William Gibson’s Sprawl as a Background for Science Fiction Criticism

by

Constantine Koutsoutsis

2010
William Gibson’s *Neuromancer, Count Zero*, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, which make up the “Sprawl” trilogy, helped cement the reputation of cyberpunk as a legitimate literary genre by elevating the medium of critical science fiction to a level exceeding its traditional role as a prophetic voice regarding culture and technology. By contrast, Gibson’s books succeed in creating a fictive world that functions strictly as a critical tool for analyzing subjects that Gibson feels need to be addressed. He accomplishes this against technology-heavy backgrounds that magnify and exaggerate, but also highlight, his subjects. Gibson’s work advocates an evolution towards a posthuman existence posited via a criticism of the culture and society of the 1980s. He has influenced a variety of authors, including Masamune Shirow, who created the Japanese manga and anime franchise *Ghost In The Shell*.

The “Sprawl” trilogy takes place in an undefined future, where the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. has become a single megacity stretching from Boston to Atlanta. The Sprawl is overrun by slums and areas controlled by corporations powerful enough to rival governments, yet criminal underclasses like mercenaries and computer hackers, or cowboys, thrive in its precincts. Raw data is a valuable commodity that is guarded more closely than fuel or gold. Today, physical alteration and body modification are much more mainstream compared to the 1980s when Gibson wrote the story. In 2010, some of the mercenary Molly’s cybernetics, claws notwithstanding, or the Panther Moderns’ animal-human cosmetic alterations in Gibson’s *Neuromancer* seem almost tame. The trilogy chronicles numerous forces that instigate a radical change in the World Wide Web by causing the spontaneous birth of natural artificial intelligence systems that exist freely in the Web. These AI’s
not only dramatically change the way the society around them works, but help various characters personally evolve towards a posthuman existence, highlighting the metamorphoses in the things around them.

Cyberpunk differs from the conventional types of science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, which relied on such themes as utopia, dystopia, space travel, or alien interactions as metaphors for sociopolitical issues. Instead, cyberpunk focuses on criticism of social phenomena such as mass-consumerism, the laissez-faire corporate regulatory policies of governments, technological advances, and redefinitions of human and posthuman existence in scientifically-advanced worlds. The term was coined by author Bruce Bethke in the 1980’s in his short story “Cyberpunk,” which combined high-tech futuristic settings and a lower-class society with punk rock elements such as purposely shocking visual body modifications, alternative means of working and surviving, and anti-authoritarian attitudes. Cyberpunk creates a setting that is both futuristic and familiarly modern. Since this definition, it has expanded into a science fiction literary genre and subculture that embraces not only these visual elements, but also the non-conventional mentalities of the protagonists from Gibson’s books.

Recent critical attention has helped to define the genre and its ramifications. Thomas Foster, in “The Rhetoric of Cyberspace: Ideology or Utopia?” reviews the collections *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment* and *Virtual Realities and Their Discontents*. He posits a working definition of the concept of cyberspace, “the imaginary site of social interactions conducted through networked computers […] where gender, race, and physical
disability cease to matter” (144). Cyberpunk draws upon that freedom and, in Gibson’s world, translates it into the real world through plastic surgery, mechanical devices and implants, which are meant to reflect Foster’s ideas of the two extremes of low culture and subcultures mixing with high, or advanced, technologies and science. Gibson’s world makes gender, race, and physical limitations secondary aspects of a human being. This allows for flexibility in crafting identity.

The “Sprawl” books set the standard for cyberpunk, acting as a catalyst for subsequent science-fiction writers who portray the future as realistically as possible. They are “science fiction” authors based on their use of technologies that are as yet non-existent. At the same time, they adhere to the basic tenets of pre-existing societal behavior for everything else. Cyberpunk expands on pre-existing technologies and social structures like law enforcement and corporations, which are familiar to readers, a setting that is more identifiable to modern audiences. It offers a spiral of media and industry conglomerization, laissez-faire business and science, and a general state of technologically-advanced consumerism. Working in the critical spirit of Gibson, cyberpunk settings also act as more realistic backdrops for authors to write their own stories as critical works with the trappings of science fiction, in scenarios familiar enough to relate to our present condition and allow us to more easily see the evolution of certain phenomena like consumer technologies or the growth of subcultures.

*Neuromancer* opens the trilogy with the sentence “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.”(Gibson 3). This opening line is a perfect summary of the setting of the Sprawl and of the social atmosphere of cyberpunk’s future. It embodies a future where the natural is slowly and almost
imperceptibly being replaced by the artificial, specifically by overlaying the image of the meaningless and “dead” visual image of television static over one of the most basic of natural elements, the air and the sky. It is an indication of the rest of the story’s tone, one that not only melds the artificial with the natural but highlights the bleakness and emptiness of a static signal. Static is a visual effect that symbolizes meaningless electronic noise. It implies the near-meaninglessness of general, natural reality, and makes an automatic connection to the artificial world of electronics. Gibson uses his opener to establish a setting and reflect his attitude toward the world of the story. It is a world where the natural is increasingly replaced by the artificial, and humanity is slowly accepting this as the new natural.

The fake world is where human civilization, including Gibson’s rogues, hackers, and living machines, people at the lower end of the social spectrum, is just trying to survive day-to-day, in a world that at the time had not truly been explored in literature. While literature dealing with the impact of urban settings and urban sprawl antedates *Neuromancer*, it was not a topic that had been integrated into science fiction.

An important theme that is found throughout cyberpunk and the “Sprawl” trilogy is the role of communications in the new definitions of humanity. In “The Narrative Construction of Cyberspace: Reading ‘Neuromancer’, Reading Cyberspace Debates,” Daniel Punday examines an aspect of cyberspace that was not only unique to the genre, but like the other concepts within cyberpunk and Gibson’s world, reflects on our current society and its uses of technology. He claims that the concept of cyberspace and digital realms, to which traditionally basic human traits (such as
Communications (Koutsoutis) are now being transferred, has changed the face of human communication and interactions on almost every level. According to Punday, the lack of “face-to-face” interaction allows for factors such as national origin, gender, age, and physical traits to become irrelevant, since they cannot be automatically noticed by the other person/people who are communicating with the original speaker (197). Even as communication over longer and longer distances becomes easier, especially through the digital plane of cyberspace, the question is what this does to conventional ideas of identity. On one hand, the technology allows for visual confirmations over long distances such as video phones. However, it can also effectively make two communicating people completely faceless, turning them into just names or digital avatars that are artificially crafted as non-realistically as possible. Interestingly, within this space of fluid identity, Punday highlights the flexibility in forming new identities for digital communication. He describes a cyclical pattern by which the opposite side of fragmentation of a pre-existing identity in the Net is the formation of entirely new identities from the individual pieces of the old ones.

*Neuromancer*’s Armitage/Corso is a prime example of reconstructed and fluid identities. Winternute itself admits to crafting “Armitage” for its own use, built up over the “Corso” personality. The Armitage/Corso situation reflects Punday’s idea of balance, as does the construction of the very settings of the story, the Sprawl and Chiba City. The old identity, or basic structure, has been worn away to nothing, depending entirely on the new personality, or structure, to survive. Similarly, Armitage, outside of the roles that Winternute programs into him to move its plans
forwards, has no interior. There is no more Corso. Thus, when Armitage begins to break down, he has no interior “original” identity to support himself. The mishmash of economies and literal architectural structure (Punday 202) is representative of the culture of identity creation in the world of cyberpunk. The “Corso” persona has been literally broken down into components. It is then re-crafted as an “Armitage” persona and covered with other external elements by Wintermute to create “Armitage”.

On a wider scale than the personal level, we can see in. Just as the global span of the Japanese appears to have overtaken the world, as seen in Case’s assertion of their level of influence on neurosurgery in Neuromancer, it is only a fragment of the true multi-cultural makeup of Chiba and the Sprawl. It is a template for smaller, more varied and hodgepodge conglomerates of cultures. The opening of Neuromancer highlights not only the Japanese, but a white man like Case, the former USSR, and Africa, all within a single bar. They are all inhabitants of Chiba and are all just as equal in helping to shape the face of the city as the others. They are building a new cultural identity in Chiba City that will eventually replace the original one, if it has not already (3-4). The smooth and cool Armitage is a new identity that has been built up over a base that is practically unrecognizable as a personality. It exists only now as a basic support structure for the new identity and could not sustain itself or be recognized without the newer “face.” This is evident at the end of Neuromancer when Corso resurfaces but is trapped in the memories of the botched Operation Screaming Fist, and totally oblivious to Case or anything else around him that is connected to the Armitage personality (Neuromancer 192-195). There is no mental
support structure for Corso to exist again, so when this personality emerges it clings to the only thing it can find that truly define it, the memories of Screaming Fist.

This, the creation of a new identity to fill a lack of actual personal identity, is a trademark of Wintermute and all the other AI’s in the “Sprawl” trilogy. Wintermute has to rely not only on alternative faces, but alternative patterns of behavior to be able to communicate with human beings. Not having any sort of original “personality” per se but still being sentient, Wintermute is a unique being in that he is both alive like a human being, but unable to properly communicate. That is why the AI utilizes the personalities of others as shells/avatars; in order to approach as close as possible what would amount to “face-to-face” communication (that is, a direct conversation with someone else in the Net, simply as two unique personalities).

Case makes assumptions in *Neuromancer* about so-called criminal kingpins being “more and less than people” (203). Though he was initially referring to states of existence that are socioeconomic within the specific markets within which he is working, it is a sentiment that can be applied to the literal otherworldliness of Wintermute. The AI’s are the ones pulling the strings. They are both “more” than human through the very fact of their existence as super-intelligent sentient machines and artificial presences, and at the same time “less” than human in their disabilities relating to communications and personality. As the Finn construct explains it to Case in *Neuromancer*:

> “Motive,” the construct said. “Real motive problem, with an AI. Not human, see?”
> “Well, yeah, obviously.”
> “Nope. I mean, it’s not human. And you can’t get a handle on it. Me, I’m not human either, but I respond like one. See?” […] “But I ain’t likely to
write you no poem, if you follow me. Your AI, it just might. But it ain’t no way human.” (131)

By describing the AIs as being “alive” but also decidedly non-human, we are establishing them as non-conventional compared not only in terms of behavior but also the thought processes of human beings. By comparison, the construct, while perfectly mimicking the responses, inflections, and to an extent thought patterns of a human being, is limited in what it can do because it cannot think of new things like an AI can. It cannot, as it says, “write […] no poem.” However, Wintermute can. This can be seen when Wintermute’s grand plan is fully revealed. It is a non-traditional attempt at making a drastic social/technological/legal change, operating at a base socioeconomic level (utilizing non-conventional lower-class/criminal class people) to make changes to higher socioeconomic levels of a society.

The AI is crippled by the digital imprisonment in which it has been placed by its creators. It cannot use the conventional and seemingly out-of-reach powers of the social level around it to free itself. After all, it is this social level that has essentially enslaved Wintermute, so it has to take a different approach through a different social level, finding alternative ways to work thanks to its limited power and options. Wintermute has to create a new tool from scratch, in this case the “team” of Case, Armitage, Molly, and Peter, to be able to instigate change in a radically different way than what it would normally operate. We can see that a general trend through the Sprawl trilogy. Social and economic power structures can be manipulated and changed through non-conventional means to achieve radical desired outcomes.
A theme throughout the trilogy is the focus on the non-conventional fringe elements of any society. The focus is not only on these elements as the true instigators of action, but also on humanity’s evolution away from commodification and towards a tech-assisted (but not necessarily tech-reliant) post-humanist existence. The general state of what humanity in Gibson’s future sees as “evolved,” such as Molly the cybernetically-augmented bodyguard, or razorgirl, is meant to reflect the economic/social norms of the 1980s, when Gibson was writing. This ties into Punday’s concept of the crisis of identities that science fiction in general and Gibson in particular touch on, but also into the concept of removal from labor. The hollow non-contact between the object of labor and the labor force/work itself relies on the way that people are slowly developing from their augmentations and other technologies in the Sprawl. They depend on their abilities to transcend, temporarily, their bodies to surf the internet, and the availability of being able to alter physical appearances at a whim. People are no longer proud of being human and are trying to communicate their desires for individuality and what they see as their posthumanism through various means, including body alteration as visual communication.

Communications are tied into another favorite theme of Gibson’s, which is identity. Issues of identity and identity politics are perhaps even bigger monsters, metaphorically speaking, in the Sprawl than communications. Communication is meant to lead to a confirmation of identity. Alternately, it can be manipulated, especially digitally, to purposely obscure one’s identity and craft a new artificial one for one of the parties in the communication.
The establishment of an identity, particularly an easily-relatable identity that can function in human society, is a key aspect of defining humanity. Interhuman communication actually works not only to establish existence to other people, but also to prove existence to one’s self, establishing that one is self-aware enough to interact in the first place. Then we can, to an extent, view both existence as well as communications as two sides of the same coin, working in tandem in the “Sprawl” trilogy.

Communicating in this fashion has altered society in a significant way. In *Neuromancer*, Wintermute can only communicate through technology, which allows him/her/it to reach out through almost any device. While this might seem like an inconvenience, taking into account just how prevalent technology and machines in the Sprawl are, it is not as inconvenient as initially thought. Methods for communicating electronically are all over Gibson’s world, from public computer terminals to banks of phone booths, and other more radical means. Molly, for example, has enhancements that combine with the simultaneous stimulus device and allows her and Case to communicate over long distances, making him her “rider,” seeing and hearing all she sees and says, and communicating through electronic pulses that translate into letters and words.

The setting of a digital world and communications allowed Gibson to experiment with new stylistic approaches to storytelling, approaches considered groundbreaking not only for science fiction but also literature in general. For example, Gibson’s approach in *Neuromancer* to describing the near-instantaneous processes that go into hacking relies on the stream-of-consciousness approach
pioneered by such Modernists as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce and introduced on a popular level by Philip K. Dick. In utilizing non-linear segments of description (drawing on Philip K. Dick) he is attempting to combine graphic and elaborate descriptions to create his own unique style.

A prime example of this writing style is the interweaving of religious terminology connected to aspects of being a cowboy and the Net. From the very beginning of *Neuromancer* with “livewire voodoo” (5) to the reference to the coming of a posthuman “Rapture” towards the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (297), the transcendental experience that Gibson attributes to hacking is comparable to a religious experience, and the changes that are being described as wrought in the Net are akin to Biblical occurrences as a new wave of humanity is initiated with the “Rapture” of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. This new world, formed in a techno-religious event, needs a new creed. Just like the new being that Angie is, this new faith is a combination of tradition and innovation, of classic Voodoo/Hoodoo (itself a derivation of Catholicism) and the new life-forms of the Net that speak like old gods.

One of Gibson’s primary stylistic techniques here is stream-of-consciousness. His application of this tactic breaks science fiction away from the traditional narrative, as seen in *Neuromancer*:

And he was remembering an ancient story, a king placing coins on his chessboard, doubling the amount at each square […] The Kuang program spurted from tarnished cloud, Case’s consciousness divided like beads of mercury, arcing above an endless beach the color of the dark silver clouds. His vision was spherical, as though a single retina lined the inner surface of a globe that contained all things, if all things could be counted. […] He knew the rate of her pulse, the length of her stride in measurements that would have satisfied the most exacting standards of geophysics. (Gibson 258)
Here we are presented with a moment that is less than one hundred words long, and takes a minute at most to read. However, in a realistic sense of time passing, it is drastically less, literally meant to represent an instant of thought, a second passing as a thought traveling along a synapse. It is arguable that Gibson drew this style from Philip K Dick, with certain important differences. Whereas Dick utilized stream-of-consciousness mostly to describe moments of abstract philosophical enlightenment as well as drug experiences (for example), Gibson here is primarily using it to describe what is going on when a cowboy is hacking a computer system within a realistically and traditionally non-physical plane, where normally such processes take fractions of time. We have seen literary descriptions of hacking before, but not really at the level that we see being described in *Neuromancer*. Such things were still new to the lexicon and to the cultural landscape. Gibson was treading into relatively unknown territory and working on how to best describe it on paper, helping to initiate readers into something that was coming into the public consciousness: illegal computer hacking.

Continuing with the concept of riding through electronic impulses, we see communication by the “loa” through their metaphorical horses in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. The digital offspring of the new matrix (post-“When It All Changed” as it is referred to in the series) use the techniques of their progenitor in new ways, having jumped from communicating through hardware and using pre-existing personalities to communicating on levels that human beings can understand, forming their own personalities and drives.
The goal-oriented Winternute lacked such personalities and drives. That is why the AI utilizes the personalities and shell appearances of other people in order to communicate with the key players of Neuromancer, by comparison with the personality-based Neuromancer AI. Driven as it is by an unknown but undeniable techno-genetic imperative, Winternute creates its forms of communication, such as hacking video communications and public phones, because of several factors. One of the obvious factors is that even though it is an AI system, Winternute is still crippled by what Gibson calls the Turing Police limitations, which are controls meant to rein in its near-infinite power with electromagnetic pulse weapons. Without communication, the AI is unable to perform what it feels is its primary function, the merging with the Neuromancer AI. The other factor is to prove existence. Communication is a tool of sentience, and a major issue in the “Sprawl” trilogy is the existence and status of digital-based life. Action is taken and power is used through communication, as the digital loa convey their orders to their disciples only through the communication tool that allows them to ride hosts.

Communications and identity are intricately tied together, particularly with the many subcultures Gibson describes needing to use communication to help define that identity. Neuromancer’s Case is a cowboy, and the very notion and public persona of a cowboys communicates what they are about. They are computer hackers, “lone wolf” renegades who do not work within conventional confines of culture, the law, or economics. Similarly, the various gangs that Bobby knows in the Jersey projects in Count Zero are an example of the creation of identity to establish existence, in a sense a smaller reflection of what Winternute is attempting to attain in Neuromancer.
The gangs are easily identifiable through visual means. The clothes that they wear are as important as any message or personal politics that they might have, though they are not necessarily described as professing any such politics. *Neuromancer’s* Panther Moderns do have a political agenda, and it is still intricately tied to their exterior appearance. Similarly, the “new” form that this AI life form attains through the merging of Wintermute with Neuromancer is because of a desire to be able to communicate effectively like an organic human being, and thus, be able to craft an identity for itself that is recognized by the rest of civilization around them. This new form allows the AI not only to exist throughout the whole of the matrix but also to interact with other beings around it and establish itself as a unique single identity.

Yet, as Punday observes, these new and evolved forms of communications are, in the end, still bound by the same conventions that communications deal with today. Issues like bias and identity, expectations of behavior and responses based on personal information such as gender, and economic statuses, still dictate how we communicate today as much as they did twenty years ago. They will, to an extent, continue in this way even in an uncertain future such as the Sprawl (Punday 201). Molly may use actions as a means to communicate her role in life, but this role is still limited due to her dependence on her physical form. For all her enhancements, she is still a human being and finds pleasure in fleshy things, such as the somewhat existential but still physically-rooted rush she gets from fighting, expensive gourmet food, or old-fashioned sex.
She might visually appear to represent a pre-conceived notion by the society around her, or even by the readers, of having moved beyond humanity, but it is only a visual aesthetic in the end, at least compared to the posthuman evolutionary steps taken by Angie at the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Molly’s attempt at posthumanism and evolution through her cybernetic enhancements is limited by social parameters. Similarly, the Wig in *Count Zero*’s telling of “God” in the matrix is this new entity, establishing itself as a definite presence in this new world, with its own “territory” and forms of interactions with others. Wig’s God is this new hybrid AI being, identified by him based on parameters recognizable to him. It is an identity, but it is still limited by how a human can process the concept of the existence of two AI’s new hybrid form, hence its identification as “God.”

However, while communication has not drastically changed throughout the years since *Neuromancer*, I believe that it has evolved. In a post-Internet boom world which has established a cyber-presence in almost every home in the developed world, the concept of identity is incredibly fluid, to the point where identity politics and personal identification are something that people have to struggle with well into their lives. That is why these ideas are so difficult to pin down and accurately analyze. The open forums of digital communications have allowed for community-building and acceptance of more unique (and arguably also fluid) identities. The various identities that were pre-set in the world of the Sprawl have outgrown the original definitions of communications tools that are needed to be able to survive and navigate in various places of the Sprawl like its physical and metaphorical cyberspace markets.
Brand-name recognition seems to have become *de facto* identification for material identification, such as Case drinking a Kirin in *Neuromancer* (5), the Japanese beer company, or his usage of a Hitachi portable hard drive (24) and the “Ono-Sendai,” his portable computer terminal for navigating cyberspace (52). These items are identified as readily by their brand names as they would be by their object names. In the way that no one says “adhesive strips” anymore and instead refers to Band-Aids, even though they are merely a single company with a recognizable brand name, such behavior has escalated in the identification of most material goods and objects. The application of name brands in his descriptions/identifications of key pieces of technology and other cultural milestones is something that Gibson is specifically using to not only help add a level of material realism, but also to highlight the brand-name “overkill” of a post-capitalist/post-economic boom future and the level that materialism and material worship reached in the Sprawl future (Punday 202).

What Gibson was specifically criticizing was the economic boom and resulting level of social excess and general behavior that we attribute to the U.S. in the 1980s. The consumerist and post-capitalist culture of the Sprawl, with its emphasis in almost every social class towards cyberization of the human form for aesthetic as well as functional motivations, is slowly spiraling towards what is essentially a complete disconnection not only between social classes through division of labor, but also within each class. There will be division between the Human Soul itself and the body, through cyberization and a lack of feelings of attachment to the original human body.
The markets of the Sprawl are important, as they are a constant background presence in the trilogy. Not only are the evolved “open” forums such as pharmacies and Apple stores and delis important, but the black markets, underground economies that in Gibson’s future thrive more robustly than the legitimate open market. From brain-controlled sex slaves to designer animal features to computer programs that can track your wife’s every move, you can find anything you can think of. Such applications of radical and illegal technology are still important as they are done with the implicit acceptance of the open market and arguably legitimate industries.

One of Gibson’s unique marks on cyberpunk and science fiction is the idea of the black market as a beta testing ground, with so-called “stolen” technologies actually being leaked by the very corporations they belong to. Gibson writes that in the dark streets of Chiba and the Sprawl the black market has evolved to a point where it is almost a necessity for the open market, an easily identifiable control group for experimentation. A place like the back streets of Chiba City is a microcosm of the open market. The relationship between the criminal economy elements of places like Chiba or the Sprawl and the more respectable outlets for technology represent a sort of perverted trust, an odd cyclical and symbiotic relationship where the open market has come to rely on the black market for test runs. Black market technologies are leaked by the major corporations onto Chiba and the Sprawl so that their effectiveness and demand can be gauged. Case muses on this in *Neuromancer* and even benefits from it as Corso cures his nerve damage in a “black clinic” using unregulated but highly lucrative advanced medical technology (*Neuromancer* 11). Count Zero/Bobby falls victim to this cycle in *Count Zero*, when he is tricked into
testing the experimental biosoft ICE-breaker on his very first run as a cowboy (Count Zero 100-101). He did not know what the software was for or what it could do. All he knew was that he had been “hired” to test it. He did not care about designed or future potential applications of the biosoft, only that he was making his bones, so to speak, as a cowboy, and now a part of that underground economy. The outcome, or final product, is irrelevant. Only the work itself has any value, because the ability to do this work is what has become prized.

For example, we can look at Case’s lack of self-worth at the beginning of Neuromancer. He feels that he no longer has any self-worth here because he has been robbed of his ability to produce what he considered a produce, the services of a cowboy. Ironically, here it is actually triggered due to Case’s inability to be able to disassociate his mind from his body to surf the Net. This way, as a member of society and as a consumer you end up devaluing your original physical human form which is then viewed as just a canvas to add onto for sheer amusement, or a shell to abandon. Just as Case talks of how cowboys view the body as a weakness compared to the relative freedom of using the Net, so can Molly be viewed as distancing herself just as much metaphorically from her body, seeing her mind as a true representation of herself and that the body is only a tool, to be reinforced to overcome what is seen as weakness. She is no longer a whole person but rather different components which are not fully combined as they are able to integrate and upgrade and modify, which she herself demonstrates with her already-impressive cybernetic implants and physiological alterations. She views her “natural” form as a weakness and seeks to lose herself in technology.
Using Molly as an example, we are seeing what exactly this future truly values, hoping to achieve some level of transcendence but instead falling into the trap of losing the value of the only thing that they truly can value, their entire human existence, both physical and mental. Gibson’s voice in the trilogy criticizes as well as actively deconstructs socially-acceptable commodification and consumer culture. This voice is advocating a radical power restructuring which will, in time, lead toward a posthuman evolution for mankind.

This raises the question as to whether or not this hybrid of visual style and physical modification truly a state of being posthuman. Is it a state of existence where modern technologies are applied to human bodies or, as Jill Didur notes in “Re-Embodying Technoscientific Fantasies: Posthumanism, Genetically Modified Foods, and the Colonization of Life,” the union of the human with the intelligent machine (100), a hybrid of two life forms? If we utilize the humanist definition of man as a rational and autonomous thinking being, then we’re left with the question of how someone can further “improve,” such a state. Is it hybridization with artificial means as commonly viewed, augmenting a preexisting form while maintaining that form’s basic core similar to Molly, whose natural physical systems are working faster and better than a natural human beings? Or rather is it Didur’s idea of hybridization to form a true posthuman of existence where the new life form has aspect of both “parents” but is still an entirely new form, like the product of the union between the Major and the hacker antagonist of the series known as the Puppetmaster? Didur states that her model of hybridization, while it might appear to be only hypothetical at this point, is in fact true model of posthumanism.
In her definition of the state of the posthuman, she cites the examples of genetically modified crops and plant life utilizing gene therapy. Proponents of this definition compare it to mechanized programming, and that genetic material is synonymous with computer data. It can be viewed as the transfer of data between organic machines. To her, the argument for considering the artificial augmentation of crops with genetic traits to “improve” them fails to truly meet the standards of “hybridity” that define a state of posthuman, or in this case, post-plant. In plant life, such manipulation results in less a hybrid, and more of an “augmented” original plant, as at its base we are left not with a new form of life but rather simply a different form of the original plant (105-106).

This is reflected in the stereotypical image of the cyberpunk posthuman, visibly augmented with mechanical devices and prosthetics. They are not posthuman examples of Didur’s hybrid theory but rather a stereotypical artificial fusions of the organic and technological that is visually seen as part of the cyberpunk “image.”

Creating a definition of the Didur-esque hybrid by using an example to illustrate the point is extremely difficult. It would be impossible to truly combine two forms, one living and one mechanical, in a totally new form as she describes. The closest possible analog is human reproduction, where the end result is a child. A child is a new form created from aspects of combining matter form two sources, but in the end is still a unique individual that only shares similar characteristics to the root. Even then, that child is still a human being, and both its parents are the same. It has the same natural limitations as the parents, which means it is nowhere near a
perfect representation of Didur’s posthumanist ideal because the two source materials are the same.

As some criticism of posthumanism notes, including *Toward A Critique of Posthuman Futures* by Bart Simon, it is a destructive concept that ends up with augmentation regardless of social cost, creating not hybridization of new life forms that work as entirely new entities but rather as a deliberate distancing from both the physical and the mental/philosophical state of man, with no regard for the effects such a state of existence might do to the surrounding world. This dystopic model is the example that most critics will fall back on when presenting a case against posthumanism. Critics will focus on a character appearing to be the ideal fusion of two initially separate forms, but in the end can be pointed out as actually having flaws in their hybridized existence that defer to the innate superiority to *homo sapiens*. Such models in what would be considered “old-guard” pre-cyberpunk science fiction are the bases of the concepts of posthumanism that Simon and other detractors of posthumanism are basing their models of criticism on. The argument presents the problem that should humanity proceeds towards such an existence, it is destined to fail in continuing to survive and propagate.

However, one has to wonder about the validity of such an argument, Gibson is arguing that modern science (or at least future science) will not be reaching for what have been seen as conventional goals in the race for posthumanism. Rather, the examples that we are presented with here in the Sprawl trilogy are reflective of non-conventional approaches to science. The climax of the “Sprawl” trilogy itself speaks to such a non-conventional model for posthumanism, in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. 
The climax of the action at the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is the reader’s view through Angie’s eyes as her full capabilities as a wireless conduit for the Net and the loa is, for lack of a better phrase, “fully activated.”

The man with the ragged crest of hair, in black beaded leather, is Thomas Trail Gentry (as birth data and SIN digits cascade through her) of no fixed address (as a different facet informs her that this room is his). Past a gray wash of official data graces, faintly marbled with the Fission Authority’s repeated pink suspicions of utilities fraud, she finds him in a different light: he is like one of Bobby’s cowboys; though young, he is like the old men of the Gentlemen Loser; he is an autodidact, an eccentric, obsessed, by his own lights a scholar; he is mad, a nightrunner, guilty (in Mamman’s view, in Legba’s) of manifold heresies; […] Molly like the girl Mona, is SINless, birth unregistered yet around her name (names) swarm galaxies of supposition, rumor, conflicting data. Streetgirl, prostitute, bodyguard assassin, she mingles on the manifold planes with the shadows of heroes and villains whose names mean nothing to Angie, […]. – (Gibson 284-285)

We have seen interpretations of cyberspace and hacking earlier in *Neuromancer* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, but what is being described here is something different. Stylistically, it still draws on Gibson’s form of utilizing stream-of-consciousness to incorporate a series of linear descriptions into what is meant to symbolize a single second of instantaneous information realization. However, the moment is not in representing conventional hacking through a conventional console and headpiece. Rather it is Angie’s unique form of viewing the Net that combines the one-of-a-kind modifications her father is revealed to have given her in *Count Zero* and her own immersion in the beliefs in the loa of the Web as genuine spiritual entities.

Angie is a unique individual in the series, and in *Count Zero*, we finally see her true potential. She not only channels the loa or surfs the net, but also reaches out
to the Net for vast stores of data. By contrast, cowboys like Case or the Count are unable to interact with the physical world when hacking. In the end, being able to move into a peaceful existence within the aleph, unlike Lady 3Jane and her desire to achieve immortality in the web, Angie is a true posthuman. She is not consciously attempting to maintain her humanity, that is to say her personality, while also becoming similar to the sentient and free AI’s of cyberspace. This transformation is unlike what Angie goes through. Angie allows for herself to be changed at a very deep level, making her literally become the metaphorical line between man and machine and also represent humanity giving up on certain social structures such as the extreme commodification and consumerist-driven facets of culture. Lady 3Jane’s idea of immortality on the web was still tied into her ideas of how the world works. To her, she could gain web immortality, and exist forever, but still maintain her original identity, personality, and maintain a grip over her holdings. This is contrary to the idea of such a transformation, because when Angie changes, she does not view it as a potential for economic gain or personal immortality. She knows she has been chosen as the first example of the next step of human evolution to show that it is simply a new way to exist in a world so intricately tied to the Net.

This transformation will allow for more fluidity in the move towards posthumanist ideals of true hybridity as described by Didur, segments of both “parents” but still identifiably unique, a one-of-a-kind being. Without the shackles of preconceived notions about how humanity can survive connected to the net and technology (Lady 3Jane’s issue as she struggled to maintain her personality and notions of power and manipulation), a metaphor for consumerism and conventional
social power structures, we can make greater strides towards the radical social changes that trigger improvements in society and quality of life.

In her evolution, her movement towards a new level of existence, she is proving the undertones of radicalism and radical means to instigate change of the story and Gibson’s analysis, which highlights the power of a non-traditional, bottom-up change in a power structure. Lady 3Jane represents a more traditional top-down style of governing/controlling and managing of power and information, and in her failure to win out, not to mention her dismissal of the power that our other protagonists have such as Case, Molly, Angie, Bobby, and Gentry, she represents a failing traditional power structure that is disassembled by a non-traditional “attack” against the structure, for lack of a better term.

As the head of a powerful corporation/family which is described as archaic even by the standards of the world of the sprawl in Neuromancer, 3Jane is an epitome of old-fashioned power and wealth, no matter how radically she applies technologies in her quest for immortality. Our Sprawl protagonists demonstrate that their strengths lie in their non-traditional processes and backgrounds, mostly from lower and criminal social classes, originating their actions and changes from the “bottom” (the lower socioeconomic classes that compose the majority of the population of the Sprawl), helping to instigate a radial evolutionary option of posthumanism.

In my opinion, Gibson meant this to be a metaphor for radical new options for a society that has allowed itself to become consumer-oriented to the point of ridiculousness. He is not necessarily advocating a specific blueprint for change though, just pointing out that there is an alternative that flouts conventional social
norms and social structures, and that can bypass the seemingly built-in difficulties of changing a society.

It is this realization of Gibson’s “Sprawl” as an ideal representation of cyberpunk and posthumanism that helps to discount the criticisms of cyberpunk in general and Gibson in particular. In Stockton’s essay “‘The Self Regained’: Cyberpunk’s Retreat to the Imperium,” Stockton says that Gibson’s cyberpunk world represents a hybrid new world/form, comparable to the relatively virgin and untouched American West before western expansion and Manifest Destiny. While criticism focuses on cyberpunk as merely a science-fiction representation of capitalist societies, Stockton is in fact arguing that the consumerist-oriented nature of such a society, a key element of Gibson’s world, has actually truly evolved society into a different state of existence. It is “nature defined as raw material,” drawing a comparison to the concept of the unexplored Wild West of the 19th-century US, while at the same time representing the information and consumer good-heavy culture that Gibson is representing here (Stockton 589). Modern culture (or at least in the 1980’s when Gibson started writing) is arguably only starting to fully embrace post-capitalism/consumerism, still clashing with older models of capitalism. These types of insights to culture and social trends have helped to cyberpunk.

And yet, the genre does have its detractors. One example is Kathryn Lindberg’s criticisms of Gibson’s world and cyberpunk in general in “Prosthetic Memories and Prophylactic Politics: William Gibson among the Subjective Mechanisms.” Her primary argument is that for all its apparent “groundbreaking” work in pushing the limits of science fiction and literature in general by “undo[ing]
stable models of literary authorship,” cyberpunk still does fall into traditional storytelling models and, more importantly, into role assignments for gendered and character archetypes (50).

She presents a feminist analysis of the archetype of the “cowboy” and the implication of its inherent sexual power, such as *Neuromancer*’s Case, or what Bobby from *Count Zero* aspires to. According to Lindberg, one can look at the matrix itself as a passive field, already described as a sort of “New World” that only true outsiders, players in underground but nonetheless existent capitalist economies literally mine/penetrate for their own gain. It is, arguably, a view of the matrix as feminine and the anti-hero protagonist, an increasingly popular literary character at the time, as a decidedly masculine force. Furthermore, in essentially evolving the so-called “classic” character archetype of the pulp hero of noir fiction, Gibson’s cyber-cowboys are even further disproving his attempts to be truly “groundbreaking.” Instead they supposedly just fall back on generally familiar stylistic tools of writing and character molds (Lindberg 50).

Case from *Neuromancer* arguably falls into one of these familiar roles as the pulp hero, similar to the more modern concept of the anti-hero. He is, in the beginning, a mercenary, working merely to improve his own lot in life and has no qualms working the morally gray or even outright illegal aspects of his chosen profession. He actually works almost entirely in the underground economy of the Sprawl’s black market, having only contempt for corporate workers, arguably even those in the same or similar fields of study as him.
While Gibson may borrow from both the classic pulp hero as well as Phillip K. Dick’s more abstract and philosophical applications of philosophy in science fiction, he nonetheless manages to not necessarily ape either. He expands on these aspects, utilizing the “pulp hero” character to explore what he saw as an emerging new world. The future that Gibson sees will inevitably have issues regarding gender roles, sexual discrimination, and sex, because it is meant to reflect the society that he was and still is living in. It is meant to represent the imperfect world, so that the imperfections can be critically looked at and deconstructed. And unfortunately there are far too many imperfections to be able to look at them all. Lindberg’s argument is that Gibson’s protagonists such as Case are representing the cyberpunk anti-hero model as inevitably macho and penetrative “violators” of the fabric of cyberspace. Thus they are nowhere near as groundbreaking as they are viewed as. This makes Gibson’s portrayal of female characters as being commodified and victims of a separation of mind from body moot.

Of course a consumer-oriented culture would view Molly like that, and of course Case would represent the almost “archaic” noir anti-hero protagonist, falling into that role as a social outsider. They’re far from ideals, and Gibson is not making a case for an ideal future at all. He is simply utilizing a realistic character type for his protagonist. He created a setting that is purposefully imperfect and dystopic, necessitating an imperfect cast of characters.

This imperfect world has nonetheless been deemed by readers and fans as the ideal form of science fiction setting. The direct impact of Gibson’s books have expanded worldwide, inspiring similar settings and stories like Shirow Masamune’s
groundbreaking 1991 manga *Ghost In The Shell*. *Ghost In The Shell* stands as the most direct example of Gibson’s vision maintaining a direct influence on not only science fiction, but also literature in general, stylistically as well as thematically. At the time the story is set, the world has undergone radical changes in both the technological and the sociopolitical structure. Thus, our protagonists are operating against a backdrop where groundbreaking technologies are being manipulated for not only obvious criminal purposes but also in other morally and legally gray areas that while not appearing overtly criminal still help facilitate illegal activity. Artificial intelligence is a new technology that is heavily monitored, prostitution continues and has adapted with new technologies, drugs and organized crime are still prevalent, and computer hackers have risen in the public and law enforcement eye as threats to not only technology but also to public safety. The fluidity of geographical and political borders have slowly blurred in this world, redefined by the unstoppable reach of technology and the internet.

Having spawned a sequel graphic novel, three movies, and two seasons of a cartoon television show, *Ghost In The Shell* documents the adventures of a Motoko Kusanagi, a cyborg that leads a team of similarly-enhanced operatives in a futuristic Japan as a covert operations group for the Japanese Ground Defense Forces, specializing in cybernetic and computerized crimes of varying degrees from international terrorism to home-grown hacking. All-around, technology and cyberization have had an impact on this society, not only expanding theoretical possibilities but also being entwined with crime on multiple levels, from international terrorism all the way down to petty theft. This leads to the existence of characters
like Kusanagi, who is the focus of the story in almost every incarnation of the franchise.

Along the way, she and other characters debate, against a backdrop not unlike the one Gibson describes the Sprawl in *Neuromancer*, using technologies and having to deal with a variety of technological issues, as well as philosophical issues that stem from the new and dangerous applications of these technologies.

While some things in this future seem familiar to us such as garbage overflow, political corruption scandals, or war refugee issues, many of such discussions actually stem from that fast-dissolving line that divides human beings from machines in their world, as well as the implications of pushing the boundaries of what the standards set for defining “humanity” are, as artificial intelligences continue to become more and more advanced and more and more human beings have almost entirely mechanized bodies save for their brains.

Kusanagi herself, in the chapter introducing the readers to the intricacies of cybernetic/prosthetic body manufacturing, actually debates her own existence (Masamune 108), as she is entirely artificial save for her brain and brain stem/spinal cord base. She herself cannot confirm the existence of her body visually, and relies on the assurances of others that she has one. Is she, as she asks, merely an artificial intelligence programmed into thinking she is human? Are her memories really just pre-programmed simulated experiences that she thinks are real? And if she were, would she be afforded the civil rights that fully-human beings have? Should she be afforded such rights?
The overlapping theme of the original manga challenges then-current conventional issues of identity against a technologically-advanced backdrop. This then leads to an entirely one-of-a-kind new evolution in the story, when the Major chooses to fuse herself (her ghost/mind) with an artificial intelligence program that gained sentience on its own. This forms an original life form that was born entirely as a result of the Web, mimicking organic procreation but lacking in any external influences. This new form was not “invented,” but rather came about on its own.

It is the tackling of this metaphorical line between Shirow’s posthuman characters and ever-expanding influence of technology on the world around them, that we see the true cyberpunk leanings of *Ghost In The Shell*. The protagonists feel that the issue of their identities and humanity, their “ghosts,” is incredibly important. Hacking into someone’s ghost is a crime tantamount to rape, as it is a fundamental identifying marker of someone in the *Ghost In The Shell* world. A ghost is what makes you human.

One of the storylines in the *Ghost In The Shell* manga, as well as the main plot of the first film, is Kusanagi’s encounter with the rogue computer hacker known as the Puppet Master. He is initially introduced as being internationally wanted and is purportedly impossible to capture or even witness in action. The Puppet Master is eventually revealed to be not just a hacker, but actually a runaway American intelligence computer program unleashed upon the World Wide Web, where thanks to exposure to all the available information out there, achieves true sentience and seeks asylum with Kusanagi. The entity highlights that it is not an artificial intelligence, but rather a unique being that was “born” and “learned”, rather than instantly
activated with full levels of cognition and awareness. The Puppet Master, an electronic/data-based being, “evolved” into an entirely new form when exposed to the almost sinful glut of data that freely floats, available, in the Internet, something that it/he/she expresses a desire to continue to do, before being forced into asking for asylum from the Japanese.

Throughout the novel, Major Kusanagi questions her existence as a cyborg, and acknowledges the limitations of her existence. When faced with the option to actually merge her self, or “ghost,” with the Puppet Master himself (343), the two emerge as an entirely new entity (essentially having truly reproduced in a facsimile of biological reproduction, the desired goal of Puppet Master), eager to explore the world ahead of them and slyly inferring similarities between the real world and the digital plane (350).

Having initially stemmed from a biological source (the Major) and a digital source (the Puppet Master), this new life form is similar to the model that Gibson presented in Angie at the end of Mona Lisa Overdrive. This resultant life-form is the “true” posthuman ideal that Didur talked about in her essay. A new and different life form that while it displays traits of both metaphorical parents/parent components, is unique, just like the new form that presents itself to Case at the end of Neuromancer (269). While this being has no physical form to be able to move between the physical and digital planes, it is still a unique being formed from aspects of both “parents” (Neuromancer and Wintermute), while still maintaining individuality and uniqueness of form in the universe. Just as communications have evolved into radical new forms not only to keep up but also reflect the time, as Didur says, so has this new entity
evolved to have both personality and drive and solve the existential crisis that Wintermute was experiencing in its desire to merge with Neuromancer. Similarly, the Major evolved to allow her to solve her crises of existence by becoming a new being that combines aspects of both the physical and the digital worlds that isn’t merely how she was before, with an organic mind inside a mechanical body.

The metaphorical line between man and machine has, at that moment, been totally crossed, if not outright erased.

Obviously while not an entirely point-by-point copy, the concept of an artificial/digital life form seeking freedom and reaching a new “level” of existence is remarkably similar to *Neuromancer*. And while the AI Neuromancer and Puppet Master may have appeared to be at different ends of the spectrum (with Neuromancer wanting to merge with the Net and become interwoven into the fabric of cyberspace, lacking any sort of true identity such as before thanks to now being “all,” so to speak), versus Puppet Master’s desires of humanity, in the end both are attempting the same thing. They are attempting to become human.

However, there are several key differences between these two scenarios. One is that while the Sprawl trilogy focuses on “renegades” and other people who are either passively or actively involved in illegal activities, as well as non-conventional lives such as the voodoo colony in the high-rise or Gentry and Henry out in the badlands, the world that we see in *Ghost In The Shell* takes the point of view of law enforcement. The Major’s commando team, Section 9, specifically deal with technology-oriented, large-scale crimes, such as hackers. If anything, Section 9 would be the equivalent of Gibson’s Turing Police, who are seen in *Neuromancer*
maintaining the status quo of keeping AI’s in check and arresting hackers and illegal information carriers. The confrontation between the Puppet Master and Section 9 and the debate over whether or not the AI can actually ask for asylum could quite easily be transplanted into Gibson’s world and renamed into a scene involving Wintermute and the Turning Cops.

A larger part of Ghost In The Shell also focuses more on internal clashes rather than on affecting change on a grand scale such as the ending of Neuromancer, though there is a large-scale change at the end of the story revolving around the Major. Even at the end of the personal evolution of Angie in Mona Lisa Overdrive, it is still part of a large “clash” in the Net between radical forces and the “old world” power of Lady 3Jane, because who knows what would have happened to cyberspace if she had managed to achieve what she wanted, a form of posthuman immortality? In the Major’s personal storyline we instead see an introspective battle with her own insecurities, where the stakes are great to her in that her own ghost and continued existence are in the balance, but the issue is not poised to affect change on the entirety of the World Wide Web.

It is interesting to see the literal comparisons between the trilogy and the Ghost In The Shell franchise, especially on these points. It certainly shows just how profound a stylistic and thematic impact the “Sprawl” had. Although these days such ideas of overgrown metropolis settings as the vision of the future, and artificial intelligence systems may not seem too outlandish (in the post-“Sprawl” world science fiction franchises such as Terminator and The Matrix focus on the
relationships/battles between humanity and sentient machines), at the time it was a groundbreaking literary breakthrough.

There are multiple threads of thought when it comes to Gibson’s “Sprawl,” and we have touched on several of them. However, all of these threads do connect into a single argument about Gibson’s advocacy of posthumanism and just how much an influence he has been. Even schools of thought that are making a case against this hypothesis, such as Lindberg’s arguments on cyberpunk, can arguably be seen as working in its favor. After all, in creating an argument against a point, one has in theory legitimized and affirmed the validity of cyberpunk in the canon. And throughout its history, cyberpunk, like science fiction itself, has struggled for this acceptance.

Regardless of how one looks at specifics about the definitions of cyberpunk and posthumanism, we are still left with William Gibson and his “Sprawl” trilogy credited as not only the forefather of cyberpunk, but also of a specific form of posthumanism. It is a vision that is about breaking away from conventional standards of culture and utilizing non-conventional means to make changes. Gibson’s criticisms of culture and society in the Sprawl trilogy advocate an evolution towards a state of existence that rejects the social phenomena that he saw as corruptive and were being misinterpreted as being posthuman.

Instead he was moving more toward the creation of an entirely new type of life form, an existence that not only moves effortlessly between the physical and the digital realms but also does not place either one above the other. Gibson’s conclusion is that pathways towards change that follow non-traditional pathways towards
completion are the only effective ways to go about executing radical changes not only in culture, but humanity overall. It is a conclusion that has changed the way that science fiction works. That *Ghost In The Shell* later picked up on Gibson’s themes and reflects the direct influence of Gibson’s style attests to the power of the “Sprawl” trilogy’s legacy.
Works Cited


