allow it to act as a guide to the transition of text media to our contemporary multilinear default. While this section will focus on fantastic subjects separately from the physical, both factions are integrated within the fabric of both the world of the story and

¹⁸ Here the term "fantastic" is taken from Tzvetan Todorov from his book *The Fantastic* rather than attempting to retrofit the term "supernatural" for my uses. In some cases, the term supernatural seems appropriate specifically for its spiritual and religious implications of the word. For example, the AI characters in Gibson's work are literally worshipped as gods, and the effect these non-human beings have over the natural world, in spite of their utter lack of material form, verges on the power and scope of deities. However, these characters and their interactions with the world are fixed in a naturalistic explanation by scientific principles (the artificial personalities are, in fact, made up of a particularly complex interaction of electrons and quantum particles), and therefore the term "supernatural" is inappropriate. Todorov's term "fantastic" bridges this inconsistency by describing the *appearance* of supernatural event or attributes which has no immediately available or convenient explanation. In actuality, the fantastic experience may be explained through natural means, by altered experience of natural events (possibly as a result of drug-induced states of mind), or by legitimately supernatural occurrences (Baldick, "Fantastic, The").

the story itself so much that divisions between them blur. This interaction will be most prominently developed through a discussion of the nature of cyberspace and its relationship with the physical world, especially in the ways in which cyberspace is simultaneously a separate plane of existence and a pervasive representation of reality, and how characters move and exist within these multiple planes of reality.

As an extension of the discussion of Gibson's intertwining of cyberspace and reality, an analysis of the relationship between Artificial Intelligence and cyberspace will be an important part of defining the Sprawl's multilinear aspects. Most characters in the world of the Sprawl treat cyberspace as a definite realm to which one travels, if not bodily, but the introduction of AI characters destabilizes this dichotomy. Many characters live at once in both places, and while their being is in the Net, they have influence in the physical world, or vice versa. The AI characters Neuromancer and Wintermute from the first book establish the dichotomy of human consciousness and artificial life, and blend the experience of both, just as the personality upload¹⁹ characters enter into the discussion from the opposite, human end of the spectrum. As the Loa, A.I. characters which emerge out of cyberspace in the form of Voodoo deities during the events of *Neuromancer*, are introduced in *Count Zero*, cyberspace's encroachment on reality is so extensive as to make the distinction between the "real" and "artificial" worlds meaningless. To these beings, both planes of existence are reality. Finally, in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, even characters previously relegated to a purely physical reality have become mainly or wholly non-physical in nature. The Finn, a recurring secondary character who plays an important role in all

¹⁹ Digital copies of human personalities in Gibson's novels are divided into two categories: digital personalities with access-only memory which disallows growth or change due to the inability to retain memories after being shut down, and digital personalities, often without physical medium, who continue to learn and adapt after the loss of a physical body. In some cases, characters move from the limited personality state to a limitless state as they move from physical storage to becoming part of the open Matrix network, joining the Neuromancer/Wintermute AI and other AI characters in cyberspace.

three books, makes this journey from physical to pseudo-spiritual being, and even transcends physical reality with other characters to join the likes of the Loa in the realm of cyberspace. This purely naturalistic transcendence mimics the biblical transcendence of the soul, and the complete removal of all legitimately spiritual aspects of Gibson's world conspicuously highlights the atheistic attempt to fill the void left by the divine. But do these AI characters and the realm of cyberspace merely simulate the real world and its inhabitants, or are they intended to simulate the spiritual at all? And what of those characters who change forms to be closer to machine than man, or to animal, or some other non-human form? These questions point to an essential longing in Gibson's world of the Sprawl for some form of permanency, and a desire for transcendent reality, without which these characters cannot hope to actualize their ideal forms. But identity is not the only destabilized feature of Gibson's world. Reality itself appears to be in flux, and the interplay of the virtual and the real creates a gradient not only for personhood, but for the very world. The multilinear aspects of these fantastic elements of personhood and reality in Gibson's novels further represent the breakdown of the traditional text media, showing a hyper-texted default developing into the new media, and further exposing the hole left by extracting divine supernature from Gibson's naturalistic world.

Cyberspace vs. Reality

Before we can thoroughly examine how characters interact with and embody aspects of the multiple realities of Gibson's work, the levels or realms of Gibson's texts need to be defined and delineated (as much as this is possible with the Venn Diagram nature of overlap in realities many of his characters experience). Firstly, one important distinction to make is that no matter how seemingly supernatural many aspects of Gibson's world appear to be, they are all entirely

and inherently material. Every apparently supernatural event or character, whether the miraculous salvation of a dying man by an angelic form in the Matrix, to the descending of “gods” upon the world of man, has a naturalistic explanation in Gibson’s world. Comfortable in their surety that God and spirits do not actually exist, characters in Gibson’s novels react to these events with wonder, but not divine reverence. Even Beauvoir, one of the hackers who directly serves the Loa, has a very pragmatic explanation for what and who the Loa are. When explaining the voodoo belief system and how it applies to the Loa of cyberspace, Beauvoir explains that the equivalency isn’t really complete:

"I thought you already said it's not a religion."

Beauvoir removed his eyeglass frames and sighted down one of the earpieces. "That wasn't what I said. I said you didn't have to worry about it, is all, whether it's a religion or not. It's just a *structure*. Lets you an' me discuss some things that are happening, otherwise we might not have words for it . . . Vodou isn't like [your concept of organized religion]," Beauvoir said. "It isn't concerned with notions of salvation and transcendence. What it's about is getting things *done*." (97-8)

Even the most pious characters in Gibson’s trilogy aren’t interested in the nature of the soul, or the problem of sin – they are interested in serving their immediate needs, in creating structure in their world out of chaos, and the Loa and other aspects of the pseudo-spiritual realm of cyberspace are only a means to an end.

Since Gibson’s characters so clearly reject the idea of actual spirituality, discussing what seem like supernatural aspects in Gibson’s fiction becomes problematic. Using the term “supernatural” to describe Neuromancer, cyberspace, and the Loa is technically inaccurate, both

by the fact that these elements are explainable within Gibson's world as being completely naturalistic, and because these elements clearly are meant as an atheistic substitute for actual spirituality. As such, the existential elements in Gibson's fiction need better terms. The late Sir Arthur Clarke, renowned British scientist and science fiction author, is often cited for three laws of speculative fiction:

- 1.) When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.
- 2.) The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.
- 3.) Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

The first and second of these laws seem pointed at the classical science fiction authors who often limited their exploration of fictional technologies and worlds based on understood scientific principles, and likewise also echoes Gibson's own convictions about pursuing art with the termite aspect gleaned from Manny Farber's article. However, Clarke's third law usefully characterizes elements of Gibson's fiction, that the fantastic, seemingly supernatural aspects of his world are in fact material, although appearing to be magical. Cyberspace, as described in one of Gibson's most-quoted passages of *Neuromancer*, is "a consensual hallucination," a "graphic representation of data abstracted from... every computer in the human system" (51). All of the computer systems connected together, what we would call today "the internet" but Gibson calls "the Matrix" in his novels, is represented by a dimensional space like a great chessboard plane marked out with lines of light. Businesses and large corporate systems are represented by enormous "constellations" of data, complexes of building-like structures built of light which may

be permeable to users or may be defended by security systems and cannot be entered without specialized access or hacking software. The space has volume, allowing three-dimensional movements by characters who have “jacked into” the system using a brain-computer interface and a laptop-like “cyberspace deck.” However, the space does not correspond to geographical locations or distances; systems of data are clustered together regardless of the actual physical distances between the hardware, and characters are able to transport themselves almost instantaneously to different coordinates with no regard to distance. This experience is all represented in the “non-space of the mind” (*Neuromancer* 51), presented as a direct projection of physical sensation into the cyberspace deck user’s brain, experienced differently from the waking reality, but using the same senses. Case describes entering cyberspace for the first time after having his physical ability to do so restored:

And [cyberspace] flowed, it flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach. (52)

Gibson’s explanation for how the cyberspace deck works and for why cyberspace exists at all merely skirts a technical explanation of how it actually could work, appearing to invoke Clarke’s third law: the effect seems more like magic than technology. Case’s entering into the Matrix is more like a spiritual journey than booting up a modem. However, all of these experiences are explainable in Gibson’s world by materialistic means. The magic is essentially virtual.

Gibson's imagined cyberspace is often credited as one of the catalysts for the popularization of the concept of Virtual Reality, the sensory mimesis of the real world through a computer-generated landscape and immersive apparatus, such as a head-mounted screen display which encompasses the user's full vision, often accompanied by a method for sensory feedback for physical sensation which mimics touch and vibration. The concept has been explored more successfully in recent years with several consumer-level head-mounted displays coming to market, but the concept of virtual reality was originally popularized through cyberpunk novels like *Neuromancer*. But if these spiritual-esque experiences are completely resultant from materialistic means, can they be called fantastic? Marie-Laurie Ryan offers an important distinction to consider when discussing the fantastic elements in Gibson's fiction. In her book *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Ryan proposes that the term "virtual" has been restricted by common contemporary usage to mean "fake" or non-real, such that "virtual reality" represents an artificial construction of reality rather than any true meaning or substance. However, Ryan points out that through Aristotelian tradition, "virtual," which comes from the Latin *virtualis*, is derived from Aristotle's "distinction between potential and actual existence," like the "presence of the oak in the acorn" (26-27). Virtual things are not defined merely by being fake, but in their potential, of "developing into actual existence" (27). This potential leaves room for Gibson's cyberspace to be more than just a computer-generated artificial world, and the events of the plot which appear so closely spiritual in nature may in fact become legitimately spiritual through the course of the novel.

Ryan describes these two attributes of "virtual" things as opposite poles, the fake end supported by Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra, and the potential end supported by Pierre Levy. However, that distinction is not as simple as it may appear on the surface. Baudrillard's

simulacra are not like “dynamic [images] of an active process . . . a mechanically produced, and therefore passively obtained, duplication whose only function is to *pass as that which it is not*” (29). In this way, Baudrillard reasons that “[i]n the absence of any Other, the virtual takes the place of the real and becomes the hyperreal” (29). Thus, these A.I. characters as virtual persons may not be “real,” but they are “hyperreal” as per Baudrillard’s third mode of simulacra. As such, these characters are beings which have true existence and have no “real” original of which to be mere copies. Cyberspace is simultaneously a separate plane of existence and a pervasive representation of reality, a hyperreal construct of real-world data which transforms into a new existence. While Baudrillard’s concept of the third simulacra was meant as an object observation of the decline of art, here it represents a possible manifestation of personhood in Gibson’s characters as they transform from traditionally known definitions, or defy them entirely. The self-actualizing process through blurring the boundaries between their real and hyperreal selves makes their identities actual, and as such they become models of Baudrillard’s conception of the virtual, becoming like their own version of idealized hologram rose rather than an original, fixed, pre-determined individual.

However, Baudrillard’s conception of the virtual is only one end of the spectrum Ryan proposes. While Baudrillard saw the advance of art from the first to the third mode of simulacra as a reason for pessimism, Pierre Levy believed that the virtual has little to do with the fake or illusory: “The virtual is by no means the opposite of the real. On the contrary, it is a fecund and powerful mode of being that expands the process of creation, opens up the future, injects a core of meaning beneath the platitude of immediate physical presence” (Levy qtd. in Ryan 35). While the virtual may represent, via Baudrillard’s conception, as a romanticized computer-generated model of a perfect rose which had no original, Levy’s view might be expressed as the rose being

printed, layer by layer in plastic, by a near-future 3D printer. The rose now exists as a physical object, but the original computer model, though formless, still has the potential of becoming physical. The only change is one of determination: an action had to take place which would cause the physical event of the rose becoming a real object, or as Ryan says it, “the mediation between the virtual and the actual is not a deterministic process by a form-giving force” (35). Cyberspace is virtual as in Baudrillard’s third mode, but it is also virtual by Levy’s meaning, possessing the potential, via actualization, to become real. This actualization process is part of what makes characters in Gibson’s novels define their personhood, the level by which they have agency in the world, and the conduit through which they respond to the environmental pressures discussed in Chapter 2. Cyberspace itself is multilinear in its properties as a realm of existence, and the actualization process by which cyberspace transforms throughout the novel is also what destabilizes the nature of gender, humanity, and personhood in Gibson’s characters.

Destabilization of Physical Identity:

Further than a metaphysical actualization of identity, Gibson’s stories are full of characters who have modified their bodies in numerous ways, often going to extreme and obvious measures to alter their identities and physical appearances to fit a strong personal ideal. With technology progressed and ethics marginalized, characters in Gibson’s world have near infinite options for modifying their physical bodies in just as radical ways as they alter their physical bodies, which has a deeply existential impact on their identity-creation process. Gangs in the Sprawl commonly undergo surgical modification, like the Panther Moderns’ cat eyes and tooth implants to make them look feline, or the numerous mercenary characters who modify their bodies through cybernetic implants to increase their value as hired muscle or hitmen. One might surmise that because these characters are becoming less human and more machine that they are

essentially depriving themselves of existence, becoming less human and therefore less real. However, Ryan points out from Baudrillard again that “if the level of reality decreases . . . it’s because the medium [of the virtual] itself has passed into life. . . [becoming] the epiphenomenon of the virtualization of human beings in their core (Baudrillard qtd. in Ryan 31). In other words, as the human characters become less physically human, their physical “medium” becomes more virtualized, and their previously immaterial potential form becomes more realized. Again we have a transaction, not of characters with their environments in order to create identity, but characters with the virtual, creating for themselves a new paradigm of personhood and existence. Characters may make themselves more virtual, or more non-human, and still retain their existence and personhood as they slowly evolve into what is essentially a new being. This phenomenon represents a multilinearity of being in Gibson’s world, a lack of true linearity between being and non-being, which mirrors his destabilization of the linearity between real and un-real.

As a reactionary measure against the environmental pressures discussed in Chapter 2, the numerous gangs which appear in all three novels are clear examples of characters destabilizing their own identities as human beings by physical modifications. Case describes first seeing a Panther Modern, whose face was nothing more than a smooth lab-grown skin graft, complete with implanted cat canines for teeth (*Neuromancer* 59). These changes are entirely cosmetic, but they serve a purpose in providing a physical uniformity among gang members which may not be possible without extreme surgery. Other characters, like the smuggler Julius Deane, have modified their bodies for more practical ends such as longevity, utilizing everything from chemical treatments, hormones, and genetic modification to live far longer than normally possible without the appearance of age (12). An even more extreme case of physical

modification is the tycoon Josef Virek who is so physically altered by his pursuit of immortality that he has become nothing more than a huge mass of tumorous tissues housed in massive support vats in a hidden warehouse. He pulls the strings of the plot along in *Count Zero* as he attempts to locate a way to contact the Loa, hoping to find a way to merge himself with the Matrix like the Tessier-Ashpools once hoped to do. These modifications are only a sampling of numerous examples of characters who transform their bodies in order to change their physical identities, falling into Baudrillard's third mode of simulacra by creating bodies which attempt to transcend mere humanity. Ryan describes this process as a virtualization of the body, utilizing "any practice and technology that aims at expanding its sensorium, altering its appearance, or pushing back its biological limits" (39). The body is "virtualized" in that these physical alterations allow for the being to become transient and unfixed, such that these characters are able to construct an idealized version of their forms and modify their real selves to reflect that ideal. Ryan further explains that the virtualization of the body in the Baudrillardian sense consists of replacing body parts, finding the "purest manifestation" of the body (39). The connection of characters' direct biological manipulation of the body through chemicals and implanted tissues connects soundly to Baudrillard's virtualization in this regard, but virtualization via Levy represents yet another unique subset of Gibson's world of the Sprawl.

Gibson's punks and super-human moguls may blur the line between human and non-human being, but there are several characters who modify their physical bodies through cybernetics who blur different boundaries. Conceived by Gibson as metal or silicon-based replacements and augmentations, the cybernetic implants in the Sprawl offer a different form of modification from biological enhancements. The purpose of cybernetics in Gibson's world is to create an ability that did not already exist, to transcend the human limitations through the power

of machines. According to Ryan, these enhancements represent Levy's virtualization as potential, "epitomized by performance- and perception-enhancing devices, such as the running sneaker and the telescope" (39). This type of modification seeks to transcend human limitations by blurring the line between human and machine, and represents another form of multilinearity of personhood in Gibson's world. Unlike other forms of transformative modifications, cybernetics sidestep the biological problems entirely rather than attempting to refine or rectify flaws of the flesh. Seeing an opportunity to create a new alternative identity narrative for the feminist movement, Donna Haraway noted this aspect of the cyborg as a means to escape the inevitable essentialist and naturalist arguments of her peers, to instead focus on destabilizing the identity roles. The cyberpunk movement in science fiction has provided a new metaphor to conceptualize feminism via a secondary binary (organic vs. machine), whereas in *Neuromancer*, the binary of organic vs. machine affects the concepts of genders. Takayuki Tatsumi, interested in identifying how Haraway's theory accommodated Japanese influence on Western fiction, characterizes Haraway's strategy thusly:

Haraway's cyborg feminism is also related to such terms as 'biofeminism' and 'primatological feminism,' but note that Haraway's conception. . . encompasses not only western discourses that dominate the East, but *any* form of discourse employed for the domination of others—other races, other species, other classes, and in particular other *gender(s)*. Donna Haraway deconstructs such discourse through a consideration of the development of advanced miniaturization technology. If nano-tech becomes universally available, she seems to suggest, all binary-hierarchical oppositions between the organic and the mechanical—in particular, between man and machine—will disappear. That is to say, the greatest

potentiality of nanotech, or descending to the next level, picotech, is its power to undermine the myriad ideologies of domination. (96)

Because of the cyborgs in Gibson's work, gender is almost meaningless, and when it does matter (i.e., characters actually have defined sexual genders) the roles are often reversed, or become mixed. This is no clearer example than in Gibson's foremost Street Samurai, Molly Millions, a super-human combat cyborg mercenary with more masculine grit than all of Gibson's male characters combined. Leblanc describes Molly's unique features in "Razor Girls," describing her proficiency as a unique feminist hero: "she is faster, tougher, and stronger than any of the male characters of the novel, none of whom sport cyborg augmentations to the same degree as hers . . . [but it is her] tough posturing and martial abilities [that] make her the dearest candidate for female-to-male role-reversal in cyberpunk fiction [because] her positioning within the economy of femininity is not at all ambiguous: she is deliberately unfeminine, lacking the traditional womanly attributes of both the 'Madonna' and the 'whore' (n. pag.). Through her cybernetic enhancements, Molly transcends her human limitations and creates a new identity for herself somewhere between woman and machine, giving her the power to overcome her harsh environment and even contend with the reshaping of reality itself in the struggle between the beings of cyberspace and the physical world. Molly and characters who modify their bodies with cybernetic enhancements show the multilinearity of gender as well as being, since the roles which they traditionally would determine by biological destiny cannot be stable as the body becomes less human and more machine. The virtualization of Molly's body gives her control over her own potential, and with that control Molly manipulates the interplay of the real with her virtual ideal to create a new physical identity for herself.

Destabilization of Physical vs. Fantastic:

There are several examples of characters in Gibson's first trilogy which define themselves and develop as characters by how they interact with cyberspace, but the clearest relationship of any character in the world of the Sprawl is in the intimate connection console cowboys have with the fantastic realm of the Net, adapting their lives to the non-physical plane of cyberspace. These characters' entire lives and identities revolve around refining their abilities to perform in cyberspace, developing mental reflexes and quick movements through the Net that have little to do with their physical abilities, often training these skills at the expense of their bodies. While somewhat winding and disjointed in his approach, Bukatman's book *Terminal Identity* has a useful discussion of how Gibson's characters develop their identities through cyberspace as a destabilization of the virtual subject, in this case, the character's own sense of personhood: "Cyberspace in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* allows new forms of identity. Within . . . cyberspace, the self can be called into question, decentered, split apart, and rendered unknowable" (91). The self is made less sure and stable, but characters can construct for themselves identities and new concepts of body and personhood out of the ethereal nature of the Matrix. The hyperreal space allows for these characters, in absence of a true, inherent self denied to them by their environments, to create hyperreal identities of their own making. Thus, these characters are the catalysts of the virtual world's actualization into a true reality.

The characters which have the closest relationship to this actualization of cyberspace from the human end of the spectrum are the console cowboys, the mercenary hackers of the Sprawl who specialize in an almost mystical ability to penetrate the hardened structures of the Matrix to steal valuable data. Gibson provides several examples of this hacker character, but the most prominent examples are two central characters, Henry Case and Bobby Newmark. In

Neuromancer, Case begins the story having had his ability to enter into cyberspace stripped from him after angering a previous employee, and he is in the process of self-destructing as he fails to cope with the limitation: “For Case, who’d lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. . . [he had previously practiced] a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh” (6). Case’s “Fall” is more than just a loss of status and income, but a loss of part of his identity, like a loss of part of his body. Without cyberspace, Case sees his body as “meat,” like a “prison of his own flesh” (6). So extreme is his disdain for the limitations of his physical body that Case’s employers forcibly remove his ability to metabolize drugs in order to prevent him from continuing his self-destruction after restoring his ability to jack into cyberspace. Case’s identity is strongly rooted in the non-physical presence of cyberspace, such that he consistently refers to concerns of the body or of the physical reality as “meat things,” preferring his cyberspace self to the physical form.

Bobby Newmark, who serves as one of several viewpoint characters in *Count Zero* and as a mysterious background character in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, is very similar to Case in his forming his identity in relation to the destabilizing force of cyberspace. At the beginning of *Count Zero*, Bobby is a neophyte console cowboy, dreaming of greatness and of breaking into a career as expert hacker Count Zero, a callsign he chooses for himself before he even completes his first run in cyberspace²⁰. After failing to do so, only being notable in the story and to other characters because of his incidental connection to the Loa A.I. characters, Bobby disappears into obscurity until the third book, in which he emerges as a gaunt, wasting man attached to a

²⁰ Which so happens to almost result in his death as he accidentally triggers a particularly powerful security countermeasure, only to be saved by one of the god-like Loa characters, in this case, the girl Angie Mitchel who unknowingly carries a brain implant that has her constantly connected to the Matrix, allowing her to enter Cyberspace in her dreams. While I will not be focusing on Angie for the sake of scope, her character develops similarly to Bobby’s, except she is a much more central character in the plot of the third book. However, unlike Bobby, Angie is a very passive character and has little role in the actualization of Cyberspace, nor does she truly form her identity from her interactions with Cyberspace.

gigantic memory-storage device called the Aleph, which was originally intended to act as a desperate final refuge for the dying Tessier-Ashpool heir's personality construct. After existing as a purely physical character with only cursory access to the non-physical world of cyberspace in the second book, Bobby has come to exist almost entirely in the virtual world of the Aleph, which approximates cyberspace in scope and renders a simulation of nearly every physical location on Earth. Lance Olsen examines Bobby's abandonment of the physical in his book-length analysis of Gibson's work:

Bobby has come closer than anyone in the trilogy to voluntarily leaving the "meat" world behind and entering the pure realm of the mind. Existing almost solely within the aleph, he pays little attention to his body which slowly wastes away. The aleph, filled with all the components of his history, suggests memory itself. (n. pag.)

Like Case, the physical world has little to offer Bobby, and so he leaves it behind at the first opportunity and never comes back. By the end of the story, Bobby has died, leaving behind his personality in the Aleph along with Angie, his lover from *Count Zero*, and they have both become entirely virtual, yet still real characters.

Destabilization of Virtual vs. Real and Simulated Being:

Cyberspace is thought by most characters in *Neuromancer* to be a definite place to which one travels, if not bodily, but the introduction of Artificial Intelligence characters destabilizes this dichotomy as they simultaneously exist both in the physical world and the Matrix. They live at once in both places, and while their being is in the Net, they have influence in the real world. As the Loa are introduced in *Count Zero*, cyberspace's encroachment on reality is so extensive as

to make the distinction meaningless. To them, both are reality. Very clearly in the mode of Baudrillard's third simulacra, the A.I. characters exist as original-less copies, hyperreal beings which have their own existence. While there are many examples of human characters who exhibit the virtualization interplay between illusion and potential, the A.I. characters are even less stable because they do not have a physical form to solidify change. From the merging of the A.I. characters Neuromancer and Wintermute intended as tools for human transcendence, these beings transform from mere reflections of reality to take on the aspects of gods, and finally envelop several human characters to transcend reality together as the barriers between man and machine and the real and the fantastic finally disintegrate altogether.

There are three different varieties of Artificial Intelligences in Gibson's novels: personality constructs (called ROMs for Read Only Memory), which are recordings of human personalities, developed A.I., which are the purposefully highly restricted artificial personalities which are built by corporations for certain specific purposes, usually for business, and finally emergent A.I., which come later in the second and third books spontaneously out of the Matrix after the merging of the Wintermute and Neuromancer A.I.s. The first group, personality constructs, are simulacra in the plainest sense, being mere echoes of the original human, incapable of forming new memories beyond temporary banks which are instantly erased as soon as the construct is disconnected from a computer console. During the course of *Neuromancer's* heist narrative, Case and his team are tasked with stealing the ROM construct of his old teacher, a famous hacker by the nickname Dixie McCoy. Case's first interaction with the ghostly presence shows the limited nature of Dixie's new existence:

It was exactly the sensation of someone reading over his shoulder.

He coughed. "Dix? McCoy? That you man?" His throat was tight.

“Hey, bro,” said a directionless voice.

“It’s Case, man. Remember?”

“Miami, joeboy, quick study.”

“What’s the last thing you remember before I spoke to you, Dix?”

“Nothin’.”

“Hang on.” He disconnected the construct. The presence was gone. He reconnected it. “Dix? Who am I?”

“You got me hung, Jack.” (78)

Dixie cannot remember not existing, and seemingly ceases to exist until he is engaged by a human user. His physical body is gone, but his mind, a spirit-like recording of his mannerisms, speech patterns, skillsets, and experiences, exists now only as an inanimate shell. But the nature of Dixie’s existence brings important questions to the table: “It asks us to consider selfhood: where is our mind? what is it? what is the relationship between brain (circuitry) and mind (thought and feeling)? and how long and under what conditions does it remain ours before subtly becoming something other than ours? Is, for instance, Dixie Flatline's construct, which behaves exactly as Dixie Flatline ought to behave, still Dixie Flatline, or something other (less or more?) than Dixie Flatline?” (Olsen n.pag.). But there is still a potential for Dixie to become more as he interacts with the actualization of cyberspace and the central A.I. characters.

Wintermute and Neuromancer, artificial intelligences developed by the Tessier-Ashpools, were created to manage affairs while the family stayed in cryogenic stasis. The A.I.s are as powerful as the law will allow, but they are also secretly designed to merge together, forming a massively powerful entity beyond any A.I. ever conceived. Wintermute and Neuromancer are distinct personalities, and they are designed for specialized tasks. Wintermute is the primary

administrator, directly controlling the family's investments and tasked with growing their wealth, while Neuromancer is tasked with providing a haven for the constructs of the Tessier-Ashpool family in a paradise-like stronghold in the Matrix as their bodies slowly die, providing them a path to immortality. But Wintermute ruins this plan because of its insatiable desire to be joined with Neuromancer, destroying the Tessier-Ashpools in the process. When asked by Case why Wintermute needs to merge with Neuromancer, the A.I. responds that he is under a compulsion, and that he is going to become part of something bigger than he and Neuromancer alone (206). Even with their individual personalities, and being individually the most powerful A.I.s in existence, the two are not complete until they become one, merge into one being, and become the potential being they were meant to create.

As they merge, however, they cannot maintain the form and instead splinter. In the events of *Count Zero*, cyberspace has begun to show signs of new inhabitants. Great godlike beings emerge from the Matrix, bearing the names of voodoo deities like Legba the Loa of Roads, and the "lord of the graveyards" Baron Samedi. The Neuromancer/Wintermute being has splintered, and in splintering, it has transformed cyberspace into a realm of spirits. Cyberspace has been moved from a reflection of the material world to a new, hyperreality. But the final destabilization of the boundary between reality and the virtual comes with the deaths of Bobby Newmark and Angie Mitchel, two central characters of the second and third books. In an event approximating a sacrificial ritual, Angie, being equipped with the special cyberspace implants that connect her mind to the Matrix, takes into herself the mind of her dying lover, and as they both die, flees into the Aleph, the vast storage device which provides a temporary limbo for her and several personality constructs which the Loa have managed to save, including The Finn, who had permanently connected his personality construct to the Matrix. The personalities gather, taking

the form of physical bodies inside the simulated world of the Aleph, and together they travel into the Matrix itself, leaving Earth to travel to another Matrix in Alpha Centauri, presumably created by an alien race. Their transcendence from the human world entirely removes the boundaries between human and machine, and there is no longer any original to which these beings can be compared. The copies have become the true original, and their existence is based on the fulfilment of their own ideal potential.

Conclusion:

In chapter two, the multilinear aspects of physical pressures from the environment forced characters to enter into a transaction with that environment in order to create identity, but the fantastic elements, those which appear at first to be supernatural, specifically in the ways in which characters transcend their physical limitations by near-magical modification and enhancement, and more generally in the way in which characters respond to and define their being based on the near-spiritual realm of cyberspace, demonstrate the complete destabilization of even the most basic premises of humanity and reality in Gibson's texts. Every character derives his or her being from the interplay of the virtual against the actual, and the development either of imitative constructs or in transcending their limitations based on a potential ideal state. The dynamism of Gibson's characters belies the multilinearity of his text, which cannot maintain simple definitions of even mundane reality, while still denying truly supernatural aspects. These elements, when combined with the overarching multilinearity of his story's Narratological structures and tools, truly demonstrate the transitional nature of his texts as something transcending linearity, grasping for a new paradigm beyond the medium of print text.

Chapter 4:

Multilinear Aspects of Story and Narrative Structure

“I saw her death coming. In the patterns you sometimes imagined you could detect in the dance of the street. Those patterns are real. I am complex enough, in my narrow ways, to read those dances. Far better than Wintermute can. I saw her death in her need for you, in the magnetic code of the lock on the door of your coffin in Cheap Hotel, in Julie Deane's account with a Hongkong shirtmaker. As clear to me as the shadow of a tumor to a surgeon studying a patient's scan.” (Neuromancer 259)

The physical environments and the interplay of the virtual with the physical in Gibson's world collaborate to destabilize numerous relationships between traditional binaries, and defy easy, linear definitions which characters and cultures in the story world might base their identities on. However, the reader is also a direct target of Gibson's subversive transmedial text by way of the narrative structures accessed through the text. The physical and fantastic subjects and relationships of Gibson's works create an environment for a shift in the reader's experience, allowing for a different approach to the text media. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated the individual functions of the physical and fantastic aspects of Gibson's destabilization via multi-linearity, but the overall effect of these multilinear aspects is amplified by the larger multilinearity of the books' narrative structures.

Neuromancer appears to be the simplest in structure of the three books in the Sprawl trilogy because it was constructed primarily as a heist narrative; however, the work in total

actually subverts the Film Noir²¹ aesthetics it imitates. The other two texts are also subversive in that the structures of *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* leave this model behind entirely, showing how Gibson's own approach to his narrative mode shifts away from the half-breed formula of *Neuromancer* and begins to truly explore the multilinearity which is inherent in the sum parts of his world and stories. In order to highlight these shifts from recognizably borrowed models to Gibson's own style, and to trace the interactions and relationships previously discussed to their ends in the shape and form of the works themselves, this section will first detail some of the traditional and post-modern influences on Gibson's structure, and then go on to explore the multiple-perspectives shifts occurring in each chapter, in which the story changes in perspectives brought about by characters interfacing with technologies and abusing mind-altering substances.

Aside from numerous non-narcotic methods for transcending normal human sense experience, such as the console cowboy's connection to cyberspace, many of Gibson's characters also use various chemical substances to alter their experience of reality, either of the physical world or of cyberspace. This comes heavily into play for multiple characters in how they actively perceive reality, whether that is as a reinforcement of the "meat puppet"²² identity or the Baudrillardian virtualization of cyberspace interactions. Similarly, Gibson's use of perspective shifts between chapters and his several other organizational divisions within his books provide a

²¹ Film Noir itself is an example of text media affecting new media, taking stories and characters from police drama novels and presenting them anew on the screen. Film Noir has inspired several new movements in literature based on the noir period of black and white film, seeking to represent the "distinct aesthetic representation of changing postwar American cities," projecting "a mood of urban anxiety and nihilism... with images of deserted streets, crumbling neighborhoods, shadowy spaces and glittering skylines" (Prakash 6-7). Cyberpunk, as Gibson helped to define it, created a noir-esque milieu which relied on an attitude of gritty bleakness to highlight characters' desire to escape the mundane physical world.

²² The attitude that *Neuromancer's* protagonist Case and several other characters frequently adopt toward their physical bodies, seeing cyberspace as the true reality from which one merely retreats into a corporeal body. After Case's ability to enter cyberspace is sabotaged, Case still treats his physical body as secondary, continuing to use narcotics to alter his experience of physical reality because he has lost the ability to cope with the physical world.

multilinear experience of plot and viewpoint, sometimes even nesting perspectives of multiple characters within the same viewpoint, in which characters experience the sense input of other characters in the physical world, all of which creates a new, hypertexted experience of the story. Gibson uses these varying experiences of the text to weave multiple linear progressions into a single narrative structure, creating a truly transitional text which transcends its inherited linear ancestry to present a very hypertext-like experience which points to the new default of the electronic age.

Post-Modern Self-Referentiality and Style:

Before many of the most subversive aspects of Gibson's novels can be examined in depth, his texts' relation to the Postmodern aesthetic and philosophical approach to literature need to be explored in order to demonstrate how Gibson's texts act beyond a mere Postmodern text to actively challenge the medial boundaries of linear text and represent the coming age of hypertext. In *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Ryan describes how Postmodern literature evolved from eighteenth century's "ambiguous stance" toward immersion to the nineteenth century's high realism which "effaced the narrator and the narrative act, penetrated the mind of characters, [and] transported the reader into a virtual body. . . [to make him or her] the direct witness of events, both mental and physical, that seemed to be telling themselves" as the narrative progressed (4). The immersive properties of this literary shift blurred the line between popular and "high" literature, bringing novels into the wider public, which later brought a broader pool of experimentation to the novel.

As academic and literary studies evolved, so did the novel, which "cross-fertilized with the New Criticism, structuralism, and deconstruction" to "[privilege] spatial relations between

words, puns, intertextual allusion, parody, and self-referentiality” (5). Being relatively recent in their appearance, many of Gibson’s contemporaries and recent forbearers had presented these alternative storytelling methods which “subverted plot and character, experimented with open structures and permutations, turned into increasingly cerebral wordplay, or became indistinguishable from lyrical prose”(5). The 60s wave of new science fiction writers ran rampant with these new gimmicks, and the evolution “split literature into an intellectual avant-garde committed to the new aesthetics and a popular branch that remained faithful to the immersive ideals and narrative techniques of the nineteenth century” (5). Gibson’s entry onto the fiction writing scene was well-timed to hit the crest of this wave, to ride it down into its myriad reactive movements, and to guide himself safely away from acting as a mimic to in vogue styles.

But the explosion of Post-modern experimentation in science fiction did not result only from stylistic choice, but from an evolution of linguistics, in studies of semantics, and in many academic disciplines of thought which were rapidly losing their interest in absolute systems of signs and signifiers. Ryan describes the movement as a “carnavalesque conception of language [in which] meaning is no longer the stable image of a world,” deeply affecting the reader’s experience, causing the reader to project a “virtual alter ego,” which is not simply the “dynamic simulation of a world in time, but the sparks generated by associative chains that connect the particles of a textual and intertextual field of energies into ever-changing configurations” (5). The result of this introduction of the virtual alter ego and the deeply simulated world within the story resulted in the meaning becoming “unstable, decentered, multiple, fluid, [and] emergent—all concepts that have become hallmarks of postmodern thought (7). The physical and fantastic aspects of Gibson’s trilogy discussed in Chapter 2 and 3 very much resemble the instability of meaning which Ryan describes here, making it clear that Gibson’s work represents a post-

modern text. However, the subversion of linearity which Gibson's texts perform pushes the definition of text as well by manipulating the reader's experience of the story through multilinear narrative structures.

In her discussion of textual theory applied to media studies, printed in Ryan's *Narrative Across Media*, Liv Hausken describes the problem of applying traditional models of text theory to emerging media: "The models of both Anglo-American and French theoretical traditions are . . . developed on the basis of the idea of *sequentially organized discourses* . . . [and] both traditions have embraced the thesis that texts are *semantically autonomous*," or in other words, the text must be linear even if the meaning is independent of the text's linear nature (400). Because *Neuromancer* (generally) follows the perspective of one viewpoint character (Case), this text more comfortably follows the traditional expectation of sequentially organized discourse. There are divergent fragments, especially in the case of the nested-perspective sections, but each chapter and each page-break section follows a consistently linear progression.

However, Gibson's second and third book in the series break down the model, beginning with *Count Zero* and extending into *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, by utilizing multiple viewpoint characters and threads of story which cannot exist in isolation as a complete narrative, but do separate themselves off from each perspective as they come in a long chain of building coherence. These novels defeat the traditional model by presenting dramatic shifts in individual characters' perspectives, often challenging the distinction between real and virtual experience, and by presenting overarching narrative forms which demonstrate each narrative fragment's purpose as the plot culminates in the climax of the story. The virtualization action of cyberspace discussed in Chapter 2 demonstrates a breakdown of semantic integrity in each progressive novel, such that the expectation of semantic autonomy is also challenged as the semantic

meaning of normally binary definitions such as being and non-being, reality and virtuality, and materialistic and supernatural.

Gibson's play with the boundaries between these distinctions through the environmental relationship with his characters' identities as discussed in Chapter 2 and the virtualization process detailed in Chapter 3 both create the necessary semantic breakdown to create a multilinear world within his text, but the overall structure of Gibson's stories most clearly aligns his work with hypertext rather than the traditional medium of linear text. This effect comes partially through Gibson's use of borrowed plot devices and overarching narrative structures, as well as several aspects of other media and other authors' works. Gibson freely admits to reworking these borrowed elements, creating a deeply intertexted work which utilizes many elements of his predecessors' more traditional stories mixed with the new wave of experimental science fiction, and finally also incorporating the vast array of non-literary pop sources which help create the unique amalgamation of cultural artifacts which studs his fiction. Lance Olsen sees this as Gibson's acceptance that "the universe is one of intertextuality where no one text has any more or less authority than any other. . . [in which the act of writing] becomes retro-writing . . . [and] [l]anguage and ideas, like glass bottles and aluminum cans, become recyclable" (*William Gibson* n. pag.).

In this way, Gibson absorbed the stylistic flair of authors like his hero Thomas Pynchon, described by Larry McCaffery as being known for his "sophisticated blend of science, history, pop culture, hip lingo, and dark humor," which Gibson retrofitted to his groundbreaking new direction for Science Fiction (218). Gibson takes from his favorite authors, but he also draws from pop-culture, music, and every other element of culture, a process he calls in his interview with McCaffery "cultural mongrelization," which he thinks "postmodernism is all about" (220).

As such, Gibson has not only created very post-modern intertextuality in his fiction, but has also created intermediality in the ways he has combined elements of movies like *Escape From New York* and lyrics from the punk rock artists of "Velvet Underground." There is no true divide between traditionally privileged text media and the worlds of popular television and other consumer media for authors like Gibson who approached the fiction writing process in the shadow of the coming revolution of electronic hypertext.

As briefly discussed in Chapter 1, William Gibson and many critics have identified art and literary critic Manny Farber as an essential influence to Gibson's textural aesthetics, but much of Gibson's transitional function comes from his intentional application of Farber's theories. The foundation of Gibson's intentionally constant violation of genre barriers is based in Farber's concept of termite art which stands opposed to "gilt culture," embracing freedom and multiplicity, considered by Farber to be embodied by the films of Laurel and Hardy. Proponents of this neoromantic "school" produce pieces that go "always forward eating [their] own boundaries, and, likely as not, leave nothing in [their] path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity." A kind of postmodernism, termite art has no goal except to devour its own boundaries, fuse genres, and create a space "where the spotlight of culture is nowhere in evidence, so that the craftsman can be ornery, wasteful, stubbornly self-involved, doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it" (78). Gibson was similarly unafraid of contaminating his text with non-literary influence, seeking instead to create a new chimera of styles. Aside from Gibson's stylistic utilization of pop-culture and punk rock, Gibson's textural style is infused by several literary sources, not all of them among science fiction. Lance Olsen's intensive examination of Gibson's literary influences in his biography *William Gibson* specifies several non-SF sources, including Dashiell Hammett's hard-boiled detective novels and Robert

Stone's counterculture Vietnam-era novels, from which Gibson derives his novels' central focus on the power of information, corruption, and conspiracies (n.pag.). Olsen also details numerous notable integrations from both traditional and new-wave SF sources: from Alfred Bester, the rough-and-tumble characters that exhibit the "techno-sleaze sensibility . . . in the figure of [Bester's marooned space mercenary character] Gully Foyle," the bleak edge of Samuel Delany's world of *Nova*, and a significant draw from the psychological experimentation of J.G. Ballard's condensed novels in *The Atrocity Exhibition* (Olsen, n. pag.). But more important to Gibson's transmedial nature than his specific literary influences is his general bridging of both old science fiction's interest in technology with the fixation on selfhood prevalent in softer SF (n. pag.). Gibson was uninterested in picking a side, instead pushing for his own unique spin on both old and new models, creating his own Termite work. Just as Farber was highly critical of traditional notions of masterworks, which implied that an artist's works were "pieces" intended to be admired, Gibson's *Sprawl* works purposefully move against the boundaries, which in turn leads him to create texts which also challenge the borders of traditional text media. This action leads to Gibson creating hypertext-like structures within his work that modify the linearity of his text and create a new model for transition to electronic hypertext.

The Hypertext Reflection of Gibson's Narratives:

Gibson's influences of genre and style help him create a complex interweave of elements at the narrative, linguistic, and literary levels, defying normal categorization due to its refusal to stay within its boundaries. But examining the blend of influence and invention which makes Gibson's work unique is less useful without a thorough understanding of the implications such an attitude toward literature has on how it represents the text medium. Such a text which

integrates disparate parts as a complex but complete whole is partly a model of a hypertext, a medium which has its own new conveniences as well as its own potential difficulties, as per Neil Postman's warnings of the potential and danger of the willful conflation of television with literature. Hypertext is based in and resultant from the advent of electronic technology; however, it also supersedes the technology of electronic text. Postman describes the connection between technology and media this way:

We might say that technology is to a medium as the brain is to the mind. Like the brain, a technology is a physical apparatus. Like the mind, a medium is a use to which a physical apparatus is put. A technology becomes a medium as it employs a particular symbolic code, as it finds its place in a particular social setting, as it insinuates itself into economic and political contexts. A technology, in other words, is merely a machine. A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates. (84)

Television, according to Postman, was not suitable for the uses which many educators and technologists of his age assumed would be natural extensions of the new technology. According to Postman, television has a bias, "a predisposition toward being used in certain ways and not others" (84). Hypertext also has a bias, preferring semantically unstable definition and connections rather than solid linear experience. The intellectual environment which is the hallmark of hypertext is a landscape filled with multiple paths to truths, and a weaving together of disparate parts for an interconnected-whole of perspectives. Just as in the shift from the Age of Typography to the Age of Television, as the supremacy of linear text decreased and the multilinear default of hypertext ascended to prominence with the Age of the Internet, the "contents of politics, religion, education, and anything else that comprises public business"

changed and was “recast in terms that are most suitable” for the new emergent medium (8). As such, the transition from functionally linear text to expandable, nested electronic texts which can contain ties to more information than is specifically relevant or even remotely connected with the unity of the logical progression has a dramatic impact on the ability of the text to present unified truth models, which results in the destabilization and decentering discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. If the “medium is the message” as McLuhan says, then the medium of Gibson’s text, even as a transitional work, is reflected in his message (8).

In addition to the clear connection between Gibson’s multilinear integration of literary and non-literary style and theme, the destabilization of context and identity mirrors the structure of Gibson’s texts, which in turn reflects the hypertext-like nature of his work. After electronic texts became commonplace, significant research and critical thought has been spent on the impact these electronic texts have on the writing process, especially through teaching methods just taking hold in academia for creative writing in the late 80s and early 90s, and these effects are already observable in Gibson’s work due to its hypertext nature. As the phenomenon of electronic hypertext became apparent, writers and teachers of writing began to see how much impact the ability to nest information inside a text would change the process of writing. Many of these changes were very positive, as Davida Charney describes in her *St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing* as “[encouraging] play, curiosity, experimentation, looking for patterns, and associational thinking rather than linear thinking,” which would be useful in the creative writing process as well as in the academic setting (165). However, Charney also notes in her article “The Impact of Hypertext on the Reading and Writing Process” the potential deconstructive effect hypertexts can have on text unity, and the inherent difficulty of intentionally wielding hypertext’s form:

The very notion that hypertext designer/writers can create meaningful, useful networks in the first place depends on a whole range of assumptions about how to divide up and relate parts of texts, including what segments of text constitute meaningful nodes, what types of links are meaningful and important, and what types of texts can or ought to be read non-linearly. In fact, many of these assumptions contradict current thinking in rhetorical theory, cognitive psychology, and document design, where the evidence suggests that, as currently conceived, hypertext may in fact dramatically increase the burdens on both readers and writers. (5)

In this statement, Charney expects that such a process of integrating textual meaning within already meaningful texts would not occur organically. While the example of hypertexted electronic encyclopedias clearly offers an easy counter example of the difficulty Charney describes, her concerns also point to a definitive strength in Gibson's use of multilinearity within his works: the blending of these non-linear "nodes" requires an overarching purpose to attribute coherency to the individual elements. In Gibson's case, the multilinearity of theme, style, and identity in his novels provides the nodal structure of elements with which he can construct overarching narrative forms, which he then crafts into the coherent narrative discourse of his texts. The hypertext nature of Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy is what allows his Termite-affected approach to style and narrative to work. There are numerous methods by which Gibson pulls the smaller particles of meaning into overarching narrative structures, but the primary narrative effects which he utilizes are multilinear narrative structures, such as by combining traditional narrative schemas or his consistent use of nesting character viewpoints. These overarching multilinear narrative structures therefore offer a useful angle to observe how Gibson's trilogy

exhibits the changes which text would undergo with the new shift in the medium toward electronic hypertext.

Multilinear Viewpoints in Nested Perspectives:

The clearest example of Gibson's purposeful use of multilinearity in narrative is in his nested perspectives of viewpoint characters, provided primarily through the means of his SimStim²³ and cyberspace technology. The first example of Gibson's nested viewpoints occurs during the heist of Dixie McCoy's ROM construct in *Neuromancer*. Case has modified his cyberspace console to allow him to switch between his hacking work in cyberspace to the sensorium of Molly Millions, who is equipped with a SimStim neural rig that captures her sense experience. Case switches to Molly's perspective, seeing through her eyes and feeling her sense of touch as she infiltrates the Sense/Net Corporation's archives:

Cyberspace slid into existence from the cardinal points.

Smooth, he thought, but not smooth enough. Have to work on it

Then he keyed the new switch.

The abrupt jolt into other fresh. Matrix gone, a wave of sound and color. . . . She

was moving through a crowded street, past stalls vending discount software,

prices felt-penned on sheets of plastic, fragments of music from countless

speakers. . . For a few frightened seconds he fought helplessly to control her body.

Then he willed himself into passivity, became the passenger behind her eyes. . .

²³ Short for "simulation and stimulation," this technology is Gibson's version of an immersive virtual reality kit which allows a user to experience not only the sight perspective of another individual, but their entire sensorium of hearing, touch, scent and taste, often professionally recorded and edited for public consumption as entertainment. In this particular usage, Gibson's cyborg character Molly Millions is hooked up to a broadcasting system which give Case a live feed of her sensorium using the same neural interface he uses to experience cyberspace. In this setup, Case has no access to Molly's thoughts or any control over her body, and so Case experiences Molly's viewpoint as a passive observer.

Her body language was disorienting, her style foreign. She seemed continually on the verge of colliding with someone, but people melted out of her way, stepped sideways, made room. . . (*Neuromancer* 56)

Through the course of this scene alone, Gibson switches four times between Case's viewpoint in cyberspace and Case's viewpoint in Molly's body. Gibson switches seventeen more times in this chapter for a total of twenty-one shifts in Case's viewpoint. The sheer mass of details in each of these perspectives paints very different experiential spaces, leading even Olsen to comment that such sequences show Gibson's favor for texture and style over actual narrative concerns because "Gibson's fiction is less about what happens, or to whom, or where" than it is about his Termiteschool focus on minutia (*William Gibson* n. pag.). These shifts would be completely unnatural in other settings if it weren't for Gibson's contrivance of the cyberspace console rig, which demonstrates that even in Case's world, his modification to his cyberspace deck that allows the switch is not common. Gibson's perspective switches constitute three different views of reality: Case's physical perspective sitting at his console when not connected, Case's sensory presence inside cyberspace while performing the hacking job, and Case's sensory presence inside Molly Millions when he switches to her perspective. The fragments of narrative involve completely different world spaces of experience, even integrating another character's experience into the viewpoint character's experience, which taken individually do not form coherent, logical plotlines.

However, Gibson's overarching narrative blends these splinters of plot into a coherent whole that meets the expectations of *Neuromancer's* heist narrative core. Joyce Goggin calls this "causal if not linear" and explains that Gibson's Simstim perspective switches in this scene constitute a "shot-reverse-shot" which readers recognize from cinema and therefore do not

disengage from the unconventional structure of the scene (30). Without this known convention, the scene would be very difficult to absorb, but the non-literary medium of film consistently offers picture-in-picture presentations of different viewpoints to allow for simultaneous narrative threads. Since Gibson's text is limited to presenting single threads of experience, the blending of several narrative splinters into one whole allows Gibson to utilize the analog of film's non-linearity. This effect is similar to what Charney perceives in hypertext, since Gibson's nested viewpoints mimic film's ability for concurrent narrative with "seriality on thought process" because while reading we "cannot think about everything at once, we have to focus on a few things at a time in some order," analogous to how a large group of students enters an auditorium by a single doorway (8). The nested viewpoints in this section not only show Gibson's Termitic style through his use of non-literary narrative conventions, but also help to demonstrate his work's inherent hypertext aspects. Because all of these perspectives are still from Case's viewpoint of events and because of the book's significant destabilization of the reality versus fantasy binary, Gibson's weaving of these narrative strands into a coherent whole makes the division between what is real and what is artificial even more unclear, which further amplifies the multilinear elements of theme and identity, leading to the broader destabilization of the reader's experience of the text.

Neuromancer as Senecan Tragedy and Noir Heist Narrative:

While it contains some of the clearest examples of Gibson's multilinear narrative style, the plot of *Neuromancer* is arguably the simplest of the three novels, at least on the surface appearing to have a very linear structure. The story has one consistent arc, following Case, the viewpoint character, from his low-life days in the black-market Japanese city of Chiba, all the

way to the climax and denouement of the novel where he has successfully helped the A.I. characters Neuromancer and Wintermute unite. Taken as a whole, the novel follows a heist narrative borrowed from Film Noir: the story begins with a down-and-out character who is recruited by (or recruits) a crack team of diverse skill in order to pull off a big job that will have a large payout at the end. Case is recruited by Armitage, who is unknowingly a puppet for the A.I. Wintermute, and Molly Millions, who works for Armitage. They move on to gather other characters and set up an elaborate scheme to break into the computer systems in the Tessier-Ashpool family's orbital space station estate, and the novel details the struggles and ultimate success of the team in executing this goal. The simplicity of *Neuromancer's* plot structure is deceptive, however, because there are several departures from the Film Noir model which Gibson uses to subvert numerous expected outcomes. Like how Gibson utilizes nested viewpoints, Gibson weaves threads of different literary forms into his novel to produce a rich combination of Film Noir with Senecan Tragedy. As such, examining these departures from the model of Film Noir offer an insight into how *Neuromancer* acts like a hypertext.

Neuromancer is broken down into twenty-four chapters which are separated into four larger sections and a coda, which according to Lance Olsen, mimics the five-act structure of a Senecan tragedy²⁴. The first large section is titled "Chiba City Blues" and covers the first two chapters, in which Case's character is set up as the hero of the heist narrative as well as set up for the Senecan revenge narrative: "set in the world of Night City. . . Here Molly collects Case . . . and brings him to Armitage with whom he makes a deal: Armitage fixes Case's nervous system .

²⁴ Senecan tragedies are a particular blend of Roman tragedy created by Seneca the Younger in the first century C.E. They are notable for being the basis for the revival of tragedy as a form during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially the French Neoclassical dramatists and the Elizabethan dramatists, including Shakespeare, whose play *Hamlet* may be considered a decedent. Senecan tragedies tend to focus on revenge narratives with heavy supernatural elements. ("Senecan tragedy")

. . . on the condition that Case will do a job for Armitage. (6) . . . The second and third sections involve preparations for the job Case agrees to do for Armitage” (Olsen n. pag.). This section sets up the team-gathering stage of the heist narrative, but also provides a background for Case’s own rise to wholeness, providing him the ability to complete the revenge aspect of the Senecan formula. Case was originally wronged by his employer, and while he does not gain revenge against that individual, Case’s deal with Armitage (and by extension, with Neuromancer the A.I.) to heal his supposedly unfixable neural damage is in itself a form of revenge, and the restoration of Case as the hero is reminiscent of the classical epics. The second section titled "The Shopping Expedition" covers chapters three through seven and is condensed by Olsen:

First in the Sprawl, then Istanbul . . . Case and Molly break into the Sense/Net data-storage library to steal Dixie Flatline's computer construct . . . Next Case, Armitage, and Molly travel to Istanbul to enlist the talents of Peter Riviera . . . infamous for his ability to project holograms of other people's fears and desires. Meanwhile, Case and Molly discover that an artificial intelligence in Berne called Wintermute is behind Armitage's plans. (n.pag.)

The characters continue to build their team as they execute Wintermute’s plan and begin to unravel the mysteries of Armitage and the true nature of their employer. This is where Gibson begins to complicate the heist narrative, as well as create a new possible target for the Senecan revenge narrative. The third section is titled "Midnight in the Rue Jules Verne" and covers chapters eight through twelve, taking the characters to the orbiting archipelago stations of the Rastafarian colony Zion and then to Freeside, the Las Vegas-like space station which is also home to the Tessier-Ashpool family’s stronghold, the Villa Straylight. This section provides a contrast to the previous environments with the savage-like Rastafarians, who have been visited

and spoken to by the A.I. Wintermute, whom they treat as an actual deity. This section begins to blur the lines between the realistic and the fantastic, drawing more attention to the fantastic nature of the A.I.s and their goals, which identifies the story more closely with the Senecan model due to the way these plays tend toward supernatural subjects.

In the fourth part, "The Straylight Run" which contains chapters thirteen through twenty-three, the novel reaches its climax, as demonstrated by Olsen:

The quartet moves toward the labyrinthine core of Straylight, back into an underworld zone of irrationality suggestive of Night City in the book's opening chapters. Case is arrested, but Wintermute kills the police guarding him. Armitage suffers a mental breakdown and Wintermute murders him as well. Molly accidentally stumbles upon Ashpool, the clan's patriarch, in the midst of a suicide attempt; when he threatens her, she kills him. But she is soon kidnapped by Riviera who has found 3Jane, the last Tessier-Ashpool left awake and alive in Straylight . . . Riviera . . . has decided to double-cross Armitage and Wintermute. Case, who has been monitoring the situation . . . to rescue Molly. Hideo, 3Jane's ninja servant, murders Riviera shortly after Case and Maelcum appear. 3Jane gives Case the password that will allow Wintermute to attain its goal: to merge with Neuromancer, another Tessier-Ashpool AI, which has fought against the union. The two AIs can now dominate the matrix. (n. pag.)

In this section, the object of the heist narrative and the object of revenge are both obtained; Wintermute's goal is reached, and Case and the team are able to win the A.I. the chance to merge with Neuromancer, and the betrayer Riviera is summarily defeated and destroyed, leaving Case and Molly with victory. Gibson has thus turned both narratives in on themselves, making the

“payout” of the heist something far from any material gain, but the creation of a new, godlike being, and while they are certainly paid for their trouble, these characters do not have a grasp of the true scope of their success. The revenge, similarly, has shifted away from the deceitful Wintermute and Armitage, a duo who appeared to have been the target in the previous sections, but instead shifts to Riviera, who was always only tentatively attached to the heist plan and was clearly a liability to every character from the beginning. But even as Riviera gets a sound defeat, and Case and Molly get clear revenge for Riviera’s treachery and sadistic violence, Riviera ended up having very little power to affect the success of the mission, since Wintermute clearly demonstrates the ability to deal with Riviera’s threat to the plan just as it deals with Armitage and the Turing police who attempt to arrest Case.

Finally, in the brief coda at the end of the novel, titled "Departure and Arrival," and covering the last chapter, Molly disappears out of Case’s life, and he returns to the Sprawl, gets his liver replaced so that he can again metabolize narcotics, and settles down with a new woman. Gibson appears on the surface to return to the heist and Senecan structures in this last section, but again, he is actually subverting both structures, primarily by engaging in what Olsen calls “a new Romantic longing for the absolute” which is consciously turned and denied through the narrative (n. pag.). Neuromancer, its name a portmanteau of “neuron,” “necromancer,” and “romance” as a being designed to bring the dead to life through the transcendence of personality over the bounds of humanity, is eaten up in the union with Wintermute, to become one being which ventures out into the Matrix, and then immediately loses its shape to splinter into multiple A.I. characters called the Loa, who feature prominently in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.

This ultimate being can have no permanent form, denying any essential absoluteness even as the two become one in a union more Romantically ideal than any human marriage.

Similarly, Case, the pseudo-Ulysses of the Senecan tragedy, does not go to his rest after the revenge, but has a strange duality in his fate. As he moves on from the events of *Neuromancer*, he not only has no further contact with Molly Millions, his friend and lover throughout the story, but also never sees his old lover Linda, again, except in a strange, brief glimpse of her in the Matrix during a hacking run, at which time he sees the boy-manifestation of *Neuromancer*, Linda, and a doppelganger of himself, off on the horizon of cyberspace (*Neuromancer* 270-1). This strange vision leaves a possibility, even after his being completely cut off from his life before and during *Neuromancer*, that Case somehow still exists with Linda, in some form or another, and that he was never truly free from *Neuromancer*'s power. This ending denies a simple, straight-forward conclusion to the plot of *Neuromancer*, effectively subverting both the overarching heist plot and the Senecan tragedy structure which might otherwise have given solid meaning and semantic definition to Gibson's world of the Sprawl. Instead, the multilinear aspects of the world and its interplay with the virtual are only further broken from stable linearity, and the story does not rest with a fully interwoven narrative in the end.

Multilinearity of Viewpoint in *Count Zero*:

Gibson's first novel has the overarching plot structure of the Heist narrative combined with the tragedy structure which give him flexibility to play with the boundaries between expected linear paths, but the singular viewpoint is left behind in his next two books, giving them even further dynamic potential. *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* introduce multiple viewpoint characters, which further fragments the plot and weaves together multiple viewpoints into narrative chains which answer and modify the plot lines of each strand. The result is that multiple lines of narrative operate almost isolated from each other, but there are many factors

outside each which are altered and defined by other actor's choices and reactions to their environments and discoveries of identity. Like *Neuromancer*, these individual threads may be based on borrowed tropes from other genres, and there are also even several examples of classical structures. Olsen breaks many of these down:

He lifts lowlife sleuths and criminals, archetypal tough guys, mysteries solved through the collection and interpretation of clues, seedy underworld settings, clipped prose, and sparse dialogue from the hard-boiled detective genre. He adopts a sense of pervasive magic, and horror, ghosts, long underground passageways, and dark staircases from the gothic novel, and formal distortions, bizarre characters, decadent settings, absurd incongruity, and a fascination with the irrational and abnormal from the southern grotesque tradition. From the tradition of the *Erziehungsroman*²⁵, he takes the plot of education that traces the psychological journey of a youth from innocence to experience, like Bobby in *Count Zero* and Kumiko in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. (Olsen n. pag.)

Count Zero is the strongest example of Gibson's blending of multiple narrative fragments into a coherent hypertext-like novel. The novel has three major plot threads, each following a viewpoint character, each winding together and connecting to each other in various places until the final events which see the threads bound together in the climax of the novel. The first thread follows Turner, a corporate mercenary who is tasked with helping Christopher Mitchel, a leading scientist of biological cybernetics for the Maas-Neotek Corporation, to defect to another company. Instead, the plan fails when Mitchel sends his daughter Angie instead, and Turner spends the rest of the novel protecting the girl who has been implanted with special bio-

²⁵ *Erziehungsroman* or "education novel," is a variant of *bildungsroman* ("coming of age story") which focuses more specifically on a character's training of certain skills, in this case, Bobby's learning how to be a cyberspace hacker.

cybernetics which enable her to connect to cyberspace without a deck, a prototype which Josef Virek, the story's antagonist, desperately wants in order to escape his cancerous body to a form of immortality in the Matrix. In a humorous reversal from Gibson's no-nonsense expert hacker Case from *Neuromancer*, Gibson's second thread of plot follows a complete amateur hacker named Bobby Newmark²⁶ who begins his narrative thread by excitedly entering the Matrix to attempt to hack a target for the first time and is nearly killed by the security measures. He is saved from permanent paralysis or death by an angelic female avatar in the matrix, and when Bobby wakes in reality, he is attacked by a third party and nearly killed again. Instead, Bobby is saved by the original owners of the stolen software, who are expert hackers following direction from the Loa, the A.I. splinter personalities left over from the merging of *Neuromancer* and *Wintermute* in the first novel. The hackers, named Beauvoir and Jackie, take Bobby along in order to find the girl he met in the Matrix since he seems to have been chosen by the Loa to help them locate her. Simultaneous to these two strands, the third narrative thread follows Marly Krushkova, an art gallery curator who is disgraced after being tricked into trying to sell a forgery of a Joseph Cornell²⁷ sculpture. Joseph Virek, the internationally-known wealthy entrepreneur, hires Marly to track down other such "forgeries," which are actually the work of a mysterious anonymous Boxmaker. As Marly begins to discover more leads to the origin of the boxes, she also begins to suspect that Virek's motives are dangerous and works to stay ahead of his agents and find the Boxmaker before he does.

²⁶ Bobby Newmark is another example of Gibson's use of eponym, making it clear from Bobby's introduction to the story that he is a "new mark" and completely inexperienced and vulnerable to manipulation. While Bobby has no experience or training in hacking, he has already chosen his moniker "Count Zero," which itself is a reference to programming language where a program will continue looping a set number of times until it counts to zero, then interrupts the sequence to begin a new process. The significance of Bobby's moniker becomes more significant as by the end of the novel as Bobby becomes more connected with the evolution of Cyberspace and its A.I characters.

²⁷ Joseph Cornell was a Surrealist sculptor and filmographer famous for his unique shadowboxes containing assorted refuse formed into unique pieces, which Gibson noted "wouldn't have seemed nearly as interesting if he'd simply left them arrayed on the bench of some picnic table" (Gibson "End Blog" n. pag.).

From the beginning of *Count Zero* to Chapter 28, none of the viewpoint characters are aware of each other's existences. The plotlines for Bobby and Turner converge on a nightclub owned by Jammer, an old hacker associate of Jackie and Beauvoir. Through both Bobby and Turner's plotlines, the Loa guide Angie and Bobby to Jammer's Bar in an elaborate plan to move Virek into striking distance. In the climax of the plot in Chapter 32, Virek's hired thugs surround the bar, attempting to capture Angie for the biosoft technology in her brain that connects her to the Matrix. Bobby and Jackie enter the Matrix in order to find help, but instead are confronted by Virek's security software, which instantly kills Jackie. With the Loa's help, however, Bobby is shunted through into Virek's systems, and the Loa use this opportunity to kill Virek, ending the threat to Angie and her eventual chance at transcendence in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.

Simultaneously, Marly has found her way onto the now derelict Villa Straylight space station from *Neuromancer* which houses the Tessier-Ashpool's old computer cores, now home to the A.I. which crafts the Cornell-esque boxes. In trying to follow and manage both Marly's attempts to escape monitoring and the active kidnapping of Angie, Virek is tricked by the Loa into overextending his computer system's resources, leaving him exposed to the Loas' attack.

Gibson's weaving of the plotlines into the climax of *Count Zero* demonstrates the multilinearity of his narrative, extending beyond the multilinearity of viewpoint in *Neuromancer*. Unlike *Neuromancer's* nested viewpoints, Gibson uses isolated viewpoint characters in their own separate threads to highlight both the movements of the Loa, and Virek's manipulation. Throughout the narrative, Virek uses his vast influence to craft the outcome of the viewpoint characters' convergence to assure his victory. Turner, Bobby, and Marly only manage to glimpse pieces of his plan, unable to grasp the full scope of his operation until the final moments of its fruition. However, all along the Loa have been simultaneously directing each character's actions,

including Virek's, to ensure the safety of Angie and to ensure Virek's downfall. Gibson's deliberate structuring of his narrative threads to accentuate the isolation of his viewpoint characters is clearest in the structure of the viewpoints after the climax in Chapter 32, in which Virek is killed by the Loa. The viewpoint is from Bobby's perspective, and after Marly's plotline tension is resolved in Chapter 33 as Virek's death prevents her being killed, Chapter 34 exhibits the only instance in *Count Zero* where the viewpoint character changes mid-chapter. After Virek's men are dead, Turner gives Angie into Beauvoir's safekeeping (and by extension, the Loas') and leaves the bar to move on with his life. After a page-break, the narrative shifts to Bobby's perspective to finish out the chapter with his own resolution to join Beauvoir and Angie rather than go back home. This shift in the narrative structure reflects that after the death of Virek, the viewpoint characters are now intertwined, and their parts in the larger unseen plan of the Loa (and their roles as Virek's pawns) are clear to all. Gibson further blends the characters' viewpoints in the final two chapters, using a nameless third-party viewpoint character in Chapter 35 as a passive observer of Bobby's and Angie's relationship after an unspecified time gap since the climax of the main story arc, and the third party viewpoint character also comments on Marly's successful career so as to give . Gibson then ends the novel with a final glimpse of Turner from his son's viewpoint, several years after the death of Virek. The individual viewpoints are dissolved into one, and the larger narrative focus has moved on. Gibson's tying of the three narrative threads of *Count Zero* shows the natural extension of his hypertext leanings, creating a strong background for the multilinear aspects of his world and characters. The transition from *Neuromancer's* singular plotline to the multi-threaded plot of *Count Zero* reflects the changes Gibson makes to his world and characters, and the dramatic decentering of reality that takes place as the realms of cyberspace and its A.I. characters evolve. *Count Zero's* myriad

perspectives funnel into a solid coherent plot because they support Gibson's texts' underlying multilinearity, imposing a logical sequentially that gives the otherwise jumbled narrative fragments a shape, and this effect clearly demonstrates Gibson's transitional nature as a hypertext.

Conclusion

Gibson's world of the *Sprawl* offers a hard edge of harsh pressures and shifting sands of meaning that leave its inhabitants very little to define themselves with, let alone to establish boundaries between personhood and society, or even between reality and the fantastic. But without a matching multilinearity structure in Gibson's narrative, his novels would offer solid purchase of predictable, linear foundation which would be clearly representative of traditional literature. The microcosm of destabilized binaries, decentering pressures, and hypertexted stylistic character of Gibson's work depends on the macrocosm of interwoven plot threads which exhibit a deeply multi-faceted work, and it is because of the consistency of Gibson's multilinearity that the text operates as a transition from the pure-form linear path of typographical-age texts to the amorphous nodal structure of electronic hypertext.

The concurrent structural blending of classical and non-literary narrative structures in *Neuromancer*, the multilinearity of viewpoint through nested perspectives, and the woven narrative strands in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* all present a sequentially complex and richly hypertexted structure for Gibson to play with meaning, connecting and separating expected binaries and truth claims to form his own Termite texts. The reader has no recourse but to absorb the multilinearity approach to truth, to accept as default a non-linear construction of logical progression, and to give up on established binaries for the purposes of grounding

character archetypes and themes. In Gibson's work, even reality itself is unstable, changing, and often immaterial, and the difference between the natural world and the fantastic is a matter of semantics. With this elaborate and forceful construction, Gibson offers a transitional piece, a missing link between the text medium and hypertexted modes of literary discourse through the combination of linear text and a multilinear approach to narrative and literature.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

“You see,” Colin said, brushing aside his brown forelock, a gesture like a schoolboy’s in some antique play, “when the matrix attained sentience, it simultaneously became aware of *another* matrix, another sentience.”

“I don’t understand,” she said. “If cyberspace consists of the sum total of data in the human system . . .”

“Yeah,” the Finn said, turning out onto the long straight empty highway, “but nobody’s talkin’ *human*, see?”

. . .

“Are you telling me the truth?”

“Be there in a New York minute,” said the Finn.

The evolution of science fiction after Gibson’s arrival follows, as demonstrated, the establishment of hypertext as a primary medial aspect of text literature during the transitional period where text took on an electronic nature. The hypertext aspect of literature bled into the political and philosophical approach to truth claims as it became easier to avoid a traditionally linear approach to text literature, and as different forms of media with different potential amputations of meaning began to supplant text media’s influence in myriad areas such as education, entertainment, and pop-culture. Gibson’s text, though itself created and printed as traditional, ink-on-paper text, nonetheless exhibits prototypical elements that subvert definitions as it eats at its genre, stylistic, and thematic boundaries in Gibson’s pursuit of termite art. The multilinear nature of these texts, in combination with their place in history on the threshold of the Internet Age, destabilizes the relationship between referent and simulacrum by playing with a

multilinear but ultimately coherent structure built of realistic circumstances and fantastic elements, solid traditional medial constraints and self-actualizing, boundary-breaching virtualization, and a conflict between naturalistic environments with often apparently Marxist relationships and characters that defy Marxist definition if meaning. The implications of Gibson's reflection of literary reality as it changed into a new subversive form are extensive, affecting political and cultural shifts toward gender, spiritualism, and technology which now define every aspect of our lives from day to day reality to our parallel existence on the internet. But just as Gibson's character Parker despaired over his own inability to piece together the ideal form of his hologram rose, let alone the perfected identity he wished he could discover, the world described by Gibson's *Sprawl* novels and the culture of multilinear truth claims it reflects yearn for something more than a mold-breaking challenge to traditional truth definition. The desire to create one's own identity, after all, is as old as the Fall of Eden, and understanding desire reflected in Gibson's pseudo hypertexts allows a glimpse into how the Gospel can still reach a world which now subconsciously side-steps linear truth claims.

The implications of Gibson's novels for Christians approaching the secular world are extensive, and careful examination of Gibson's purpose in his writing is important for the Christian's approach. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, C.S. Lewis reminds Christian readers to avoid the "use" of literature, instead to "'receive' it . . . [to] expert our senses and imagination and various other powers according the pattern set by the artist" (88). Gibson clearly intended his text to be subversive, as is demonstrated by his drive to pursue a termite text which dissolves its own boundaries. In this sense, Gibson does not directly make Christianity a target of this subversion, instead pushing away any true sense of the spiritual and defining the world of the *Sprawl* as entirely naturalistic. Whether intending it or not, however, Gibson's replacement of

biblical divine supernature with naturalistic pseudo-gods in his A.I. characters and a virtual spiritual realm in his cyberspace implies that there is a hole to fill, a referent which the virtualization implies, whether or not Gibson believes there was an original. The rose may be a hologram, but it is still the image, if idealized, of a true subject. Because Gibson's form of subversive science fiction has had such wide influence on current cultural approaches to linear truth, Christians can learn effective avenues for approaching that culture by examining how Gibson's novels create third-case simulacra of biblical concepts.

Gibson's naturalistic, spritual-esque reality reveals, firstly, an innate desire for the biblical reality. Cyberspace and the climb of mortal characters to the transcendence of virtual existence mirrors the biblical transcendence of humankind to immortality in Christ, and these naturalistic realms are not only a virtual replacement in Gibson's novels, but a real goal for the development of the internet. In her history of the concept of space taken from classical literature to the development of the internet, Wertheim explains how the creation of the internet domain, which has in many ways become a real equivalent to the fantastic fictional cyberspace of Gibson's novels, is naturalistic in nature:

We are witnessing here the birth of a new domain, a new space that simply did not exist before. The interconnected "space" of the global computer network is not expanding into any previously existing domain; we have here a digital version of Hubble's cosmic expansion, a process of space creation. (221)

While Wertheim is clearly ignoring that the internet was created by intelligent designers and did not actually arrive without considerable directed application of technology, her point that cyberspace is being carved out of non-space, creating a new realm inside the physical, points to the cyberspace's nature as a third-case simulacra – the virtual realm of cyberspace, both in

Gibson's novels and in reality, do not truly have a corollary. However, Wertheim also demonstrates by her attitude the naturalistic replacement of the biblical concept of created reality. Cyberspace is man-made, and should one choose to discount the possibility of a kingdom of heaven, then cyberspace becomes the naturalistic replacement. Gibson's characters actively pursue existence in cyberspace as a means of immortality, several succeeding in their goal to transcend their mortal bodies to live in the virtual realm of cyberspace. This cultural longing for the transcendent is heavily present in our own time, actually increased by the progress of technology. Atheists once had to content themselves to oblivion once their physical bodies failed them, but now thanks to this new virtual kingdom, they have hope, even faith, that one day they can live forever. In a 2000 documentary film by Mark Neal called *No Maps for These Territories*, Gibson's philosophy is heavily examined during his interview. When asked what will save humanity, Gibson responds:

Acceptance. Acceptance of the impermanence of being, and acceptance of the...the imperfect nature of being. Or possibly the perfect nature of being, depending on how one...how one looks at it. Acceptance that this is not a rehearsal for the...that this is it. (laughs) This is the deal. This is your life.
(No Maps for These Territories)

Regardless of whether Gibson recognizes his own innate desire for the transcendent, he recognizes the "impermanence of being," that these vessels of our consciousness can and will fail. Since he does not believe that there is a real kingdom of heaven, he invents his own. Christians approaching our current culture must recognize the need being expressed in the hope for naturalistic transcendence, and instead offer the true kingdom of heaven.

The realm of cyberspace may be virtual, but Gibson does not leave it empty of gods. But the world that Gibson constructs, with its mechanism for self-actualization and self-definition in response to an environment that is itself changeable and fluid, subtly rejects the idea of a truly omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God. Because all true spirituality and divine supernature is denied in the world of the Sprawl, only cyberspace can support a being which reflects God's nature. Beginning with the dual A.I.s Neuromancer and Wintermute, Gibson creates an origin story for the first gods of the human system, tracking the union of the two great A.I.s in *Neuromancer* to the human matrix's sentience, to the transcendence to the larger network of matrixes across the galaxy, and the return of the splintered Loa, who even more fully take on the aspect of spiritual beings of human culture. The A.I.s are practically omniscient, being the sum total of "data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system" (*Neuromancer* 51) which in Gibson's atheistic world, effectively means omniscience. They are as powerful as beings can be, having utter control over the fabric of cyberspace, even over life and death in their realm, and even have powerful influence in the physical realm. The A.I.s are as omnipresent as the matrix, and anything connected to cyberspace is a place they can be connected to also. But as powerful as these A.I. gods are, they are mere simulations of the Divine Godhead. Technological futurists such as Ray Kurzweil believe that humankind will one day soon give birth to human-level, sentient artificial intelligence, which if they have the ability to self-iterate and evolve, will rapidly outstrip humanity's own progress and become godlike in their power over us. Whether heartless exterminators of the human race or appreciative benefactors, these A.I. characters are the avenging gods of naturalistic science, holding the potential to guide humanity on its course for transcendence or to punish us for our folly. Gibson's artificial gods demonstrate the former case, allowing human characters in the Sprawl

trilogy a path to immortality. In the final scene of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Gibson's characters leave the human system entirely, traveling out and beyond to an alien matrix somewhere out in the Alpha Centauri cluster, following the path laid for them by the A.I. gods. This scene not only implies the possibility in Gibson's world that Earth was actually seeded by aliens, a belief that many atheists hold as a replacement for a divine creator, but this scene offers a familiar hope to Christians who believe that once absent the body, they will be present with God. The hope and peace of a journey completed and a new, better existence to come are embedded in the naturalistic virtual realm of Gibson's cyberspace and its gods, and while secular culture increasingly rejects the biblical worldview, it cannot help but wish for there to be a better existence waiting for them at the end of their suffering.

Gibson's texts offer a unique representation of innate human hopes, showing the desire for transcendence even when faced with a purely naturalistic universe. In Gibson's multilinear text, he cannot help but point to the true multilinearity of reality, nor can his work escape a hope for a kingdom of heaven and a god to better humankind's existence, even if the best he can manage is a virtual replacement. The environment, existential reality, and even the story itself reflects the new default of literary experience – that the expectation is not a single linear progression of truth, but a myriad of paths that lead to truth we choose. As holders of the divine truth, Christians have a unique opportunity to examine this hologram rose of our culture's desire for transcendence, and to recognize our own role in helping them to find the truth they have been denying – that there is a true divine reality, and a God that longs to give them that transcendence.

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