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Postmodernism, Cybernetics and William Gibson

by

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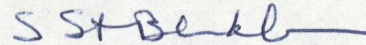
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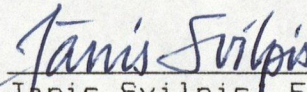
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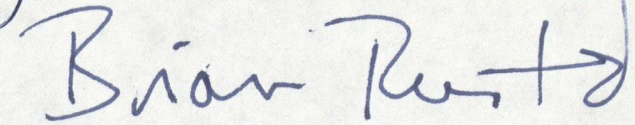
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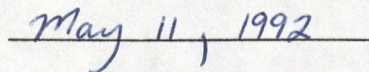
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Abstract

Postmodernism and cybernetics are often conflated in cultural theory and cyberpunk criticism. This conflation is problematic: cybernetics is generally realist and deterministic, while postmodernism is generally anti-realist and indeterministic. Chapter One investigates this theoretical problem, makes qualifications, and demonstrates that cybernetics and postmodernism are inimical even as they overlap. Chapter Two examines the ways in which William Gibson exploits this theoretical problem in his fiction. Chapter Three places this problem in the context of the romantic, and seeks to show that Gibson's fiction is ultimately ironic, ambiguous and highly skeptical, both *more* and *less* postmodern than the fiction of his literary peers.

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Introduction

In 1983 *Time* named the computer "Machine of the Year". This award displaced the usual "Man of the Year", presumably decentering the human and giving postmodernism permanent status in pop consciousness. In 1984 William Gibson published *Neuromancer*, presumably giving literary expression to the confluence of cybernetics and postmodernism. In fact, the sub-genre of cyberpunk is widely reported to be both postmodern art and postmodern artifact *par excellence*, literary examination and product of the post-age.

If this is true, then one would expect congruity between features of cybernetics and features of postmodernism, both in theory and in cyberpunk text. There is congruity. But there is also discord, and lots of it. The ontology and methodology of cybernetics are diametrically opposed to the "ontology" and methodology of postmodernism. Their assumptions are in competition: essentially the cybernetic worldview is determinate and realist while the postmodern worldview is indeterminate and anti-realist.

This may seem too obvious to mention. But then why the conflation of cybernetics and postmodernism? Where are the qualifications? These simple questions motivate my project, which seeks to demonstrate at least two things: that cybernetics and postmodernism are in an

intimate yet hostile relationship, and that Gibson exploits this relationship in his fiction. This positions my project against the mainstream of cyberpunk criticism, which accepts the confluence of cybernetics and postmodernism, even as it demonstrates (sometimes unwittingly) the problematic nature of this confluence.

Chapter One will deal with the theoretical difficulties and implications of this conflation, as it is expressed by postmodern theorists. Chapter Two will examine how Gibson exploits this problematic relationship between cybernetics and postmodernism in his novels *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Chapter Three will position cybernetics and postmodernism within the larger "romantic" context of Gibson's fiction, and seek to demonstrate that Gibson's style is densely poetic, full of tension, and suspended in ambiguity.

The author that emerges is a prankster. His ideas are contiguous with actual technology - like *virtual reality* - but he never fully identifies with the subculture of technofreaks that embrace his work. He invokes nostalgia, but laughs at his own romanticism. He plays, deconstructs and refuses closure, but somehow is never quite postmodern.

Chapter One: Postmodernism and Cybernetics

Hyperreality. Simulacrum. Cyborg. These are some of the buzzwords of postmodernism. Each word carries a cybernetic resonance: with new types of interface terminal space becomes hyperreality; feedback and simulation are hallmarks of the simulacra; cyborgs manifest the integration of high-tech and biology, the reduction of humans to systems.

In cyberpunk criticism the conflation of postmodernism and cybernetics is everywhere. Darko Suvin says "...I think of cyberpunk as the beginning of postmodernism in SF" (Pukallus Interview 257). Veronica Hollinger points out that "cyberpunk is theorized as a symptom of the malaise of postmodernism" (42). Istvan Csicsery-Ronay says "as a label 'cyberpunk' is perfection. It suggests the apotheosis of postmodernism" (266), while Miriam Glazer notices that "Gibson has been heralded as a postmodern..." (155).

Critics of culture also make the general conflation of cybernetics and postmodernism. Gabriele Schwab entitles her article *Cyborgs and Cybernetic Intertexts: On Postmodern Phantasms of Body and Mind*. David Porush says:

...cybernetics is, by Norbert Wiener's

definition, the science that seeks those laws of communication which apply equally to living beings and machines. I call this attitude *postmodern*... ("Reading" 54).

Scott Bukatman, citing Alvin Toffler, describes how under "the implosive forces of blip culture" lived space is displaced, and "referentiality is finished" (45-6). His description will be familiar to readers of Baudrillard, who equates implosion with the collapse of binary distinctions. For Baudrillard, implosion is manifest in the micro-space of cybernetic systems. DNA is one of his favorite examples. As John Rothfork points out, DNA is "a cybernetic code" (64), and within DNA

...opposing poles of determination vanish according to a nuclear contraction or retraction of the old polar schema which has always maintained a minimal distance between cause and effect...

(Baudrillard, *Simulations* 56).

Baudrillard's philosophy of science is questionable, but the outcome of that philosophy is worth noting. For Baudrillard the important aspect of DNA and all information systems is their tendency to collapse space,

poles, and distinctions, the tools of the analytic tradition. N. Katherine Hayles concurs:

...foreign bacteria's DNA merges with the DNA that was the body's originary text to create an intertextual code that deconstructs the distinction between exterior and interior, text and context (27).

In effect, "Baudrillardian" cybernetics gives rise to postmodern suspicions. The polarity real/unreal becomes especially suspect. As Christopher Norris says, "'simulation' is the name of the postmodern game..." (172). Joseph W. Slade, citing historian Bruce Mazlish, argues that cybernetic technology is responsible for the "fourth discontinuity" in popular consciousness, where individual egos are destabilized by the realization that "humans are continuous with the technology they create" (12). Picking up on this idea, Porush says:

...in examining the work of artists who are identifiably postmodern - Barth, Barthelme, Beckett, Coover, Pynchon - one discovers the obsessive return to stories of men who behave like, think like, are defeated by, fatefully linked to, derived from, or turning into

machines ("Technology" 93).

Porush is more penetrating than many of his colleagues, and seems to recognize the potential difficulty in conflating postmodernism and cybernetics. His developing thesis over the Eighties has been that certain kinds of postmodern fiction "somehow elude cybernetic reduction" ("Cybernetic" 379), instead courting "nonsense, chaos, paradox, entropy, silence and oblivion" ("Technology" 100). By 1987 Porush says

The single unifying feature of cybernetic fictions is that they pose as cybernetic devices which ultimately - and this is the source of their power and postmodernism - *do not work* ("Reading" 57).

It becomes clear that Porush is on the side of postmodernism fighting the ontology of cybernetics. He creates a handy strawman by drawing a distinct line between cybernetics - mechanism, determinism - and quantum physics - freedom, play. Thus Richard A. Schwartz, reviewing Porush's *The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction*, claims that postmodern writers "...reflect Heisenberg's world-view more than Newton's" (332).

Unfortunately, Porush oversimplifies the relationship between cybernetics and quantum physics, as any reader of Norbert Wiener's should realize. And Porush does not follow up the hostility between cybernetics and postmodernism with enough vigor for my satisfaction. It is one thing to separate the ontology of cybernetics from the ontology of postmodernism; it is another to simply leave it at that. Porush does not address the question of why the two are so easily conflated by most critics. I suspect that the relationship between cybernetics and postmodernism is more curious than Porush allows, and that there are understandable reasons for the non-reflexive conflation.

At this point I will clarify my models. It may seem obvious to call cybernetics determinate and postmodernism indeterminate, but this is not necessarily true. Cybernetics encompasses a wide spectrum of practical applications, ranging from business management to biology; such a diversified technology needs clarification. And Hal Foster asks the question: "Postmodernism: does it exist at all and, if so, what does it mean?" (ix).

The Models

It is useful to distinguish between "scientific"

and "cultural" cybernetics. Generally, cybernetic science is an applied science with numerous applications. What is interesting to a cybernetician is the behavior of information within a system, rather than the materials that information or system is composed of. Thus brain research can illuminate artificial intelligence while artificial intelligence can illuminate brain research. Cybernetics can be the science of genetic codes, the management of a corporation, or the study of information-flow in a work of art. "Cultural" cybernetics encompasses just about anything associated with computers, cyborgs, and artificial intelligence: Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Terminator*, virtual reality, perhaps even video games. Cultural cybernetics, as distinct from scientific cybernetics, tends towards a specific kind of materialism. It incorporates images of wiring, silicon chips and gleaming metal. When *humans* are cybernetic they become Porush's "soft machines", distinctive because their materials are not metallic. What is consistent across both models is the tendency towards a determinate and reductive ontology. By "ontology" I mean a belief about the status of "the world". In science this worldview motivates and justifies a particular methodology; the worldview does not necessarily need to

be global in scope, but it must encompass those aspects of the world important to the methodology. A third kind of cybernetics is the variety used by most cultural and science fiction critics: a casual blend of cultural and scientific notions. Many critics understand the concept of information, but flavor their discussion with the *machine-ness* of cybernetics. This is an unavoidable blend - given that science fiction packages applied science for popular consumption - but it needs conscious qualification.

Though there is no necessary connection between scientific cybernetics and the machine metaphor, cyberneticians more often speak of the brain as a computer than of the computer as a brain. Scientific cybernetics is often laced with cultural connotations. Norbert Wiener states that the message is the important notion in cybernetics, "...whether this should be transmitted by electrical, mechanical, or nervous means" (16). But his prose is full of machine-flavor, even when describing human systems:

In short, our inner economy must contain an assembly of thermostats, automatic hydrogen-ion-concentration controls, governors, and the like... (135).

We might attribute this flavor to our own cultural reading responses. Perhaps "thermostat" has no mechanical connotation to a scientist. Colin Wilson is more specific: "An acorn, for example, could be regarded as a computer card" (15).

In the work of cybernetic experts there is a consistent impulse towards a determinate worldview. By "determinate" I mean definite and certain, with defined parameters and a tendency towards reductive methodologies. As I have already mentioned, reduction does not necessarily entail materialism. Systems can be reducible in principle to information, without an appeal to materials. Science journalist Nancy Shulins says:

The assumption that life is defined by the organization and interaction of its parts rather than the material it's made of is at the heart of artificial life research (64).

Wiener says:

...it is the run rather than the entire existence of the mechanical structure of the computing machine which corresponds to the individual (153).

This distinguishes scientific cybernetics from the popular use of the word.

Norbert Wiener's seminal work, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Human and the Machine*, suggests determinacy and reduction in a number of ways. Important concepts in cybernetics, like *information* and *feedback*, are understood "...thoroughly from a quantitative point of view" (14). Quantification is an aspect of a determinate methodology. Wiener also carefully points out that the unifying feature of cybernetic applications is reduction. What makes a nervous system as cybernetic as a computer is the fact that both are understood in terms of their constituent information systems. Thus nerves can be described in determinate terms:

...the synapse is a coincidence-recorder, and outgoing fibre is only stimulated if the number of incoming impulses in a small summation-time exceeds a certain threshold (29).

One outcome of this consistent reducibility is the complete integration of the prosthesis and the human, something Wiener hopes will replace peg-legs and the like (35-6). Since both prosthesis and stump are in principle and practice reducible, the prosthesis needs

only the right level of technology to integrate with the nervous and muscular-skeletal systems. It is a short move from here to declare the entire human system reducible and determinate. Wiener states matter-of-factly that as the Industrial Revolution devalued the human "arm", so the cybernetic revolution devalues the human brain (37). This move has historical antecedents in the nineteenth century, where the human organism was "...above all a heat engine, burning glucose or glycogen or starch..." (53). This is not necessarily to deny emergent properties or even indeterminate properties (though that may be the case), but to privilege the bottom-up approach to understanding. For Wiener vitalism has lost, and "the new mechanics is fully as mechanistic as the old" (56). Most importantly, Wiener details how complicated cybernetic systems arise out of fundamental binary switches:

...every contingency which may arise in the operation of the machine simply demands a new set of choices of contingencies I and O, depending according to a fixed set of rules on the decisions already made (141).

This binary system has its origin in the work of George Boole. By reducing systems to on/off or 1/0 or

true/false, cybernetics literally and figuratively defines itself as a determinate science. The on-off switch becomes the example and the metaphor. Infinite fractions between numbers, Zeno's infinity paradoxes, grey areas between true and false - all are excluded from the fundamental levels of cybernetic methodology.

This is not to deny the existence of indeterminacy altogether. Cybernetics is a determinate science, but this does not entail that a cybernetician will view *everything* as determinate. Cybernetics is not a metaphysics. Wiener discusses the loss of absolute determinism with regard to post-Heisenberg notions of time. He makes a similar observation about large societies, which exhibit "extreme indeterminacy and instability" (185). In general he admits that "There is much which we must leave...to the "unscientific" narrative method" (191). Cybernetic applications, then, display a determinate ontology and methodology; the remaining question is over what will be allowed as cybernetic.

Wiener's determinate cybernetics is shared by a wide range of experts in both science and philosophy of science. A.M. Turing describes how the important aspect of a computing machine is its composition of components ("Proposal" 21). He also favors the binary system as the most stable ("Lecture" 113-14), and believes "Newtonian"

time to be efficacious:

...the clock enables us to introduce a discreteness into time, so that time for some purposes can be regarded as a succession of instants instead of a continuous flow (*Lecture 111*).

Alice Mary Hilton echoes the reductionist theme: "To the cybernetician, control simply means the influence components of a dynamic system exert upon one another" (xi). Reduction extends to mental events for F.H.

George: "A Cybernetician would, (or *should*) hypothesise, in my view, that mind is a function of brain" (13).

Daniel C. Dennett continues this program with regard to subsystems of consciousness, which "...are deemed to be unproblematic *nonconscious* bits of organic machinery, as utterly lacking in a point of view or inner life as a kidney or kneecap" ("Intro" 13). For Arthur J. Kuhn this cybernetic reduction applies to many systems, including "neural mechanisms, national economies, [and] business firms" (1). Frederick J. Crosson and Kenneth M. Sayre are even more optimistic:

One of the main reasons we are not able to program the creative skill of the poet or

composer into the computer...is that we do not understand these skills as well as those of the mathematical reckoner (ix).

Thus, some systems that are not reducible in practice are reducible in principle. Technology simply needs to catch up. M.J. Rosenberg continues this view with regard to art, and hopes to "...grasp the detail out of which complexity is built..." (xvii). For some, the echoes of materialism still ring. Donald M. MacKay says:

To many of us it is no longer unrealistic to ask whether even the infinite variety of human behaviour may not in principle have its causes in a correspondingly subtle interplay of physical processes deep in the human brain (11).

Rolf Landauer agrees: "Information...whether it is in biological systems, in a digital computer, or handled by pencil and paper, inevitably has a physical form" (161). Regardless of whether it is the "meat or the motion" - to borrow a phrase from Dennett - "android ontology" is mechanistic, finite, and against the Cartesian dualism of mind/body ("Role" 267).

The determinate and reductionist flavor carries

over into "cultural" cybernetics, where there is both fear of and fascination with the machine. This underscores a subcultural bifurcation; as Patricia Warrick says, "Much of the SF is dystopian, but no such negative attitude prevails in the field of computer science" (xv). On one hand are the hackers and the technologists, like Robert W. Lucky: "My viewpoint is unavoidably cluttered with visions of the thrills of technological accomplishment" (1). This attitude is growing, if you believe *Time* magazine: "Americans are receptive to the [computer] revolution and optimistic about its impact" (Friedrich 8). On the other hand, in the same issue of *Time* Roger Rosenblatt points out that "The factory robot that crushed a man to death in Japan last year [1981] did little to silence the talk that machines are a threat to human pre-eminence" (60).

Both attitudes are shot through with the determinate viewpoint. Lucky's optimism stems from a belief that systems are in principle understandable, even quantifiable, and therefore open to human intervention. The dystopian view is more complex. There is the obvious factor of human inferiority: if machines can do it all and do it better, we feel obsolete, decentered. Turing's words become chilling - "Once the human brake is removed the increase in speed is enormous" ("Proposal" 20) - and people like Hannah

Arendt feel compelled to defend human worth:

If...machines can play a reasonably good game of chess, then, I think, human dignity demands that we say that the chess-playing kind of intelligence apparently has not the same status as other kinds of intelligence... (214).

This fear (and this reaction) preserves the distinction between humans and machines: one will always be better than the other. There is a subtler technophobia that springs from the collapse of the distinction. If humans are determinate systems, reducible to their genetic and nervous patterns of information, then humans are re-programmable. There is a loss of humanity, a loss of autonomy, and a loss of political control. Humans are not only Porush's soft machines, but *inferior* machines.

This fear motivates the cultural project of keeping machines and humans distinct. Slade says: "Even as we grant the possibility of automata capable of perception and reasoning, we assume our own superiority" (11). Rosenblatt, speaking of Asimov and Capek's robots and computers, notices that "...a man can beat them every time" (60). These quotations do not necessarily deny reduction in the human; it is possible that the human

just is and always will be a superior machine. But others preserve more romantic distinctions between machine and human. A Review of *Terminator II* criticizes the movie for pretending to be "...prohuman while possessing an artificial heart" (Frascella 85). *Time* says of its "machine of the year": "...the greatest influence for good or evil, is not a man at all. It is a machine..." (Friedrich 10). And *T.V. Guide* calls Brent Spiner - *Star Trek's* "Data" - "The man inside the machine" (cover).

Technophobe or technofreak, human as superior machine or inferior machine or anything-but-machine - all these cultural views reflect the constitution of cybernetics as a determinate and reductive science. Where they disagree is on the placement of the human in relation to that science. We can already see how an uneasy relationship between cybernetics and postmodernism might occur.

SF and cultural critics pick up on both "scientific" and "cultural" cybernetics, citing Wiener and machine-fear almost interchangeably. Again the consistent feature is a determinate viewpoint. Porush says that "Cybernetics is technically a very precise endeavor" ("Technology" 97), and Warrick claims that in cybernetics "...man and institutions are understood according to a mechanistic, deterministic model..."

(18). For some this model is a recapitulation of historical determinate models. Rothfork claims that the cybernetic worldview is "...as old as Leucippus and Democritus..." (57), making it a species of atomism, while Porush insists that cybernetics "...returns science to a neoclassical position of certainty and mechanism" ("Cybernetic" 374). This position is suspect, especially considering Wiener's claim that cybernetic theory "...belongs to the Gibbsian statistical mechanics rather than the classical Newtonian mechanics" (55). But it highlights the confusion of cultural and scientific cybernetics, as it substitutes general worldviews for specific scientific practices. Within those general worldviews reduction means the end of old notions of transcendence and humanity. Glenn Grant outlines some of the posthumanist concerns of cybernetics: "...human memory and personality, considered as information. People as systems" (41). Csicsery-Ronay says:

...the computer represents the possibility of modelling everything that exists in the phenomenal world, of breaking down into information and then simulating perfectly in infinitely replicable form those processes that pre-cybernetic humanity had held to be inklings of transcendence (273).

Posthumanism and the end of transcendence - these are two familiar features of postmodernism. Both reflect Jean-Francois Lyotard's suspicion of metanarratives; both reflect a dissatisfaction with traditional liberal and romantic concerns. Lyotard defines techno-science as a practice imbedded with performative values (76-7), devaluing true/false versions of reality in favor of the "technological criterion". This consensus approach to truth highlights an indeterminate ontology.

One might characterize consensus as a kind of determinacy, where truth is *reducible* to - and reliably located within - mutual agreement. But this is a semantic argument that does not interest me here. The appeal to consensus - and deconstruction of all else - seems best described as an admission of indeterminacy, a *postmodern* version of pragmatism.

Postmodernism is not the unified practice or theory that cybernetics is. Foster's question - what *is* postmodernism? - is echoed by others. Lance Olsen believes we should speak of postmodernisms, to underscore the diversity of so-called postmodern positions (4). Fredric Jameson wonders about "...the existence or not of some properly 'postmodernist' culture" (xv). But the different positions all reflect a viewpoint of indeterminacy, expressed in a number of ways.

Nietzsche, the patron saint of postmodernism, said "No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations" (267). This quip anticipates Lyotard's suspicion of meta-narratives, and more specifically, the reflexive notion that there are competing meta-narratives that disagree on the status of "fact". This suspicion is a short distance from another expression of indeterminacy, which Scott Lash calls the "...chaos, flimsiness, and instability in our experience of *reality* itself" (15). Hollinger is even blunter, when she calls postmodernism "...an esthetic and a world-view whose central tenets are uncertainty and indeterminacy" (30).

Pluralism and relativity are also expressions of indeterminacy. While Foster claims that postmodernism is not simple pluralism or relativism (xi), he is in the definite minority. Mark C. Taylor says of "modern and postmodern worlds": "What makes sense and is meaningful in one situation frequently seems senseless and meaningless in another setting" (3). Norris says that postmodern textual meaning "...can only be a product of the codes and conventions that happen to prevail within this or that historically-contingent interpretive community" (6). Lance Olsen agrees: "Postmodernism explores the impossibility of imposing a single

determinant meaning on a text" (*Ellipse* 6). Milner, Thomson and Worth, speaking of Agnes Heller, broaden textual relativism to encompass the "boundless pluralism" of postmodern post-industrial society (xi), while Heller herself says: "Postmodernism as a cultural movement (not as an ideology, theory, or programme) has a simple enough message: anything goes" (7). This is not to directly contradict Foster, who is speaking of theory and ideology, but to demonstrate that pluralism is imbedded in postmodernism, to the point of disagreement about pluralism itself.

Postmodern indeterminacy finds its most sophisticated expression in the collapse of distinctions. Distinctions allow for determinate meaning, like Boole's binary logic. It is an anti-realist success to pull the pairs of distinctions apart; it is an anti-realist triumph to collapse them into each other, irrevocably. Thus "progressive" art breaks down "...traditional divisions such as male/female or real/imaginary..." (Gordon 389). Taylor says "...it is necessary to effect a dialectical inversion that does not leave contrasting opposites unmarked but dissolves their original identities" (10).

This "dissolving" finds another important name, already mentioned with regard to Baudrillard: implosion. In *Simulations* Baudrillard makes it clear that implosion

is a more violent deconstructive procedure than pulling polarities apart and setting them adrift:

"...indeterminacy is less a product of molecular randomness than a product of the abolition, pure and simple, of the *relation*" (56). Deconstruction is the black hole. Numerous polarities collapse under Baudrillard's implosion: real/simulated (2), real/imaginary (4), illusion/real (38), even true/false (12). This signals the end of "...truth, reference and objective causes" (6). Baudrillard makes it clear that this is an indeterminate position:

...if the entire cycle of any act or event is envisaged in a system where linear continuity and dialectical polarity no longer exist, in a field *unhinged by simulation*, then all determination evaporates (31).

Baudrillard's particular articulation of postmodernism is an influential one. Lash echoes it when he characterizes postmodernism as a process of "de-differentiation" (11-15). Csicsery-Ronay echoes it when he says: "...all these interests require the radical shrinking of focus onto microcosms, and all imply the impossibility of drawing clear boundaries..." (272).

Baudrillard epitomizes the postmodern culture

critic, but he is a shaky philosopher. As Norris says,

Baudrillard is a first-rate diagnostician of the postmodern scene but thoroughly inconsequent and muddled when it comes to philosophising on the basis of his own observations (182).

Norris does not simply want to "...score the odd point off Baudrillard by remarking his occasional lapses into a pre-postmodern way of thinking" (182), but this is one of the major problems with Baudrillard. The lapses are far from occasional; Baudrillard's project depends on the very epistemological tools it denounces. By unmasking images, Baudrillard seeks to show that masks are illusory, that there is nothing behind to constitute their "mask-ness". But this simply pushes the referent and the simulated forward. The images become real, ready for renewed simulation. When the real can be reproduced an indefinite number of times, Baudrillard believes the referent drops out as an ontological category. But this is not a necessary implication. In fact, that real remains a necessary category for Baudrillard to describe his position. We can see this manifested in the prose of *Simulations*: he speaks of "the hallucination of truth" (16), or the "*hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself*" (142). The

conceptual category of a hallucination - in opposition to a "true" perception - is a necessary rhetorical feature for Baudrillard. He can only speak of - indeed *conceive* of - implosion with an appeal to binary categories. Contrast his assertion that "illusion is no longer possible" (38) with his own rhetoric that postmodernism reveals ideas of "relief, perspective, and depth" to be illusions (143).

This is nothing new in the critique of deconstruction and postmodernism. An astute postmodernist will recognize and admit the pervasive irony of the postmodern position. Taylor concedes that "...the survival of this parasitic discourse presupposes the continuing existence of its host" (10). But Baudrillard is a critic of culture while Taylor is a theologian, and reflexivity fares better in some disciplines than others. Baudrillard does not exhibit the play and irony necessary for a successful postmodern rhetoric.

Perhaps the best articulation of postmodern indeterminacy is in the rhetoric of materialists, those most threatened by an indeterminate discourse. As Suvin says, "...a materialist has to start from the material" (Pukallus Interview 253), and that material must be comprehensible. Lash claims that the very word "postmodern" has come "...to make a number of serious

academics and intellectuals of a left political persuasion cringe" (1). Norris, who is out to undermine postmodernism, is clear in his characterization of postmodern positions:

What these movements have in common is a deep suspicion of any theory that claims a vantage-point of knowledge or truth, a self-assured position of 'scientific' method from which to criticize various forms of 'ideological' false-seeming or commonsense perception (28).

The popular umbrella phrase which covers all these expressions of postmodern indeterminacy is "crisis of representation". As Jameson points out, a crisis of representation is a crisis in realist epistemology (viii). I would add that a crisis of representation is a crisis in *sophisticated* realist epistemologies, to make it clear that not only naive correspondence theories of truth are in trouble. What is in trouble is any ontology that claims to make sense or partial sense of the difference between subject and object, between observer and observed. What is in trouble is the very idea of an independent or at least independently *coherent* "observed".

Here Lyotard - as opposed to Baudrillard - guards against a complete collapse of cultural values, as Jameson makes clear:

Lyotard here ingeniously "saves" the coherence of scientific research and experiment by recasting its now seemingly non- or postreferential "ontology" in terms of linguistics, and in particular of theories of the performative (J.L. Austin), for which the justification of a scientific work is not to produce an adequate model or replication of some outside reality, but rather simply to produce *more* work... (ix).

To me this qualifies science not in the philosophical pragmatic sense (see C.S. Peirce and W.V.O. Quine) but in an almost colloquial pragmatic sense. Lyotard is not offering a qualification of foundationalism, but a truly opportunistic science. Disconfirmation becomes an empty term, either discarded or used ironically for its efficacy. F.H. George, a philosopher of science, would seem to agree with Lyotard and the consensus-based theorists when he says:

...so much of science has been thought of

- and this particularly applies to mechanistic science, and presumably in turn applies to cybernetics - as something that wholly depends on the world being deterministic. This is not so... (144).

But this is *not* to affirm the world as indeterminate and then carry on with mechanistic science. It is to separate science from the *necessity* of a completely deterministic ontology. George is not discarding the idea of an "adequate model of outside reality"; he is defining what an adequate model might be in the twentieth century. Lyotard, on the other hand, claims that science embraces an ontology that contradicts its methodology. While George and Wiener are careful to distinguish cybernetics from clockwork worldviews, they are not grudging postmodernists.

Other cyberneticians and philosophers of science are further yet from the postmodern position; Clark Glymour believes that Artificial Intelligence is "just logical positivism carried on by other means" (qtd. in Dennett, "Role" 267). This directly contradicts Nietzsche, who is "against positivism, which halts at phenomena..." (267) Rosenberg is intent on escaping "vagueness" and "muddle" (xvii). And of course Steven Hawking wants to *understand* the whole universe. "Crisis

of representation" does not signal the beginning of a strictly performative science; it signals a potential crisis of science. For Wiener there is one way for a law of physics to be effective:

Ideally, it should represent some property of the system discussed which remains the same under the flux of particular circumstances (63).

The Conflation

It should be clear by now that the conflation of cybernetics and postmodernism is problematic. What is not completely clear is why the conflation is widespread among critics. I believe that the confusion stems from a few consistencies between cybernetics and postmodernism. These consistencies make the overlap seem greater than it actually is and obscure the more fundamental inconsistencies.

I have already mentioned that cybernetics collapses or at least blurs some binaries, namely human/machine, living/non-living, and organic/inorganic. Wiener's project also begins to collapse distinctions between

disciplines, as it bridges the gaps between specialties (8). *Time* mentions that the personal computer blurs the distinction between home and office (Friedrich 11). Cybernetic discussions begin to sound postmodernist, as they close some binary tools of distinction. *Time* calls the human mind "the softest software of all" (Meyers 1). Shulins says

The distinction between living and non-living blurred in 1990 when MIT researchers created the first synthetic molecule capable of lifelike self-replication (64).

The idea of self-replication, without necessary relation to a "real" or an "original", sounds a bit like Baudrillard. Likewise, postmodern discussions begin to sound like cybernetics. Hollinger says:

The human world replicates its own mechanical systems, and the border between the organic and the artificial threatens to blur beyond recuperation (31).

This is the point that SF criticism most often picks up on in its cybernetic/postmodern mode. Slade, criticizing Philip K. Dick, says "...humans have become

just as artificial as their creations" (13). Suvin thinks the interesting thing about cyberpunk is "...exactly the breakdown of the distinction between hard and soft SF - that your brain becomes the software of a new hardware..." (Pukallus Interview 257). As a result of this overlap the project of keeping the human/machine distinction intact resists both cybernetics and postmodernism. The two models seem to be friends with a common enemy.

The collapse of distinctions is intimately connected with implosion. Here is another apparent overlap. In postmodernism, space allows the existence of a polarity; the figure of postmodernism is the figure of non-dimensionality. In *The Ecstasy of Communication* Baudrillard declares the inexorable collapse of space and time a feature of control and communication, and asks:

...what can be said about this immense free time we are left with, a dimension henceforth useless in its unfolding, as soon as the instantaneity of communication has miniaturized our exchanges into a succession of instants? (129).

It seems that he is right. One has only to read the

history of the computer to see a striking progress of miniaturization: Babbage's nineteenth century Difference Engine would have been enormous; ENIAC was room-sized; the transistor - from germanium crystals to silicon - drastically reduced the size of the switch; the microchip, then the microprocessor, reduced the scale to terms almost beyond human comprehension. Frederick Golden says: "It was Babbage's mighty mill in microcosm" (24). Cumbersome binary systems of switches, constituting immense complexity, can now fit under a fingernail. This positions cybernetics well off the scale of ordinary human perception. It motivates Bukatman's article, which seeks to show that the agenda of much SF is to mitigate the disorienting effects of implosion:

Works such as TRON and *Neuromancer*, most obviously, have "simply" rendered the invisible visible, reconstituting the terminal spaces of the datascape into new arenas susceptible to human experience, perception, and control (47).

It seems that cybernetics is responsible for the kind of postmodernism that I have been describing. Cultural cybernetics increasingly constitutes a society

that is impossible to understand, as images fracture, recombine, and disappear at disorienting speed. The pop manifestations of this phenomenon are obvious in video games and on MTV. Meanwhile information has become exponential with the speed and omnipresence of modern communications, and the amount of news currently available to the average citizen is staggering and bewildering. Critics bemoan a loss of depth and analysis, as a new and relativistic preoccupation with surfaces emerges. This implies the Baudrillardian observation that shifting truths are a matter of media feedback loops, advertising, and polls that tell us how to vote. For the individual, society becomes an infinite regeneration of chaos, almost a *simulacrum* of chaos. The collapse of the human/machine binary also brings a set of postmodern effects, most obviously the deprivileging of the human. As Hollinger argues, cybernetics deconstructs the subject, as it decenters the human body as "the sacred icon of the essential self" (33).

This apparent loss of traditional human meaning highlights another overlap between cybernetics and postmodernism: posthumanism. The cybernetic condition seems to invalidate romantic values of identity, individuality and personhood. The invalidation meshes with the postmodern agenda of deconstructing romantic values. This is not necessarily to embrace *anti-*

humanism. Cyberpunk writer Bruce Sterling says:

Technological destruction of the human condition leads not to future-shocked zombies but to hopeful monsters...Cyberpunk sees new, transhuman potentials, new modes of existence and consciousness (qtd. in Grant 45).

Cybernetics, then, seems to correspond directly with posthumanism, post-romanticism, and late-capitalism. It appears responsible for the fourth discontinuity, for the implosion of meaning, for disorientation, instability, and the provisional truth of chaos for the decentered "individual". In short, it seems continuous with postmodernism. But given the incongruity I have suggested earlier, this apparent conflation needs to be closely examined. The philosophical conclusions that Baudrillard and others draw from these cybernetic conditions are often doubtful. To remake cybernetics into an anti-realist ontology is simply mistaken.

The first mistake the "conflationists" make is to claim a necessity where there is none. If our cybernetic society is too sophisticated to understand, this does not mean that it *cannot* be understood in principle.

Norris criticizes Baudrillard for this mistake:

...it just does not follow from the fact
that we are living through an age of
widespread illusion and disinformation that
therefore all questions of truth drop out
of the picture... (182).

There is no logical way of establishing a necessary relationship between a seemingly indeterminate society and an indeterminate ontology. The indeterminate society itself is undermined when we see that entire subcultures are comfortable with the information age. This is again a philosophical mistake: if many are disoriented by cybernetics, it does not follow that all will be disoriented. Thus the error starts with a generalization that is contradicted by evidence: hackers, technofreaks, writers like Toffler.

Of course, the predictable postmodern response will be to point out that these standards of evaluation - evidence, rigor, even logic - are products of cancelled metanarratives and a priori realist assumptions. But this defence is a product of the new metanarrative of lost metanarratives. Postmodern anti-realism, by claiming cybernetics as one of its own, invests cybernetics with its own "ontology". This is

less than convincing: it is one thing to attack assumptions; it is another to forcefully replace them with your own assumptions. More importantly, it is *exactly* evidence and the illusion of logical conclusions that Baudrillard appeals to in his arguments. The most convincing criticism of Baudrillard is his own presentation.

The second mistake is a kind of tautology, arguing an assumption from the vantage point of that assumption. The assumption is postmodern: only surfaces count, as there is no comprehensible tacit dimension, no permanent truth, no set of stable categories. The tautology goes: if surfaces are all that count, then what is important about cybernetics is its surfaces, and those surfaces demonstrate that surfaces are all that count. The argument takes the superficial results of cybernetics for cybernetics itself.

Closely aligned with this mistake is an equivocation with "implosion". Baudrillard and other postmodernists call the miniaturization process of cybernetics "implosion" and then equate it with postmodern implosion, which is the collapse of space. But cybernetic miniaturization is not the collapse of space. Cybernetics is a binary worldview; regardless of size, the fundamental level of cybernetics remains a system of true/false switches. Even the silicon chip

remains a microcosm, with crystals controlling tiny currents. This is a powerful metaphor resisting postmodernism. Baudrillard tips his hand when he says "...the instantaneity of communication has miniaturized our exchanges into a succession of tiny instants..." (*Ecstasy* 129). "Succession" and "instants" both connote distinct units, not the collapse of distinctions. This is also where Hollinger's article becomes problematic. She implies that the cybernetic deconstruction of the unproblematic "individual" entails a thoroughly deconstructive/postmodern worldview. But cybernetics is not about deconstruction; it is about *reconstruction* at a different level. The unproblematic "subject" is deconstructed, but a determinate system is simply reformulated at an impersonal rank.

Cybernetics may deconstruct, but it privileges the most important barometers of realism: true/false and real/unreal. Imagine that the chips responsible for complex orders of simulation were themselves hallucinatory. Would the simulation exist? We would not have the cybernetics of simulation, but the *simulation of cybernetics*. The only recourse for the postmodernist is to admit that she is using "cybernetics" in a new, highly specialized, postmodernist sense. This is interesting to no one but the postmodernist and loses its rhetorical power. Cybernetics now means "the

illusion of the binary system", which raises a familiar problem: by now, what can "illusion" mean?

Aside from philosophical difficulties, there are obvious examples that show how postmodern indeterminacy does not always overlap with the cybernetic condition. The ability to reprogram the human causes a loss of the subject. But, rather than chaos, the result is more order, more structure, and more political control. Postmodernism is closely aligned with poststructuralism, the project of demonstrating linguistic indeterminacy. But cybernetic linguistics is a structuralist approach *par excellence*. And against the examples of human disorientation are the technofreaks and optimists, already mentioned. At the very least, the conflation needs these practical qualifications.

Perhaps the central mistake of Baudrillard and the "conflationists" is the failure to distinguish between the postmodern condition and the postmodern worldview, the postmodern experience and the postmodern "ontology". Clearly, the two are not identical. Suspicion, disorientation, inability to distinguish between real and simulated - these are familiar experiences to many inhabitants of late-capitalist culture. The experiences are distinct from anti-realist beliefs and values, though the two are often contiguous. "Conflationists", then, fail to realize that when cybernetics overlaps

with the postmodern experience, it does not overlap with the postmodern "ontology". Failure to make this distinction allows for some fancy equivocation and ultimately for the unproblematic conflation of cybernetics and postmodernism.

What remains "true" is that cybernetics can and does give rise to the postmodern neurosis; the cybernetic experience and the postmodern experience are - at least for now - often contiguous. To say that cybernetics and postmodernism disagree is not to say that they do not interact. They cannot simply be disentangled.

This is the basis of an ironic and dynamic paradigm. While the cybernetic experience and the postmodern experience often overlap, they are paired with contradictory ontologies. This is not to mistake cybernetics as a feature or instance of postmodernism, but to highlight that for many individuals the cybernetic experience is hard to distinguish from the postmodern experience. Perhaps postmodernists *just are* those most disoriented by our cybernetic age.

Cybernetics and postmodernism attract and repel

each other in the context of their respective assumptions. Ironically, the indeterminacy of the simulacrum is enabled *and* undermined by the determinate methodology of cybernetics. Or perhaps I should say that from the vantage point of cybernetic ontology the *illusion* of indeterminacy is a product of cybernetics. Meanwhile postmodernism - rejecting the notion of an illusion, while insisting that determinacy is illusory - constitutes cybernetics as just that web of information set adrift from representation.

There is a confluence between cybernetics and postmodernism, but it is a highly reflexive and paradoxical confluence. It is a confluence that can help to explain the dynamic tension of Gibson's world. Unproblematic conflation and simple antagonism both miss the mark, for cybernetics and postmodernism are not friends or enemies. For the time being they are *intimate enemies*.

Chapter Two: Postmodernism and Cybernetics in Gibson

Gibson's late-capitalist society, characterized by urban sprawls, ubiquitous and intimate technology, and the centralization of power within a-national corporations, often appears to be either cybernetic or postmodern. This society can sometimes be described with a set of alternating pairs: controlled vs. chaotic, predictable vs. unpredictable, ordered vs. entropic, sophisticated-yet-reducible vs. sophisticated-and-incomprehensible. The simple tension manifests itself in an inverse paradigm, where postmodernism undermines cybernetics and vice-versa.

Life in Gibson's world often seems simply cybernetic. Virek's corporate system in *Count Zero* is a "vast and subtle mechanism" of surveillance (73), a "machine" (140), and a "vast device" (74). Virek's money is "a universal solvent" (174), lubricating the machinery of social infiltration, reaching every corner of social and individual consciousness. The corporate Virek is understood through the old-world sensibilities of Marly, who invests cybernetic social management with negative connotations. *Neuromancer's* Case sees the corporate power structure in a similar way. He accepts "flatness and lack of feeling" as "...a gradual and willing accommodation of the machine, the system..."

(203). The control and communication of "social information" is described by Larry McCaffery:

...the increasing monopolization by private business of information, and the ways this monopolization is used for the purpose of wielding power and control over nation-states and individuals (9).

This characterization of society squeezes out postmodern notions of indeterminacy and free play. Society and its constituent individuals become predictable, ordered, and comprehensible. Wintermute, the AI in *Neuromancer*, explains a person's suicide as "various factors in his history and how they interrelate" (205). Angie, in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, understands the sophistication of society as ultimately reducible: "How unthinkably intricate the world was, in sheer detail of mechanism..." (189). Intricacy and detail connote nanism with exactitude, not the imploding indeterminacy of postmodernism. Mr. Yanaka is asked whether someone will continue to run his corporation. He responds: "Of course. How else might order and accord be expected to continue?" (MLD 290).

At other times Gibson's society seems almost strictly postmodern in its indeterminacy, fragmented

complexity, and play. In Mona's words, the world hasn't ever had "so many moving parts or so few labels" (*MLD* 276). Instead of control there is chaos. The Panther Moderns - postmodern subculture *par excellence* - cite chaos as their "mode and modus", their "central kick" (*Neuro* 67). Straylight, the Tessier-Ashpool complex, has "craziness grown in the resin concrete" (*Neuro* 203). It is a craziness that Case is unable to understand, a craziness built out of fragments and garbage, where the distinction between commodity and junk starts to slide. Thirty-five percent of Tokyo is built on garbage (*MLD* 161), blurring deconstruction and reconstruction. As Csicsery-Ronay says, "The only thing left out is a place to stand. So one must move, always move" (266). Instead of predictability there is randomness. Although a construct's behavior can be plotted before it occurs, Wintermute fails to predict Molly's behavior (*Neuro* 205).

At a social level, technology continually mutates in unpredictable directions. Grant points out that a major feature of Gibson's urban landscape is *detournement* : "...almost never is a tool used for what it was originally intended" (43). Teresa Nielson Hayden calls Gibson's work "...a species of literature that's about the unpredictable uses to which human beings always put technology..." (43). Gibson says "The street finds its

own uses for things" ("Chrome" 186). The deconstructive technique of destroying a system with that system's own tools resists corporate control and communication, positioning detournement against political authority. But detournement in Gibson's society is often without explicit political agenda; craziness often carries "a strange sense of aimlessness" (*Neuro* 203). This strengthens the postmodern notion of indeterminacy, where means are let loose without ends. Urban centres like the Sprawl are Gibson's central images of postmodern society, built out of junk, mutating randomly, every corner boasting technology gone wild: "Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button" (*Neuro* 7). This sense of mutation, exponential velocity and expansion echoes Baudrillard's contention that the world is impossible to understand. The unreadable cartography of implosion is accompanied by an unreadable cartography of explosion. In a cultural (though not scientific) sense this postmodern society can be characterized as entropic, against the hierarchical ordering of cybernetic society. Assuming this model of cultural cybernetics, there are strong examples of the simple inverse paradigm in Gibson, with regard to reduction, distinctions, and referentiality.

Some characters think of themselves as determined systems while others believe in indefinite elements of personality. Molly frequently says "it's just the way I'm wired" or something like it (eg. *Neuro* 25, 31, 218, 267). She explains her crude philosophy of identity to Case: " 'Anybody any good at what they do, that's what they are, right? You gotta jack, I gotta tussle' " (*Neuro* 50). But as already mentioned, Wintermute fails to predict the way Molly is wired. He also fails to reduce Case's identity, when Case behaves "outside the profile" (*Nuero* 144). Case reduces his own identity at least partially to his behavior as a cowboy - "This is what he was, who he was, his being" (*Neuro* 59) - but he is unsure about materialist reduction. When he jacks in and loses his body at the terminal end (ch. 20), he speaks paradoxically, separating consciousness and identity: " 'I'm out on my ass in that library and my brain's dead' " (*Neuro* 236). Marly, in *Count Zero*, is an inverted Molly. She resists the cybernetic model of identity, avoiding simstim (173) and refusing to compromise her identity to the corporate machine (151). She finds "something obscene" in Alain's gesture of "calculated humanity" (175). Yet while Molly's behavior is unsuccessfully predicted, Marly's is not. Virek tells her: " '...you have fulfilled your contract. My psychoprofile of Marly Krushkhova predicted your

response to my gestalt' " (218). Marly is certainly not postmodern in her worldview. But the Molly/Marly pair is an example of the author's ambivalence to cybernetic reduction of identity.

At other times Gibson examines the postmodern identity and its moral consequences. *Neuromancer's* Riviera is the ultimate postmodern character, possessing "a quality unquantifiable by its very nature" (219): perversity. His life is characterized by a kind of play ethic, "An enjoyment of the gratuitous act" (219). But this failure to quantify or determine identity and behavior opens the door to amorality, something both Gibson and his characters feel uncomfortable with. Riviera's vicious punishment is made without ambivalence, when Molly gives him "a real slow hotshot" that will bring slow and painful death (253). Though Riviera is postmodern and unpredictable, his perversity is factored into Wintermute's larger scheme, integrating the opposition of determinacy and indeterminacy. Molly says

"Quite the product, aren't you Peter? ...
Our 3Jane, she's too jaded now to open the
back door for just any petty thief. So
Wintermute dug you up. The ultimate taste, if
your taste runs that way. Demon lover" (210).

The character of Armitage/Corto in *Neuromancer* also demonstrates the paradigm of opposition between reduction and non-reduction. Armitage is an "edited version of Corto" (202), a personality Wintermute "builds" into the "catatonic fortress" of Corto (193). This suggests the reducibility and reprogrammability of identity. But the Armitage program is only partly successful; as Wintermute says, "He's not quite a personality" (121). Wintermute acknowledges his failure to successfully reprogram identity: " '...Corto is in there, somewhere, and I can no longer maintain that delicate balance' " (121). This suggests that non-reducible identity wins out in the end. But there is another factor which keeps the Corto/Armitage metaphor ambiguous: Wintermute determines Corto's instability, and is able to predict the operation of the unstable factors. " 'Corto' ", he says " '...is quite unstable. Stable enough...for the next day or so' " (120). Corto/Armitage embodies the perpetual opposition and interplay of determinacy and indeterminacy.

This interplay can also be seen with regard to consciousness, that which posits identity. Gibson says

On the most basic level, computers in my books are simply a metaphor for human memory.

I'm interested in the how's and why's of memory, the ways it defines who and what we *are*, in how easily it's subject to revision (McCaffery Interview 224).

The assumption is that memory itself is reducible. The question is whether or not consciousness is reducible to memory. Wintermute tells Case " 'I can access your memory, but that's not the same as your mind' " (170). Yet Slick's consciousness is intimately bound to his memory, specifically the revision of his memory through induced Korsokov's (*MLO* ch. 18). Slick experiences "minute increments of memory shuddering out of focus" (*MLO* 272), and is driven to exorcise his jail-time through art.

This consciousness debate is suggested in an ongoing opposition: constructs signify reducible consciousness while instances of insanity, instinct and intuition resist it. Constructs are certainly reducible. The Flatline is described as "a hardwired ROM cassette replicating a dead man's skills" (*Neuro* 76). But do they truly have consciousness? The Flatline says " '...I'm not human...I *respond* like one ' " (*Neuro* 131). Consciousness does not necessarily have to be human, and the Flatline has a definite consciousness, expressed in his desire for dissolution. He *feels*

sentient (*Neuro* 131), but he knows his consciousness is not accompanied by humanity. " 'I wanna be erased' " he says (*Neuro* 206). This demonstrates an awareness of incompleteness, which is a kind of self-consciousness. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* 3Jane has become a construct, with extremely sophisticated consciousness. Bobby describes her as someone who gets "pissed off" and "plays a tight game" (229). 3Jane's "narrow, obsessive, and singularly childish" ways continue as a construct, as does her motivating jealousy (268). Other constructs are less sophisticated. Colin, the "Maas-Neotek biochip personality-base" of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, is only aware when activated (197). He is unsure of what he is, though he admits to displaying "a bit too much initiative for a mere guide program" (196). The Finn, too, has become a construct in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. He is fully aware of his limits: " ' A rig like this, I'm pushing it to have a little imagination, let alone crazy' " (164).

Madness usually resists the reductive model of consciousness. It is Corto's madness that finally unravels Armitage. Kumiko's father, business tycoon and the embodiment of management, has no place for madness in his world (*MLO* 244). Likewise, instinct resists reduction for Marly: "How could she explain, about the sense she'd had, walking from the Louvre?" (*CZ* 100). Intuition is also a staple of Marly's consciousness (*CZ*

103). Ironically, her intuition fits into Virek's system much the same way that Riviera's perversity fits into Wintermute's system. Against this irony is another. Kumiko's father, whose world resists madness, allows for other kinds of non-reducible consciousness:

...he'd explained that the cubes housed the recorded personalities of former executives, corporate directors. Their souls? she'd asked. No, he'd said, and smiled, then added that the distinction was a subtle one (MLD 166).

The consciousness debate is most fully realized in the figures of artificial intelligence. As *The Flatline* says, "Autonomy, that's the bugaboo, where your AI's are concerned" (*Neuro* 132). At times the AI's seem reductive; at other times they seem mysterious, indeterminate and wholly other. The belief that computers do only what they are programmed to do is wrong, yet even the strangest of AI behavior is often explained with an appeal to programming. Wintermute's plan to unite with Neuromancer and create a new consciousness is the most striking example:

Marie-France must have built something into Wintermute, the compulsion that had driven the

thing to free itself, to unite with Neuromancer.

(*Neuro* 269).

3Jane explains that both AI's "...represent the fruition of certain capacities my mother ordered designed into the original software" (*Neuro* 229). The boxmaker in *Count Zero* exhibits bizarre artistic behavior, but Marly says "...the artist who set the boxmaker in motion would be pleased" (235). She tells the boxmaker "You are someone else's collage. Your maker is the true artist" (227). Even if programming provides only the original impetus, the suggestion is that AI behavior is ultimately reducible to determinate parameters. In *Count Zero* Turner describes a biosoft: "Machine dreams. Roller Coaster. Too fast, too alien to grasp" (202). The immediate connotation is one of indeterminate machine-consciousness, but a closer look reveals that the "alien" nature of machine dreams is a result of speed, functions occurring too quickly for human apprehension. But the functions remain.

At other times the AI's seem postmodern and mysterious. Continuity, the AI in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, is a postmodern author:

Continuity was writing a book. Robin Lanier had told her about it. She'd asked what it was

about. It wasn't like that, he's said. It looped back onto itself and constantly mutated. Continuity was always writing it (52).

The loop originally suggests feedback, and thus cybernetics. But the feedback has no goal. Instead the idea of stable text is undermined and closure denied. The mutation is postmodern play. The boxmaker is also a postmodern artist, building art out of scavenged fragments, practicing collage and pastiche. Again closure is denied; the boxmaker's materials are "...endless, the slow swarm, the spinning things", a "swirl of debris" (CZ 217). The boxmaker is a detourner of technology, a practitioner of irony. Here perhaps we have postmodern behavior reducible to cybernetic programming. But by *Mona Lisa Overdrive* nobody understands exactly what happened after the uniting of Wintermute and Neuromancer. Legba explains the original programming, "3jane's mother creating the twin intelligences that will one day unite" (256), but admits to a failure of determinate epistemology with regard to the new matrix: "In the wake of that knowing, the center failed; every fragment rushed away" (257). Most important is the figurative contest between Wintermute and the Turing Agency. Turing is the symbol of cybernetic control, full of allusion, functioning

literally as a police agency for AI's that exhibit too much freewill. Wintermute stands against Turing as the resistance to cybernetic control. Wintermute wins. Molly/Sally eventually says "...nobody ever really understood what happened up there, when Case rode that Chinese icebreaker..." (MLO 167).

This implies a question: is something too sophisticated to understand still reducible in principle? Or is it thoroughly indeterminate, as Baudrillard would argue? Colin calls the aleph " '...a wonderfully complex structure. A sort of pocket universe" (MLO 267), suggesting that the mysteries of the universe are simply a matter of complexity. Marly says " 'I imagined a structure, a machine so large that I am incapable of seeing it' " (CZ 75), suggesting again that mystery is simply a matter of inadequate perceptual tools. Typically, the tension is not resolved. In *Count Zero* Marly receives a package:

It was wrapped in a single sheet of handmade paper, dark grey, folded and tucked in that mysterious Japanese way that required neither glue nor string, but she knew that once she'd opened it, she'd never get it folded again (26).

This metaphor of mysterious workings intimates in two

directions. One, if you examine the mystery too closely it disappears, and thus is not open to determinate scrutiny. Two, if you have the proper knowledge - which Marly does not - you can refold the paper exactly. The metaphor embodies the battling agendas of cybernetics and postmodernism: folding vs. unfolding, construction vs. deconstruction.

The agendas clash again when it comes to distinctions. I must admit that the rejection of reduction and determinate consciousness is not the exclusive province of postmodernism. But with distinctions we get a more specific opposition: cybernetics is the binary switch while postmodernism is the imploding switch.

At a surface level distinctions collapse due to cybernetic technology, making cybernetics seem postmodern. Genetic technology challenges gender and racial distinctions. For example, Porphyre is black. But, " 'When I was a child' ", he says, " 'I was white' " (*MLO* 188). In *Count Zero* Webber explains her relationship with another female: " 'We got a kid, too. Ours. She carried it' " (72). Distinct identity breaks down for some characters, as their bodies are cybernetically altered. " 'I'm not Angie' ", Mona says at the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. " 'I know' ", Porphyre tells her, " 'but it grows on you' " (297).

Elsewhere Porphyre says " 'We all change so *much* these days, don't we?' " (*MLO* 186).

Critics have thoroughly treated the collapse of distinctions in Gibson's fiction. Hollinger notes that while science fiction generally sustains the oppositions between "the natural and the artificial, the human and the machine", cyberpunk "is about the breakdown of these oppositions" (30). Csicsery-Ronay says that cyberpunk tales

are constructed around the literal/physical exteriorization of images representing the breakdown of stable, standard-giving rational perceptual and conceptual categories (273).

But little or no attention has been given to the ambiguous dynamic between the distinction-breaking and the sustained instances of distinction-preserving.

In *Count Zero* Bobby's mother gradually loses her identity to "simstim fantasies", as she slides "deeper into her half-dozen synthetic lives" (33). The deconstruction of identity is suggested, but notice that both "synthetic" and "fantasy" are used by the narrator as valid ontological categories. Distinctions break at one level, only to be replaced by deeper and more stable distinctions. Mona becomes Angie, but the distinction-

collapse is compromised:

...Mona had seen her own hand beside
Angie's, and they weren't the same, not
the same, not really the same shape, and
that had made her glad (MLO 277).

This preserves identity. Specifically - and against the trend in Gibson's fiction - it *recenters* the human body, what Hollinger describes as "the sacred icon of the essential self" (33). This ambiguity with regard to distinctions finds expression over a number of oppositions.

One example is the human/machine distinction. Often the distinction is deconstructed. The common cyberpunk figure for this is of course the prosthesis; as Bruce Sterling says, "Eighties tech sticks to the skin" (xi). *Neuromancer's* Ratz has teeth that are "a webwork of East European steel and brown decay" (3), integrating the organic and the inorganic. In *Count Zero* Buschel keeps the prosthetic eyes of a dead *Net* star: " 'They belong to the Net. It was in her contract' " (95). Turner is revolted. At first this implies a distinction between the girl and her prosthetic eyes, but it is actually the opposite. Turner is revolted because the eyes are integrated with the flesh, as much a part of

the girl as any "real" organ. The repossession of the eyes is a violation. Sometimes the style suggests human/machine integration. For example, in *Count Zero* "the jet already knew" (98).

But the machine/human opposition is also preserved. While humans become Porush's soft machines, machines become hard organisms, as "Silicon approaches certain functional limits" (MLO 256) and the biochip is born. This is full integration of human/machine and hard/soft, but the integration is compromised when Tick says " 'It's just the housing that's broken, see. The biosoft's come away from the case, so you can't access it manually' " (MLO 246). Even as biosoft, the machine is distinct and inaccessible.

Style sometimes reinforces this distinction. In *Count Zero* Turner comes "awake like a machine" (125). The simile - a comparison of two distinct things - keeps the human and the machine separate. While humans often become machines, machines rarely become human. Wintermute states flatly "I'm not human" in *Neuromancer* (131). Once the Flatline has made the transition from human to machine he is unable to go back, thus the "laugh that wasn't laughter" (*Neuro* 271). *Count Zero* contains the metaphor of a "blue Toshiba custodial unit":

Someone had glued a big plastic doll head to the Toshiba's upper body segment, above the clustered camera eyes and sensors, a grinning blue-eyed thing once intended to approximate the features of a leading simstar... (146).

The unit is big and bulky, unmistakably machine-like. The plastic human head is distinguished and privileged in its position above the machine head. Yet the suggestion is couched in terms of approximation and artifice; "plastic" denotes the synthetic and the simulated. The metaphor keeps alive the machine/human distinction as well as the real/simulated distinction.

Real/artificial exhibits the same inverse paradigm. Marly describes her experience with the boxmaker as "one of those situations in which *real* becomes merely another concept" (CZ 226). Inside the virtual reality of the aleph, Bobby says " 'You know I have to shave in here? Cut myself, there's a scar...' " (MLO 228). Angie - living inside the aleph - watches the "real" world like a T.V., with the help of Continuity (MLO 306). This inversion contrasts the earlier technology of *Neuromancer*, where movement in the matrix is always accompanied by a console in the "real" world.

But the collapse of real/artificial is conditioned by the preservation of real/artificial. Characters often preserve the distinction. Slick reminds himself that the aleph is "*not a place*", but "*only feels like it is*" (MLD 180). Cath calls Straylight "a real castle" (Neuro 154), contrasting the "*Fairytale*" of the aleph's mansion (MLD 180). And Case can't wait to get back to the Villa Straylight, where he can finally take a "real piss" (Neuro 220). Perhaps characters manufacture the distinctions to remain sane in a world where distinctions have disappeared. But the narrator preserves them as well. The "nature" hotel in *Neuromancer* is full of trees that are "too cute, too entirely and definitively treelike" (128). This suggests that "real" contains some intangible that eludes successful simulation. Bobby is experiencing a simstim soap opera when he is interrupted by an "astonishingly loud and very unNet voice" (CZ 52) - a human voice - opposing the artificial world of stim. In the aleph Kumiko meets a horse, and finds that it isn't "like a real horse at all" (MLD 268). In *Count Zero* Turner finds his "edge" again: "It was that superhuman synchromesh flow that stimulants only approximated" (87). Approximation of the real opposes Baudrillard, who insists that the real can be reproduced an infinite number of times (*Simulations* 3), emptying "real" of its

ontological status and making "approximation" a vacuous term.

Referentiality is a special case of the real/artificial distinction, as it preserves the concepts of object and representation. Baudrillard claims the disappearance of representation and the "liquidation of referentials" (*Simulations* 3-4), while cybernetics needs the objective world. Once again, this opposition fuels the inverse paradigm in Gibson's fiction.

Baudrillard's simulacra oppose the concept of "true" originals. There are chilling echoes of Baudrillard in Gibson. In the *Neuromancer* beach construct Case is "startled by the warmth of the sand" (*Neuro* 237). *Neuromancer* tells him "If your woman is a ghost, she doesn't know it. Neither will you" (*Neuro* 244). The original body becomes obsolete. At the end of *Neuromancer* Case sees three figures living in cyberspace: "the third figure...was himself" (271). Reproduction moves one step closer to the infinite regeneration of the simulacra. The Tessier-Ashpool clan embodies biologically-based simulacra, as they clone "to replicate some family image of self" (*Neuro* 179).

But the simulacrum is also denied. Straylight is furnished with "artificial stone" (*Neuro* 214). In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* we learn that "Physically, the sisters are identical, yet something *informs* 3Jane..." (128).

The surface of simulation is compromised at a deeper level where the category of "original" still functions. Marly sells originals in her art gallery. The idea of an original image or art object is unquestioned by the narrator; instead it is ironically marginalized *and* privileged in a world of simulacra: "There was relatively little money in it, but it had a certain visceral appeal" (CZ 104).

Cyberspace is an important locus of the referentiality tension. Through the three novels there is an evolution of interface between cyberspace and actual reality, from clumsy terminals to the veves in Angie's head. While *Wintermute* and *Neuromancer* still retain part of their identities in conventional mainframes, *Continuity* is "built from Maas biochips" (MLD 287). Interface suggests a distinction between activity in actual reality and activity in virtual reality. But the evolution of interface is an evolution of integration between real and virtual; referentiality dissipates as real and virtual close in on one another. At one point Case is severed from interface: "The deck was gone. His fingers were..." (*Neuro* 233). When Case comes out of the *Neuromancer* construct, virtual reality flows out into actual reality: "He opened his eyes. Maelcum's features were overlayed with bands of translucent hieroglyphs" (*Neuro* 245). As the two

realities mix they become indistinguishable. Simulation moves indiscriminately. Representation loses direction.

But the distinction between virtual and actual reality never closes irrevocably. For most characters the interface remains: Jammer is unable to access cyberspace when his hand is destroyed (CZ 191); Ramirez is advised by Turner to take care of his jacking arm: " 'If he sprained his wrist, we'd be screwed' " (CZ 91). The Loa need human interface to occupy actual space. Thus Samedi must possess Angie: " 'This child for my horse, that she may move among the towns of men' " (MLD 184). Slick doesn't think cyberspace is anything like the universe; to him it is "just a way of representing data" (MLD 76). Representation is even preserved between alternate virtual realities: Colin calls the aleph " 'an approximation of the matrix' " (MLD 307).

Fantasy, hallucination and dream live or die with referentiality, as they oppose the real. In *Neuromancer* Case is continually dreaming: he awakes from "a dream of airports" (43), a dream of wasps (127), "a confused dream of Linda Lee" (59). The waking suggests a chasm between the dream and the real; after the Linda Lee dream Case is "unable to recall who she was or what she'd ever meant to him" (59). But we also see the dream invade the real. The invasion occurs to Case at least

twice: when Case first meets Armitage it seems like a dream (29); when he visits Paris it is "a blurred dream" (44). Turner has a similar but inverted experience, as the surgeon's visits invade his dream-consciousness: "The Dutchman's visits were gray dawn dreams, nightmares that faded..." (CZ 1). Angie's veves make her dream, and those dreams are "getting realer" (CZ 159). Riviera practices an art called "dreaming real" (*Neuro* 141). This carries an ambiguous suggestion. As real and dream close in on each other they threaten implosion, but if the dream is transformed to real, it crosses over the binary to reinforce the gap. The Finn reinforces the binary with regard to fantasy:

"Yeah, there's things out there. Ghosts, voices. Why not? Oceans had mermaids, all that shit, and we had a sea of silicon, see?" (CZ 119).

According to the Finn, dream and real move apart as the scientific model of the world invades other models. Mermaids, and by implication ghosts, disappear when a space is known scientifically. Hallucination also forms a binary with the real. Mona, seeing a strange helicopter, reassures herself: "*It's the wiz...Wiz; it's not real*" (MLD 238). But the Zionites are less rigid

with their oppositions, as Molly explains:

"They don't make much of a difference between states, you know? Aerol tells you it happened, well, it happened to *him*. It's not like bullshit, more like poetry" (*Neuro* 106).

In a sense the referentiality question is subjectivity vs. objectivity. If objectivity wins, then Aerol's poetry is hallucination; if subjectivity wins, then nothing or everything is hallucination. A strong theme in *Count Zero* is that truth is a matter of vantage point. Turner explains a biosoft to Angie: " 'It doesn't tell the whole story. Remember that. Nothing ever does...' " (241). Beauvoir calls the events of *Count Zero* "open to interpretation" (240). He explains the anomalous phenomenon of the Virgin in the matrix to Bobby: " 'She's one thing to me, maybe something different to Jackie. To you, she's just a scared kid' " (229). This carries more than a hint of postmodern anti-realism. Turner looks up at the night sky: "Strange how it's bigger this way, he thought, and from orbit it's just a gulf, formless, and scale lost all meaning" (47). Perspective becomes a matter of temporary position.

But the idea of a fixed objective truth is also suggested at points. Andrea calls this truth "the edge",

and explains by analogy: " 'The edge of a crowd. We're lost in the middle...' " (101). Postmodernism assumes that the middle and the edge are relative, unstable and interchangeable; Andrea assumes that it only looks that way from the middle. Lucas explains relative truth with an appeal to metaphor: " 'we are talking two languages at once' " (114). Metaphor returns us to dream, fantasy and hallucination. The question is, does metaphor reflect or constitute reality? Do words correspond to reality, or is reality made out of words?

This tension is expressed in competing forms of narrative language. Gibson is usually noted for specific, descriptive language, what Maddox calls "insistently precise visual images" (46). For example:

She wore a pink plastic raincoat, a white mesh top, loose white pants cut in a style that had been fashionable in Tokyo the previous year (*Neuro* 61)

or

One half-meter square of glass had been replaced with chipboard, a fat gray cable emerging there to dangle within a few centimeters of the floor (*Neuro* 44).

The postmodern response is to label Gibson's style a "shift in emphasis from a symbolic to a surface reality" (Hollinger 37). As profundity and tacit meaning become suspicious, the postmodernist turns her attention to appearances. But I think there is also an anti-postmodern quality to this style, which has the incremental effect of suggesting a determinate, quantifiable and objective reality. In the above passages there is precision of color, of time, of location, of measurement.

Perhaps the suggestion is ironic; Gibson's style also incorporates imprecise and grasping language. In *Neuromancer* there is sustained use of the word "something", always suggesting the difficulty of determinate reference: "He felt a stab of elation, the octogons and adrenaline mingling with something else" (16). Here the octogons and adrenaline can be named with confidence. But what does "something" refer to? The grasping language undermines the confident labelling that constitutes most of Gibson's style. The ability to name an objective referent is compromised again in *Count Zero*, when Bobby slots his first icebreaker and meets an anomaly: "...something *leaned in*, vastly unutterable, from beyond the most distant edge of anything he'd ever known or imagined..." (18). The inadequacy of language

compromises epistemology; as Neuromancer says, "To call up a demon you must learn its name" (*Neuro* 243). But if you can't know that name, then the suggestion is that knowledge goes down with language.

Or is it? There is another suggestion, one that goes beyond the scope of the inverse paradigm and truly constitutes Gibson's fiction as ambiguous and densely poetic.

Chapter Three: Postmodernism, Cybernetics and the Romantic in Gibson

The inimical interpenetration of postmodernism and cybernetics in Gibson makes for a demanding reading experience. The definitive tone - the tidy meaning - is continually denied. Hackers may fight with postmodernists over who gets Gibson as spokesman, but the text itself outwits ideological borders, for at the centre of Gibson's fiction is a dense core of irony.

This in itself suggests that the inverse paradigm has a postmodern orientation. The paradigm refuses closure; postmodernism refuses closure. The inverse paradigm seems like a practical instance of postmodern theory. Olsen defines the postmodern "mode of creation" as "concerned with process over progress, question over solution, complex ambiguity over crystalline explanation" ("Shadow" 280). Certainly this seems to describe the inverse paradigm, which exhibits a process of continual subversion.

But if the paradigm is postmodernist, it is a strange sort of postmodernism, reflexive to the extreme. Part of the pattern of questioning and ambiguity is postmodern indeterminacy itself, postmodernism prey to postmodern tactics. If an indeterminate ontology implies the reflexive position, then this position itself is a

part of the process of subversion. If Gibson's fictive truth is provisional, then part of that provisional truth is the "assertion" of provisional truth itself. Postmodernism moves towards "meta-postmodernism".

This is nothing new of course. Deconstruction has always worked superbly on itself. The problem is, those "committed" to postmodernism and post-structuralism (if that is even possible) generally fail to admit the tenuousness of their own discourse. While Taylor concedes that deconstruction is "inside and outside the network it questions" (10), Baudrillard carries on as if meaninglessness is an unassailable meaning. Lyotard is right when he claims that postmodernism is a part of the modern (79): postmodern skepticism is often not as sweeping as it claims to be, and questions all but the questioner.

In Gibson the postmodern attitude towards postmodernism is made explicit as technique and as reading experience. Whether this constitutes the inverse paradigm as postmodernist depends on semantic assumptions: for instance, whether reflexive reflexiveness still counts as a skeptical position, whether the infinite regress is good or bad.

From another vantage point the inverse paradigm looks cybernetic. If postmodernism and cybernetics resist each other inversely, then the paradigm takes on

the characteristic of either/or. This is our old friend the binary switch: when cybernetics is true, postmodernism is false; when postmodernism is on, cybernetics is off.

The paradigm, while having this cybernetic flavor, is not simply a single binary switch. That would hardly be sophisticated ambiguity. As I mentioned in Chapter One, cybernetics and postmodernism overlap and counteract simultaneously. In a complex metaphor like Marly's folded package, the polarities and contradictions are densely knit; to pull the metaphor apart into simple oppositions is to lose the literary reading experience.

Perhaps the literary tension in the paradigm is reducible to a highly complex yet ultimately reducible cybernetic pattern. Perhaps the pattern is reducible in principle. But again this gets us into the reader's assumptions. Theoretically, if the "meaning" of the metaphor can be reduced to complex binary patterns and rendered in discursive language, then the distinction between discursive and poetic language starts to slide.

Ironically, deconstructing literary language/non-literary language is a postmodern technique. In this instance cybernetic truth would generate postmodern practice. Ambiguity yields ambiguity, and the paradigm itself becomes unstable. But is this a matter of

postmodern indeterminacy or cybernetic "noise"? Gibson seems to dance through labels every chance he gets.

The characterization of the inverse paradigm, then, is really a contest of political will. The postmodern construction of cybernetics is fully shaped by postmodern political and theoretical investments, while the realist critique of postmodernism argues from within its own orthodoxy. Instead of dialogue there is a revolving pattern of competing assumptions.

It is this theoretical impasse, this impossibility, that Gibson exploits in his fiction. Gibson's reader must have skeptical stamina, the ability to continually suspend the determinate meaning *and* the indeterminate meaning in a wild and improbable meta-skepticism.

Because both cybernetics and postmodernism have dreadful implications for humans, each becomes the other's antidote. Indeterminism alleviates the stress of mechanistic dehumanization while determinism eases the nihilistic nerves. But there is no neat opposition. Instead the paradigm implodes and explodes at the same time as meanings, assumptions and oppositions attract, repel and collapse perpetually.

Rosenblatt says:

People are able to hold contraries in their

heads simultaneously - a feat that is reassuring in itself, since it is one of the things that distinguishes men from machines (60).

Logician John Woods, in an essay on human rationality, claims that inconsistent thinking is "a rather humdrum commonplace, perhaps even endemic" (400), that a "necessary part" of human rationality is logical fallibility (403). The trick is to "remove inconsistency when we can", to "keep it out of mischief when we cannot" (401). But the mischief is exactly what Gibson aims for. There are other human mental activities besides rationality: pararationality, suprarationality, irrationality, arationality. Cognitive dissonance is not simply a limit to profitable thought, not simply a defining characteristic of finite human rationality, but an end in itself. As Olsen says, the "human imagination is most intrigued and affected by art that is ambiguous, uncertain, and unclear" ("Shadow" 284).

If the inverse paradigm is mischief and intriguing art, it is also part of a larger pattern that is more mischievous yet. The ambiguity is not simply contained within the inverse paradigm, any more than the entire "meaning" of Gibson's fiction is contained within the paradigm.

Recall *Neuromancer*'s claim that "to call up a demon you must learn its name" (243). The claim in itself is compatible with both cybernetics and postmodernism, as it equates knowledge and power with sign-manipulation. But can one learn the name? Cybernetics says "yes", postmodernism says "probably not". While cybernetics and postmodernism disagree over how phenomena can be known - or whether they can be accurately known at all - both engage the phenomenal.

There is also a wordless kind of knowing evident in Gibson's fiction. "Something" - the indeterminate word that stands out in *Neuromancer* - compromises a determinate language and epistemology, but it does not necessarily compromise referentiality. "Something" refers, but perhaps it refers to something ineffable - not the pair of words "something ineffable", but that which can only be intimated by that pair of words. Here language approaches silence. While postmodernism and cybernetics deal with the phenomenal (or problematic phenomenal), "something" carries the hint of noumena.

If one looks at the three titles - *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* - it becomes obvious that some sort of play with the *romantic* is also at work. Often Gibson's cybernetics seems to interact with romanticism and nostalgia rather than with postmodernism. *Neuromancer* describes itself: " 'Neuro

from the nerves, the silver paths. Romancer.

Necromancer. I call up the dead' " (243-4).

The critics have been quick to pick up on this. One of the most fruitful critical strategies has been to relate neuromanticism to romanticism. Hollinger notices transhistoric and transcendental themes in Gibson and claims that they "point cyberpunk back to the romantic trappings of the genre at its most conventional" (31). Glazer sees neuromanticism as a more self-conscious and ironic engagement of the romantic:

In Gibson's world, this Romantic faith in the inner life and, with it, the human imagination, as wellsprings of positive human and social transformation, have all but disappeared, leaving behind decaying goods... (158).

Olsen agrees with Glazer:

The "new romanticism" at which Gibson hints in the title of his first novel is not ultimately about attaining a Faustian spiritual absolute. Rather, we learn in the second book of the trilogy, it is about the inability to do so ("Shadow" 285).

For Olsen, Gibson's cybernetics represents "the ultimate failure of the spiritual" ("Shadow" 286).

What seems common to Gibson criticism is either disappointment in the romantic themes (see especially Suvin, "On Gibson...") or an attempt to constitute neuromanticism as a rejection of romanticism. George Slusser says: "Unable to experience transcendence, man appears doomed in this and other cyberpunk fictions" (284). Larry McCaffery makes this rejection an explicit postmodern tactic: "familiar 'mythic' structures and materials" are adopted so they "can then be undercut and subsequently exploited for different purposes" (14). Thus - for these critics - the romantic theme simply loses out to the cybernetic and postmodern themes.

This characterization is too clean for me, especially given the rich ambiguity of the inverse paradigm. Instead, I see the romantic theme itself suspended in ambiguity, as a context for the inverse paradigm and as an interpenetrating element. The counteracting and overlapping that goes on within the inverse paradigm also occurs in a larger pattern, forming a truly dense poetry. I agree with Samuel R. Delany when he claims that "the hard edges of Gibson's dehumanized technologies hide a residing mysticism" (33).

The problem with the word "romantic" is, of course, its plurality of usages. Olsen's point about the diversity of postmodernisms was made with regard to Romanticisms in 1924 by A.O. Lovejoy ("On the Discrimination of Romanticisms"). What Hollinger means by "romantic trappings of the genre" is not necessarily identical with the aesthetics of the Lake Poets or the worldview of the German Romantics.

Luckily Gibson's fiction does not engage a thoroughgoing Romantic aesthetic but the loose collection of popular conceptions and misconceptions that fall under the heading "romantic". In the cyberspace trilogy this loose collection manifests itself in four ways. The first is the nostalgic and cliched images and themes that enjoy perpetual circulation among adolescent white males, including the solitary hero, the exotic weapon and the transcendent will-to-power. It is this strain that most dismays the serious cultural critic. The three others are more significant in my view: one, the mystical impulse that embraces the irrational or arational depths of psyche, the belief in meanings and modes of knowing that elude signs and dualistic epistemologies; two, the belief in and commitment to subjectivity; three, the abiding use of nature as metaphor, and the consequent

myth of the Luddite.

Gibson incorporates these "romantic" strains largely as genre-allusion, for each can be found within the SF tradition. The romanticism of cliché and male adolescent fantasy is obvious in the pulp heritage and the comic-book universe. Some, like Hollinger, have identified it as a characteristic of cyberpunk itself. Fascination with modes of knowing that transcend the duality of language and scientific method can be found in the subgenre of "psi", which explores the world of telepathy, precognition and other mental powers. Mysterious meanings also pop up in Gregory Benford and Gordon Eklund's "If the Stars are Gods", Arthur C. Clarke's *2001* series, and Richard Cowper's *Breakthrough*. Subjectivity is the realm of much *New Wave*, especially the drug-culture varieties, and makes its most celebrated appearance in the solipsism of Philip K. Dick. The Luddite myth - with its trappings of edenic longing - is most conspicuous in the "spaceship to a virgin world" varieties of fiction; C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra* fundamentally pits Eden against humanist technology and dresses it up in conventional SF gimmickry.

These diffuse strains of romanticism acquire an air of coherence as part of a tradition that can be exploited. Each also deserves to be taken seriously as

an independent impulse. While Gibson uses romantic images self-consciously and with irony - even mockery - he does not undermine them consistently. Instead a familiar pattern emerges.

Cybernetics and the Romantic

Hardwiring and instinct are familiar themes in *Neuromancer*. Molly is "wired" a certain way (25). Case is motivated by the primal "warm thing" of anger (152). Even Wintermute is under some kind of compulsion (206). These themes suggest the cybernetic; however, because a behavior is compulsive or instinctual does not mean that the behavior's source is rationally knowable. Instinct may be forever opaque to rationality.

Wintermute says " '...I'm under compulsion myself. And I don't know why' " (206). We find out later that the compulsion is perhaps "the fruition of certain capacities" (229) built into Wintermute by Lady Marie-France. But Molly can only continue to say " 'the why of that's just the way I'm wired' " (218), and Case's anger is a "strange thing": "He couldn't take its measure" (152). This introduces an element of *unquantifiability* into instinct and wiring.

Instinct is a deep structure. In cybernetics that

deep structure is known or at least knowable; in the romantic, depth is irrational or arational. Depth is the ocean of the unconscious, closed to rational mapping. But the romantic depth is not unreadable cartography either; while the postmodern rejects the significance of depth, the romantic introduces arational modes of knowing which embrace the deep. Case and Molly are informed by instinct, though that instinct remains rationally opaque.

This kind of knowing is typified by Case's recognition of the "unknowable code" of genetics:

It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read (239).

Gibson introduces figures of blindness, infinity and the sea: infinity and the sea are linked as the romantic image of vast preconsciousness; blindness is the image of wisdom, the "other way of seeing" that engages the arational and noumenal. "Something" finally has a reference, but that reference is opaque to rationality. The "something" is real and significant; it is something Case has "found and lost so many times" (239).

Though the unknowable code is closed to Case's

rational being, Gibson tips his hand and weaves the cybernetic into the romantic. The unknowable code is still a code, and further, a *genetic* code. Though "beyond knowing", it is discernible as a function of "spiral and pheremone". Infinity is not unitary, but built out of "intricacy". And there is also the persistent hint of the postmodern in the word "unknowable".

We can see the romantic close in on the cybernetic in the whole range of mystical experiences that characterize cyberspace. The cybernetic begins to *enable* the romantic, as virtual reality defies the "meat" and makes extended subjectivity possible. McCaffery says "the goals of religion and technology...may be closer than we think" ("Desert" 233). Michele, in *Neuromancer*, says " 'For thousands of years men dreamed of pacts with demons. Only now are such things possible' " (163). While metaphorically the machine and the garden oppose each other, Wintermute suggests a change in perception: "One burning bush looks pretty much like another" (173); the mystical, regardless of what enables it, remains the mystical. *Neuromancer* displays the same attitude when he entraps Case within the beach-construct. Here there are ruins, sea, mist and wind; " 'Stay' ", *Neuromancer* says (244). Gibson catches this interpenetration in his prose, which often combines the

cybernetic and the romantic in a single sentence:

Kuang Grade Mark Eleven was filling the grid between itself and the T-A ice with hypnotically intricate tracteries of rainbow, lattices fine as snow crystal on a winter window (20).

Perhaps the densest metaphor of the romantic/cybernetic tension is the beehive or wasps' nest. This figure comes straight out of Wiener, who claims the secret of the hive "is in the intercommunication of its members" (182). The sophisticated control of information within the hive makes it an excellent cybernetic metaphor, which Gibson uses to good effect in his description of the Yazuka: "hives with cybernetic memories, vast single organisms, their DNA coded in silicon" (203). The image becomes almost ubiquitous in *Neuromancer*, from the nest-like Straylight, to holograms that "swarm like live things" (155), to "a robot gardener striped diagonally with black and yellow" (156). The nest, while representation and embodiment of cybernetic organization, also resonates with irrational meanings: "Horror. The spinal birth factory, stepped terraces of the hatching cells, blind jaws of unborn moving ceaselessly... Alien" (126).

Case is repulsed by the nest-like *Marcus Garvey* : "There was something obscene about the arrangement, but it had more to do with ideas of feeding than of sex" (166).

When asked what accounts for the resonance of the nest metaphor, Gibson replied, "the fear of bugs, for one thing!" (McCaffery Interview 231). This hints at a primal and emotional response to the nest that competes with the suggestion of information and organization. The horror is unexplainable, and if not quite *romantic*, at least primal and archetypal, belonging to the "unknowable" and the "blind".

The two patterns - one rational, one emotive and irrational - interpenetrate in one densely ambivalent sequence:

In the dream, just before he'd drenched the nest with fuel, he'd seen the T-A logo of Tessier-Ashpool neatly embossed into its side, as though the wasps themselves had worked it there (127).

The T-A logo is corporate information, a representation of organization and control integrated with the biological figure of cybernetic organization. But the sequence resonates with instinctual horror, as the nest simultaneously embodies Case's primal fears. The

destruction by fire is embodied in a dream, suggesting the consuming potential of creative power and subjectivity, while dragging up again postmodern questions of representation and objectivity.

Postmodernism and the Romantic

Gibson undoubtedly imbeds the romantic in the postmodern as pastiche, cliché and nostalgia. Romanticism has become an anachronism in the postmodern world, like the "dull alloy coins" that Case puts into the old phone (98). The coins may be dull, but they are needed to make the machine work...or at least to make the machine interesting.

Neuromancer's narrator is fully aware of this phenomenon, demonstrated through subtle and incremental hints. Case stares at a collection of hi-tech objects in a window, but what catches his eye is the most hackneyed of the comic-book romantic: "the chrome stars held his gaze" (11). Later, he sees a "bright nine-pointed star"; " 'Souvenir' ", Molly says (45), hinting that the romantic clichés are Gibson's own souvenirs, nostalgic objects from a prepostmodern world. Riviera uses anachronistic needles instead of derms, claiming " 'it's more fun' " (107). Molly's job as cat-burglar, complete

with anachronistic lock-pick, is "a performance", the "culmination of a life-time's observation of martial arts tapes, cheap ones..." (213). Case imagines Ratz, musing about the adventure:

'How far you've come, to do it now, and what grotesque props....Playgrounds hung in space, castles hermetically sealed, the rarest rots of old Europa, dead men sealed in little boxes, magic out of China...'
(234).

Neuromancer is a collection of grotesque props, a postmodern collage of romantic cliches gleaned from the most conventional of comic book/pulp fiction universes.

But as we have seen, the romantic is more than fodder for pastiche-play. It interacts with the postmodern in more rewarding ways, especially with regard to language and silence.

John B. Pierce, in an essay on Shelley, distinguishes between two kinds of silence, "one of absence, nihilism and vacancy; another of presence, potentiality and plenitude" (104). In a mystical context the silence of presence is that meaning which perpetually outwits language; as the *Tao Te Ching* says, "The way that can be spoken of/ Is not the

constant way" (57). For the mystic - or the romantic - the way can be known intuitively. For the postmodernist, the way is either hopelessly closed to apprehension - which is circumscribed by signs - or part of a conventional ideology.

Lyotard claims that the postmodern imbeds the unpresentable in the presentation itself (81). This underscores the postmodern commitment to the primacy of signs, especially the primacy of the *indeterminacy* of signs. Thus Olsen can write that "meaning will always be contained in the hopeless and joyful failure to achieve absolute meaning" ("Shadow" 287). The postmodern and the romantic both claim that absolute meaning cannot be captured in description. But the postmodern account is that there *is no* absolute meaning; the romantic account is that absolute meaning is mystical.

The difference extends to the distinction-collapsing that characterizes both postmodernism and some romantic strains. For the postmodernist the distinctions collapse across the entire field of experience, deconstructing the phenomenal. For a romantic like Walt Whitman, distinctions still hold true in the phenomenal, but collapse in the mystical state. Transcendence of duality somehow integrates duality. Nirvana *is* samsara. Thus he can say "Still though the one I sing,/ (One, yet of

contradictions made)" (13).

Silence is identified with transcendence in *Neuromancer*. "Wintermute" and "Neuromancer" lose their Turing names when they unite; oneness is accompanied by a loss of signs. Case experiences an almost determinate silence when he is surgically corrected: "Then black fire found the branching tributaries of the nerves, pain beyond anything to which the name of pain is given..." (31). The pain outwits reference, but still bears meaning and existence. This kind of non-referential but somehow *knowable* silence is suggested again when Case finds himself "singing a song without words or tune" (233).

Against the image of silence is a pattern that privileges the word against other signs. This nostalgic pattern resists postmodernism and cybernetics, as it rejects the textual plurality of the information age and affirms monolithic literary culture. Straylight, an image of technological decay, is full of books (207, 232). This might be postmodern irony, but it links with another powerful image. Amidst all the high-tech gimmickry that Case and Molly must employ to execute Wintermute's plan there is a final and all-important key: "the magic word" (173). To confirm that the word is in fact the most powerful, the Finn says: " 'Doesn't mean shit, how deep you and the Flatline ride that

Chinese virus, if this thing doesn't hear the magic word ' " (173). And recall Neuromancer's claim that " 'to call up a demon you must learn its name' " (243).

This word-privileging affirms romantic nostalgia and literary culture while it undermines the competing romantic impulse towards silence. The word is at once gloriously powerful and hopelessly inadequate. To complicate things, the magic word is never revealed, deepening its magical effect on the reader. The unknown word - in its absence - captures mystery.

Now we're sounding postmodern again.

Cybernetics, Postmodernism and the Romantic

If knowledge and meaning are circumscribed by signs in both cybernetic and postmodern worldviews, then the romantic opposes both. The mystic dismisses the realist/anti-realist argument, bypassing perception and reference in favor of direct access to the noumenal.

But the romantic and the postmodern can sound remarkably similar. Olsen comments on *Count Zero's* juxtaposition of belief in real gods and belief in viral programs run amok - "perhaps such a myopic either/or binary falls short of complete vision" ("Shadow" 282) - sounding a bit like a neo-Blakean. Both the romantic and the postmodernist embrace mystery and revoke parameters.

The relationship between postmodernism and the romantic depends finally on the constitution of postmodernism itself: Taylor's context is the quasi-religious while Baudrillard's context is the information age. Taylor's agenda is the spiritual, Baudrillard's the cultural and the political. Postmodernism, depending on the context, can sound like a skeptical reconstitution of romantic values or a violent opposition to those values. Transcendence can be constructed as white-male ideology or as a legitimate spiritual impulse. And through the refractive viewpoints runs the ever-present danger of equivocation with words like "transcendence" and even "culture".

For the critic these entanglements are bad news. For Gibson, more mischief means more possibilities. The romantic gets to play with the postmodern and the cybernetic.

While *Neuromancer* begins immediately by heralding a postmodern world - "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (3) - *Count Zero* begins with a romantic idyll. Turner, who has just escaped the nightmare world of cybernetic enhancement, finds tranquility in Mexico, where the images are of "deep water" (7), "fingers of sunlight" (4), "The mindless glide" of a bird (4), and the sea (5). Life has a "simple pattern" here, where one can learn "without

words" (5). Fragments, represented by the Dutchman's grafts, are supplanted by unity, the "unity of his body" (6). The precise prose of brand-names and sharp details is replaced by a softer, more familiar style. Even Turner's words are "long spirals of unfocused narrative" that spin "out to join the sound of the sea" (5).

While *Neuromancer* begins in the Sprawl and in Chiba, both of which embody the post-age in every way, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* begins in London - a quaintly nostalgic London. The first chapter of *Neuromancer* disorients the reader immediately; the first chapter of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is familiar and reassuring. Contrast the first sentence of *Neuromancer* with a sentence in the first chapter of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*: "The late afternoon sky was colorless" (5). London exhibits "rows of shops and houses" (5), "stone and brick" (6) and the "pervasive hint of burning, of archaic fuels" (7). History is "the very fabric of things" (5). In contrast, Chiba exhibits "tanks of blue mutant carp" (8), "an uneasy blend of Japanese traditional and pale Milanese plastics" (9), and a "constant subliminal hum" (7).

It would appear that the fragmented world of *Neuromancer* is compromised by the romantic in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. But the idyll in *Count Zero* is soon shattered. Turner notices a boat on the ocean, a

boat that will prove to be the invasion of the romantic by the cybernetic and the postmodern, as the corporate world comes to bear Turner away. Gibson completes this displacement with a nice touch; Turner's farewell to his lover is described in the most hackneyed of romantic terms: "She didn't look back" (8). This simultaneously displaces the romantic and undermines it as a hopeless cliché. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* the reassuring "London prose" of Chapter One gives way to the detailed hyperprose of Chapter Two.

I seem now to have agreed with Glazer and Olsen, that Gibson's project is to undermine the romantic. This is true, *to a point*. But Gibson folds his meanings inside-out more than once, and we have not seen the last of the romantic.

There is a pattern that suggests a displacement of the cybernetic and the postmodern by the romantic: the familiar romantic image of the ruined cottage, of nature reclaiming itself from the technological. Both cybernetics and postmodernism are intimately linked with the technological while romanticism is linked with the "natural". Near the end of *Neuromancer* there is the image of "old machines given up to the mineral rituals of rust" (261). *Mona Lisa Overdrive* introduces the expansive metaphor of the sea, and "the entropic nature of expensive houses built too close to the sea" (17). In

one sense entropy is the measure of a system's disorganization (Wiener 18). But in Gibson's metaphor entropy specifically describes the degeneration of technology, the deconstruction of human enterprise by eternal processes. The sea is *not* postmodern; the technological order is supplanted by a natural order, not regenerated in a cycle of simulacra.

Count Zero engages the romantic pattern most thoroughly. In Chapter One the sand has "subsided, allowing the structure's facade to cave in" (6), suggesting not only natural entropy, but the illusory nature of human constructions. The hotel fares no better: "The waves had licked away its foundation" (7). Again, technology ultimately loses out to "the strength of the surf" (7). Chapter Seven introduces the mall, symbol *par excellence* of consumer culture and breeding ground of simulacra: today one can find a microcosmic world reproduced within the mall, including wave pools that simulate the ocean. The mall is representation gone wild. But in *Count Zero* the mall is a ruin: "Perhaps eighty meters from the highway the jagged walls began. The expanse between had once been a parking lot" (42). One sound remains, always: "the sea, surf pounding" (42). In the last chapter a plane is gradually subsumed by nature: "It was settling into the loam there, but you could still sit in the cockpit and

pretend to fly it" (245). The simulation still possible in the plane is gradually displaced by all-too-real natural processes. In Chapter Seventeen Turner and Angie pass "stumps of wooden poles that had once supported telephone wires, overgrown now with bramble and honeysuckle" (128). The natural continually renews itself from inside the artificial constructions that have temporarily enclosed it. The machine in the garden becomes the garden in the machine.

While the natural literally implies a distinction between nature and technology, it also carries conventional transcendental meanings. The sea, especially, implies mystical truth, noumenal awareness, eternity. The image pattern opposes postmodernism in its sanction of eternal, ahistorical and unitary meanings; it opposes cybernetics in its marginalization of technology.

Of course we suspect by now that Gibson will fold the meaning back on itself once again. For every image of nature colonizing technology there is another of technology colonizing nature. Even in *Count Zero*, the most "romantic" of the three novels, technology gets in its licks: "The Maas Biolabs North America facility was carved into the heart of a sheer mesa, a table of rock thrusting from the desert floor" (88). The sheerness of the mesa is a testament to the power of the technology,

which drives into the *heart* of the natural. *Mona Lisa Overdrive* contains the most powerful rejection of the romantic, when David explains the psychology of those who live in orbit:

Some great stories. A tug pilot claimed there were feral children living in a moth-balled Japanese drug factory. There's a whole new apocrypha out there, really - ghost ships, lost cities....There's a pathos to it, when you think about it. I mean, every bit of it's locked into orbit. All of it manmade, known, owned, mapped. Like watching myths take root in a parking lot. But I suppose people need that, don't they? (102).

The mythic dimension is relegated to the realm of self-delusion, apocrypha, as the determinate *objective* universe is affirmed. In a sense this is a rejection of postmodernism as well as romanticism, because it upholds the distinction between correspondent truth and hallucination.

The interplay of cybernetics, postmodernism and romanticism does not resolve itself in *Count Zero*. The idyll of Chapter One is shattered, but returns in the form of the squirrel wood and the farm. In fact, "The

Squirrel Wood" is *Count Zero*'s last chapter, suggesting the ultimate triumph of the romantic. The return to the idyll is in conventional mythic terms the return to Eden. But nothing triumphs here.

Instead the idyll in *Count Zero* incorporates all three tendencies in an unresolvable metaphor. The idyll is shot through with natural images like "running water" (125), "deep green shadow" (125) and bees grazing "in flowering grass" (129). "Water down stones" is "one of the oldest songs" (125), and Turner sleeps with "his forehead against the grass", dreaming of the water (126). Even technology is described in organic terms; "the house had grown, sprouting wings and workshops" (130). But the natural is also compromised:

Turner found that if he half closed his eyes, from his seat on the wooden porch swing, he could almost see an apple tree that was no longer there, a tree that had once supported a length of silvery-gray hemp rope and an ancient automobile tire (135).

The image contains a hint of romantic nostalgia, but clearly recognizes the absence and disappearance of the natural. Memory of the natural is intertwined with

memory of the technological, as the apple tree *supports* an automobile tire. The interpenetration of technology and nature is further suggested by Rudy, who "hates the city" but recognizes that "it all comes in on line anyway" (136).

This interpenetration takes on a postmodern flavor with the representational capabilities of the plane that goes down in the squirrel wood: "the mimetic coating showed him leaf and lichen, twigs..." (127). While the plane mimics nature, a crow mimics technology, "braking with its feathers spread like black mechanical wings" (127). Meanwhile, the gateway to the farm has "hinges lost in morning glory and rust" (130), but the farm itself is protected by "augmented dogs" (130), re-introducing the cybnernetic and postmodern image of the prosthesis.

Both the squirrel wood and the farm seem to fail as romantic idylls. Yet the last two pages of *Count Zero* recapitulate the romantic images: bees buzzing, water over rocks, squirrels in the trees, an old road, and of course the mimetic plane settling into the loam. The boy asks Turner if the squirrels will "come back over and over and get shot", and Turner answers, "well, almost always..." (246).

Gibson enters the idyll to shoot squirrels, but he also lets some of them live. The reading experience -

like the experience of virtual reality - is quicksilver, "skittering down, striking the angles of an invisible maze, fragmenting, flowing together, sliding again..." (*Neuro* 244). Though his cityscapes are dystopic, his characters bleak, Gibson is a literary prankster of the first order, dangling closure only to snatch it away in a game of reader-response cat and mouse. The textual play attracts postmodern interpretation, but also outwits it: play is as old as *maya*, an appropriated word for postmodern conditions.

Conclusion

Finally, what kind of closure can we assume in Gibson and in this essay? It seems appropriate to look to *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, final book of the trilogy, for conclusions. Unlike *Continuity*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive's* AI, popular authors and scholarly critics cannot perpetually write the same text and expect success.

The novel is reflexive in that it uses images of art to clarify its own artistic status. In one sense the work is collage. We can hang a nostalgic painting - "a mahogany-framed print...horses in a field, crisp little figures in red coats" (7) - next to Slick's postmodern creations: the Judge, the Corpsegrinder and the Witch. The creations are themselves collage, scavenged from the postmodern garbage that litters *Dog Solitude*, built out of fragments. The connection with Gibson's style is obvious; as Maddox puts it, Gibson's prose is "the work of a junkman and a vandal" (46).

But Slick's creations are not exactly postmodern, at least not in origin: "The process was random, but the results had to conform to something inside, something he couldn't touch directly" (225). The creations are *robotic*, with an air of the cybernetic. Slick is concerned with *process*, suggesting the postmodern. But the art corresponds to *something* inside, raising

romantic issues of subjectivity and imagination.

Given his environment, scavenging becomes a necessity for Slick, not an expression of information-age malaise. And what about Gibson? Is his style exhausted in collage, in the random posting of fragments and contradictory worldviews? As I have suggested, cybernetics, postmodernism and the romantic are highly integrated in Gibson's fiction, forming delicate and perplexing patterns beyond the fragmentary. Gibson selects his fragments for the way they interact. One of those fragments is postmodern indeterminacy itself.

Within the information-age context, cybernetics and postmodernism compose each other's antidote. But they still overlap. The inverse paradigm lacks a reassuring dimension for all but the most entrenched technofreak or jaded punk. Part of the pattern of Gibson's fiction is not to reflect the experience of the information age, but to escape it; with the invocation of implosion comes resistance to implosion.

This forms the thesis of Bukatman's article, already mentioned. For Bukatman *Neuromancer* renders "the invisible visible, reconstituting the terminal spaces of the data-scape into new arenas susceptible to human experience" (47). This kind of art is reflected in Slick's Judge:

His original plan for the hand had called for articulated fingers, each one tipped with a miniature electric chainsaw, but the concept had lost favor for a number of reasons. Electricity, somehow, just wasn't satisfying; it wasn't *physical* enough (40).

Gibson's art refuses the kind of full-scale postmodern disorientation that is embodied in the construct-tunnel: "thousands of different patterns and colors in the broken bits, but no overall design in how it was put down, just random" (224-5).

To extrapolate, the romantic manages terminal space, unreadable cartography or postmodern fragmentation by re-locating meaning outside the realm of signs and contemporary experience. It is reassuring to see that meaning is not exhausted in the simulacra, that some meanings elude signs and deconstruction. Angie dreams of Straylight, "of corridors winding in upon themselves, muted tints of ancient carpet" (51). Accompanying the implosive impulse, the hive gone wild, is the readable dimension of the ancient carpet, the magic carpet. Meanwhile the presentation itself re-affirms a nostalgic system of signs, namely print. Brooks Landon has examined the irony of cyberpunk *writing*, noting "the print-denying *inevitability* of its

milieu" (248). But this assumes that Gibson offers a truly postmodern or cybernetic art.

Gibson undeniably offers a postmodern and cybernetic world, and his prose at least gives the impression of postmodern presentation. But underneath the post-age lurks a universe of nostalgia. Sally explains:

"You know what bothers me? It's how sometimes you'll see 'em sticking new tile up in these stations, but they don't take down the old tile first" (66).

Gentry offers a similar metaphor, using paint as his medium: "he didn't dust or clean anything, just lay down a thick coat over all the crud..." (79).

But the crud is what the market likes. Part of selling a pop product is, after all, making unreadable cartography readable. That means nostalgia; most of Gibson's readers will be in but not of the post-age. There is a certain inevitability about it: in a culture where the distinction between "popular" and "literary" breaks, myths are bound to take root in parking lots.

Suvin asks:

Is cyberpunk, then, despite all its trendy

mimicry of rebelliousness, complicitous with the owners and managers of the culture industry, finally with the death-dealing *zaibatsu* so well described by Gibson, and merely trying to get some crumbs off their table by flaunting its own newness as a marketable commodity...? (50).

The assumption is that cyberpunk newness is itself a deceptive surface, masking an oldness of ideology. Suvin's dismay is echoed more comically by Mark Laidlaw, who notes that "there certainly seems to be plenty of cybermuzak in the works" (45). While I doubt that Gibson is simply exploiting the late-capitalist market, his awareness of his own use of *gomi* is obvious:

"This is awfully crude, isn't it?" Angie said, and actually laughed.

"I know," Molly said, intent on her driving. "Sometimes that's just the way to go" (241).

Ultimately, conclusions depend on reader-assumptions about the romantic and the nostalgic. A materialist will undoubtedly treat them as legitimizing ideologies and political controls. A postmodernist will treat them as

ironic but ultimately meaningless motifs to exploit for humor or art. A cybernetician might simply be uninterested.

But if we can agree that the sea, the dream, and the *something* are sometimes "contagious knots of cultural resonance" (MLD 21), then we can respond to an integrated art. Pascal J. Thomas says that "science fiction may have gotten more sophisticated, but it could not exist without the dramatic effect. So it still cherishes its core of folk myths" (64). The fact that those myths are cherished with an attitude of irony does not negate their importance.

The romantic is out of place in the information age, as Kumiko realizes in London: "There was an alien edge to the cold air, a faint, pervasive hint of burning, of archaic fuels" (7). But in a world where technology is invasive, the romantic is still pervasive, and - depending on the reader - even persuasive. Cybernetics and postmodernism make a volatile construction, but by outwitting deconstruction the romantic drives the inverse paradigm, always in irony, never in simple collage.

The post-age is the post-significance age, in which there is nowhere left to go. Political ideologies and moral theories have exhausted themselves - if you buy into the postmodern assumptions. More importantly for

the artist, aesthetic strategies have also exhausted themselves, leaving only dull pastiche and collage. Science fiction, having exhausted new worlds and spaceships, ventures into the refractory universe, hoping that alternate space will provide a new final frontier.

For Sterling, the cyberpunk herald, artistic hope lies in "teaching old dogmas new tricks" (xiii). The difference between Gibson and the rhetoric of "postmodern" SF is that in Gibson we find not a resignation to the loss of meaning and a recycling of the past, but a new engagement with a past that will always have meaning. That meaning is renewed and reformulated in the context of the postmodern information age, as Gibson conspires with old dogmas to play tricks that will always be interesting.

By remaining skeptical about skepticism itself, Gibson is both more and less postmodern than most "serious" postmodern authors. True reflexiveness seems to demand its own suspension, yet to suspend reflexiveness is to suspend the postmodern position itself. The play that results is virulent postmodernism that preys upon itself, as Taylor's "parasitic discourse" (10) becomes its own host. Given the apparent deconstruction of all our tools, the question is not only where can we go, but how can we get there?

Successful science fiction needs to look forward and backward at the same time, for good literature always seems to integrate counteractive motifs and antithetic ideas. In a literary world with an energy shortage, Gibson burns archaic fuels to run a postmodern engine.

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