

Neuromancer and the Question of Architectural Space^{*}

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My first encounter with the notion of literary architecture or architectural space in the literary work came in the form of a gift item on sale in a bookstore. The item in question was pop-up book of literary buildings, and as one turned the pages three-dimensional cardboard models of famous literary homes such as Mansfield Park and Thornfield Hall sprung up to meet the reader. This amusing if somewhat cumbersome novelty seemed quite compellingly to suggest that the architecture represented in novels might be an important nexus of meaning in the literary text, albeit one which we often take for granted when immersed in the narrative richness of our favourite books. Indeed, the structures readers call to mind as they make their way through literary texts often recede into the background as one proceeds. For the reader, literary architecture is more often than not out-shone by the fascinating parade of paper beings that pause on a staircases, conduct trysts in drawing rooms, or waltz out of a crowded ballrooms.

My next encounter with the topic was in a seminar taught by Hugh Kenner on the relationship of narrative to architecture and structure. The seminar addressed literary form from an historical perspective, beginning with oral narratives and how they were remembered, transmitted and eventually preserved. As the Kenner explained, those who carried and passed on oral narratives developed methods for structuring and holding stories in the recesses of their minds that worked together with mnemonic indicators in the narrative itself. Storytellers therefore, served as a sort of public cultural archive who stored bytes of narrative memory in structures “built” in the imagination with specialised compartments, resembling an imaginary

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storehouse. These imaginary compartments could then be accessed like files on a hard drive as the storyteller worked through his tale, prompted by mnemonic phrases such as “the rosy fingers of dawn.”

In this article I will address the notion of literary architecture, as it interacts with narrative imagination and memory in William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. Writing in the early 1980s, the author created a bizarre and not entirely futuristic possible world, aspects of which have since become the standard typology for films like *Johnny Mnemonic* and the *Matrix* trilogy. Importantly, the architecture of the futuristic cities that make up *Neuromancer* is constantly and self-consciously foregrounded and impacts dramatically on the bodies that populate the text. My intention here is to examine architectural structures in *Neuromancer*; how they are erected and function in the text; and further how the architectural space recounted therein guides and constitutes both the characters in the text and readers as they make their way through it. I will also argue that *Neuromancer* provides an interesting context in which to raise questions about subjectivity and architecture because of the arresting nature of the subjects and structures that inhabit it.

I will also be concerned with *Neuromancer*’s reputation as a pivotal, genre-defining text and with the attention devoted to it by Gibson’s many readers in new media and film as well as in philosophy, cultural analysis and literary studies. Interest in *Neuromancer* as a work of literature is at least partially attributable to its status as the first cyberpunk novel and therefore as the possible origin of an emergent literary genre. At the same time, because much of the novel’s action takes place in cyberspace, it has become an important text for people working in new media and film.

On the other hand, philosophers like Donna J. Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles refer to Gibson’s work in connection with questions of being and subjectivity in *Neuromancer*. Such authors’ interest in Gibson centers on his posthuman characters, constructed along a grid that ranges from human to machine and embraces every shade and shape in between. Moreover, *Neuromancer* in particular constantly raises the question of subjectivity and sentience, engendering no dearth of meditation on what it means to be human, what it means to be a cyborg and how both states came to define subjectivity in late post-modern society.

And finally, on the side of the reader, *Neuromancer* has come to define how we imagine and project the architectural space of the net, supplying the visual syntax of films, T.V. shows and websites as well as

metaphors like the “information highway,” the notion of flat lining as a cool thing, and rock groups with names like the Meat Puppets. In what follows then I will address Gibson’s fictional architecture and how it relates to narrative and subjectivity.

NEUROMANCER AND DIFFICULTY

Having made these preliminary comments, a brief description of *Neuromancer*’s notoriously difficult plot and freakish characters is now in order. The novel begins by asking the reader to accept a futuristic setting in the Japanese port town of Chiba, where “the sky above [the harbour] was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel” (Gibson 1984: 3). The reader’s attention is then directed to Case, the twenty-four year old protagonist, as he is served by a bartender whose “prosthetic arm jerk[s] monotonously as he fill[s] a tray of glasses with draft Kirin” (p. 3). Much attention is devoted to the sheer ugliness of this prosthetically enhanced bartender, whose repulsive appearance has become “the stuff of legend” in this “age of affordable beauty” (p. 4). The reader is alerted to the significance of the bartender’s refusal to smooth over his ugliness through plastic surgery as having “something heraldic about [...] it” as it constitutes an assertion of natural circumstance in this futuristic fictional world (p. 4). And indeed, as one of the millions of inhabitants of this city whose name is “synonymous with implants, nerve-splicing, and microbionics” and cosmetic surgery, hanging onto one’s ugliness while sporting a sophisticated digitalised limb seems somehow quaintly stubborn (p. 6).

Case, we soon discover, is in Chiba trying to find an underground clinic that can reverse a castigating medical treatment performed on him for double-crossing his former employers. Case’s work for these corporate criminals as a cyber cowboy previously involved jacking “into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix” (Gibson 1984: 5). While in the matrix, Case was expected to harvest information for these “wealthier thieves [...] who provided the exotic software required to penetrate the bright walls of corporate systems, opening windows into rich fields of data” (p. 5). Everything goes according to plan we read, until he tries to front some of their information for himself through a fence in Amsterdam. The “wartime Russian microtoxin” with which Case is then treated in punishment for this transgression leaves him with damage “minute, subtle and utterly effective”, simply

destroying his ability to jack into cyberspace (p. 6). The resulting drama in the text amounts to Case's quest to permanently regain "the bodiless exultation of cyberspace" and to return to virtual reality from his post-lapsarian condition in the "prison of his own flesh" – a prison to which he refers as "meat" (p. 6).

The loosely defined agency that can provide Case's cyborg redemption is an artificial intelligence known as Wintermute. The AI wants him to crack the "intrusion countermeasures electronics" known as "ice," that protect a multinational corporation's space station (Gibson 1984: 28). Case's cyber-access is restored by the AI temporarily in order to enable him to perform his task, but only under stringent conditions. The same surgeons who repair the deterioration caused by the Russian microtoxin also plant new sacks of toxin inside his veins, which will flood his system with lethal poisons if he fails, but will be removed allowing him permanent free access to the matrix should he succeed.

For the difficult task of cracking the ice and stealing the required information Case is assigned a partner named Molly who, like Case, is highly specialised. Molly's various implants include microchannel amps set into her lower teeth that she can click on and off with her tongue, and retractable razor blades set in under her fingernails – formidable accoutrements that earn her the monikers of "Razorgirl" and "Stepping Razor." Molly is also endowed with surgically inset sunglasses behind which she receives constant information read-outs, including the exact time to the minute and second, text messages, and her health specs.

I wrote above that *Neuromancer* is known for its conceptual difficulty, and indeed the novel seems to be located at the point at which possible worlds and reception theoreticians tell us that readers will disengage with a text because it has strayed too far from their horizon of expectations.¹ Yet at the same time the plot adheres closely to the logic of the classic heist narrative, and is indeed causal if not linear, building to a denouement and a resolution somewhat in the tradition of the classic novel. One might object however that characterisation is destabilised as Case is frequently transferred into Molly's body through a programme called Simstim, so that her perspective takes over. But even this turns out to be nothing more than a sort of radical shot-reverse-shot which most readers rapidly get the hang of through their implicit knowledge of cinematic conventions.

It seems likewise unlikely that the text's difficulty can be attributed to its depiction of the urban and architectural space through which the reader is asked to navigate. Gibson's construct of urban sprawl known as BAMA in the text, consists of a Metropolitan Axis connecting Boston to Atlanta, through which Case and Molly arrive at concourses in Narita, Schipol and Orly. Hence the urban space which one is called upon to conjure in the hermeneutic exercise of the text is ultimately scarcely more chaotic than urban landscapes that contemporary readers negotiate in their daily lives. Indeed *Neuromancer* threatens little more confusion than that most postmodern of cities, Atlanta, Georgia, which has earned this dubious distinction by refusing the notion of a centre and naming over 150 of its streets Peachtree-something.² Remarkably enough however, even contemporary readers whom one might expect to have caught up with the novel by now, continue to associate *Neuromancer* with readerly difficulty.

ARCHITECTURE AND THE TEXT

In order to address this seeming incongruity between readers' frequent reaction to *Neuromancer* and ostensible lack of quantifiable or logical textual difficulty, I will now turn to authors who have analysed the question of architecture and its relation to literature. One such author is Ellen Eve Frank (1979) who has argued that there is a correspondence between all forms of structure in her book *Literary Architecture: Essays Toward a Tradition*. Here Frank explains that all structures have either "actual spatial extension in the physical world [as in architecture] or the language of special extension in the world of thought" as in literature (p. 7). What the experience of both types of architecture helps us to understand is how external structures relate to internal structures and how in turn one makes sense of the former as a function of the latter. According to Frank, this process embodies an understanding of what it means to be and to abide in the moment of translating the space of architecture – of the abode – into another medium. And given what the author sees as these characteristics of architecture, she goes on to suggest that both literary and material architecture "provide a means of preserving or memorializing the past, and identity, even as it provides for the transformation of that past and being into literary art" (p. 13). Writing in the late 70s Frank then concludes that this potential for preservation comes at a time when "the temporal past as well as all concepts of identity threaten to

disappear” (p. 13). Finally, she asserts, architecture “is about our experience of being *alive*” and “literary architecture celebrates the perceiving mind of the self; but it does so never at the expense of the universe or whole, never to the exclusion of the world” (p. 9).

These then are the basic tenets of Frank’s argument, and although she wrote this some time ago and is referring to the work of authors like Walter Pater and Henry James, I think her argument is useful as a sort of reverse definition of architecture in *Neuromancer*. To begin with, far from serving as a stable repository for shared cultural memory, the architectural space of *Neuromancer* in the “real” world outside the matrix is described as random and impossibly incoherent. The planners of one of its microworlds – Straylight – designed it as a “craziness grown in the resin of concrete they’d mixed from pulverised lunar stone, grown in welded steel [with] tons of knick-knacks, all the bizarre impedimenta they’d shipped up the well to line their winding nest” (p. 202). Case frequently complains that he has no idea where he is and while “everything [is] familiar, he [can’t] be sure he[’s] seen any particular stretch before. A curving hallway lined with wooden showcases, display[ing] collections he was certain he’d never seen: the skulls of large birds, coins, masks of beaten silver” (p. 231). Similarly, a chest of drawers in which Molly finds the key to the Villa at the heart of Straylight holds an impossible and disquieting collection of unrelated objects. The third drawer she comes upon contains “dull beads of solder and a small brown thing that looked like a human finger bone. The fourth drawer held a damp-swollen copy of an obsolete technical manual in French and Japanese” (p. 180).

Hence neither the cityscapes nor the domestic spaces of *Neuromancer* offer its denizens a sense of cohesive identity or macro-narrative from which a construct of the self could be extrapolated. Significantly enough then, even the instruction manual that Molly stumbles on in her recognisance mission to the Villa is obsolete and written in two languages she does not speak. More importantly, if the random objects that form the microenvironments of *Neuromancer* ever do accidentally manage preserve some fragment of the past, there is never any effort made to connect them with a normative logic that might give good narrative. In other words, Gibson refuses to pleasure the reader by providing us with literary conventions such as legible architecture that constitute part of the effortless enjoyment of reading Austen or Dickens.

Likewise, the kind of understanding that Frank sees as resulting from the transfer of external to internal architectural structure constantly misfires in *Neuromancer*, because external structures are all threatening, disquieting, but most importantly, *temporary*. Rather than occasioning the kind of historical continuity that this transfer supposedly entails, or a sense of stable identity, *Neuromancer* is filled with characters with no sense of history and the sketchiest of forms. Here the rooms decorated in “the style of improvised fixtures suggest[ing] childhood...fortresses built with children on rooftops and in flooded sub-basements. A rich kid’s hideout, [Case] thought. This kind of roughness was expensive. What they call atmosphere” (p. 209). So even when architecture in the novel is over-designed and expensive it is made to look temporary and unfinished like a child’s hide-out. The comparison with a flooded sub-basement also signals a post apocalyptic environment animated by violently random events. This in fact is a possible world in which “entire subcultures could rise overnight, thrive for a dozen weeks, and then vanish entirely” (p. 58). The cities of *Neuromancer*, as Dani Cavallaro has written in his book on cyber culture, function as an “impenetrable palimpsest, resulting from an incremental stratification of historical occurrences which, somewhat paradoxically, render history itself unintelligible” (p. 146).

The novel’s other architectural space is the seemingly boundless matrix, endowed with its own fictional ontology, volume and depth. This is Case’s “country, [a] transparent 3D chess board extending to infinity” an “infinite blue space ranged with colour-coded spheres strung on a tight grid of pale blue neon. In the nonspace of the matrix, the interior of a given data construct possessed unlimited subjective dimension; [...] presented limitless gulfs of nothingness hung with a few basic commands” (Gibson 1984: 52). Hence to refer to Frank again as a sort of reverse definition, Gibson’s matrix is disturbingly capable of infinity and of becoming the only universe that counts precisely “at the expense of the universe as a whole [...] and] to the exclusion of the world” (Frank 1979: 9). As the narrator tells us, the text’s “burgeoning technologies require outlaw zones” such as Night city which isn’t “there for its inhabitants, but as a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself (Gibson 1984: 11). In other words, Gibson’s novelistic cityscapes have nothing to do with memory and the preservation of subjective plenitude, and everything to do with alienation and dispersal.

But perhaps the most significant contrast between Frank's notion of architecture and that of *Neuromancer* is that the former is concerned with "our experience of being *alive*" because "literary architecture celebrates the perceiving mind of the self" (Frank 1979: 9). Gibson's novel is rather peopled by flatliners stored in computer memories and ancient denizens sustained with regenerated flesh on every part of their body save the tell-tale knuckles which still present a challenge to plastic surgery. And again, this is reflected in the architectural space presented in the text, where Case's hovel in Cheap Hotel rents out minimal, press-form rooms known in the vernacular of the text as "coffins." This then is neither the experience nor the architecture of "being alive" which according to Frank celebrates the human mind and its capacity for perception.

VIRTUAL ARCHITECTURE

If the novel does contain architectural memory and perceiving subjects in Frank's sense they are related to what might seem a surprising antecedent. The ethereal architecture of Gibson's matrix we are told, "has its roots in primitive arcade games" (Gibson 1984: 51).³ The relationship between video games and the architecture of *Neuromancer*'s possible worlds is certainly not gratuitous and I would argue that it provides readers with a valuable clue to the logic of the text and the kind of posthuman subjects that inhabit it. Consider for example, Case's vantage point from inside Molly's head, from where we are told that he can make out "enough of her arms and hands" to grasp what is going on (Gibson 1984: 175). This perspective is one which gamers immediately recognise as that of the first person shooter, which essentially means that Case has moved from spending a lot of time in arcades to physically projecting himself into an avatar.

In terms of how Case understands himself as a subject, it is furthermore not without significance that many of his most important experiences and indeed his only tender memory in the entire novel, are directly linked to the video game arcade. Hence, as he thinks back on his earliest and most poignant memories of his old girlfriend Linda Lee whom he suspects has been murdered, he is stricken by the image of her in an arcade where he watched as she played a game called *Wizard's Castle*:

[H]er cheekbones flar[ed] scarlet as Wizard's Castle burned, forehead drenched with azure when Munich fell to the Turk war, mouth touched

with hot gold as a gliding cursor struck sparks from the waste of a
skyscraper canyon. (p. 8)

In this scene it should be noted, Linda Lee's otherwise remarkably featureless face comes alive in the light from the screen that bathes her in washes of colour. The metaphorical implication seems to be therefore that she has blended more or less seamlessly with the machine. Her merger with the technology is in fact so complete that her physical engagement with the program constitutes her emotional input and output.

Be this as it may, one might object that early, or in Gibson's words "primitive" videogames – games which would include Pong and Pac Man – hardly seem likely candidates to become significant and emblematic features of our shared past. One might equally object that video games are certainly not the sort of the philosophically weighty or culturally profound objects that would qualify for memorialization and preservation in the sense that Frank implies. Yet Gibson repeatedly implies some form of parallel between the architecture of the micro worlds in which his characters circulate, videogames, the matrix and the structure of his own text.

The parallel Gibson draws ultimately resides, I believe, in certain shared features of premodernism and postmodernism that theoreticians like Vlad Godzich and Rebecca Comay have cautiously pointed out.⁴ A parallel can be seen for example in premodern and postmodern constructs of subjectivity, keeping in mind that the former subjective construct pre-existed the modern conceptualisation of the individual, while the latter follows it. In this view pre- and postmodern subjectivity are seen as lacking a distinct outline, which makes for a more permeable, less rigid subjective construct than the modern individual was thought to have. Appropriately then, postmodern subjects, and particularly those in *Neuromancer*, see themselves as fluid constructions that favour androgyny, and trouble the borders between male and female, and more dramatically between nature and technology. As Cavallaro writes, *Neuromancer's* characters embody "contemporary anxieties about the encounter of the natural and the artificial and the idea that there are no clear divisions between the non-human and the human, the technological and the biological, the original and the copy" (p. 44).

All of these binary pairs – the non-human and the human, the technological and the biological, the original and the copy – are constantly contested in the novel. For example, the human/nonhuman

binary is “deconstructed” in a rather disgusting and yet oddly satisfying scene as Case pauses in front of a surgical boutique, where “he stare[s] through the glass at a flat lozenge of vat grown flesh [...] tattooed with a luminous digital display wired to a subcutaneous chip” (14 [140]). The implication is of course that if one loses a body part a new piece can be grown to fit any rip or tear and that furthermore, unlike one’s own substandard flesh, this new stuff will be enhanced with a micro-chips. Here then, the human merges with non-human flesh grafts which bodies readily, and at times greedily, accept.

Another feature of premodernism is the oral transmission of narrative which is arguably related to the current trend to non-written narrative in new media such as video games. In *Orality and Literacy* Walter Ong looked forward to a *partial* return to orality; partial because the legacy of modern print culture remains firmly in collective memory as in contemporary post-literacy. Likewise, in *Neuromancer*, a novel about a post-postmodern society, subjects abound whose reading skills tend to partial orality or almost complete illiteracy while a shadowy memory of literacy hangs on. The issue is directly referred to by an artificial intelligence as an on-going process whereby reading has become almost extinct. As one AI explains to Case: “Minds aren’t *read* [...] See, you’ve still got the paradigms print gave you and you’re barely print-literate” (p. 170).⁵

In this passage moreover, the AI implicitly links reading to memory (‘minds aren’t *read*’) which evokes another oft-drawn parallel between pre- and postmodernism. This is to say that if narrative was stored in the memory and transmitted orally in premodern cultures, the just “barely print-literate” characters in *Neuromancer* transmit narrative by a similar yet technology-driven operation. Here memory is compartmentalised so that the storehouse of the mind model of primary orality has been rearticulated through the filing system of microchip memory to be accessed directly and projected as a hologrammic basis for spatial narratives:

What’s out there? New York? Or does it just stop?
 [...] You can go for a walk, you wanna. It’s all there. Or anyway, all the parts of it you ever saw. This is memory, right? I tap you, sort it out, and feed it back in.
 I don’t have this good a memory [...]
 Everyone does [...]. Memory’s holographic [...] the closest thing you’ve worked out to a representation of human memory (p. 170).

So if premodern storytellers stored information in the imagined structures of the mind, which they then translated into narrative, post-postmodern memory is tapped out and projected. Because memory in *Neuromancer* provides the semblance of structured space, it actualises the connection between memory and architecture made earlier so that these posthuman characters can explore their own memories like a gamescape from *Grand Theft Auto*.

There is however, a more significant link to be made between the kinds of illiterate or barely literate audiences to which oral narratives were directed in the past and the “structure,” for lack of a better word, of *Neuromancer*. It is no secret that Gibson culled his novel from literary intertexts, many of which are premodern. As Cavallaro explains, Gibson has “gathered the scattered limbs of western history,” creating a heterodoxia of premodern belief systems including “voodoo, magic, witchcraft, sorcery” and early Christian myth (Cavallaro 2000: 55). Lance Olsen furthermore, has shown how *Neuromancer* self-consciously mimics the structure of *The Odyssey*, from which I drew the famous phrase ‘the rosy fingers of dawn’ at the opening of this article, which I cited as an example of a textual mnemonic device.⁶

I would argue furthermore, that while on the surface *Neuromancer* is *thematically* related to early narrative, Gibson transfers the analogy to a deeper structural level by writing episodically and allegorically, reproducing some of the effect of transcribed oral narratives. In other words, *Neuromancer* relies on episodic cycles of plot evolution, enacted by allegorical good guys and bad, bad intelligence. What is more, the text is informed by what Auerbach identified as the logic of parataxis which informs the narratives of oral traditions.⁷ Following this logic, Gibson tells his story paratactically, avoiding narrative hierarchies and according equal importance to virtually all diegetic events so that the temporal logic of the text is less than clear or linear. This point accounts for some of contemporary readers’ confusion as they find themselves looking for conventional novelistic clues to sequence and temporality and wind up looking for hypotaxis in *Neuromancer* all the wrong places.

Furthermore, located squarely on the other side of modernity, *Neuromancer* incorporates the logic of the video game, a medium that scholars like Janet Murray call interactive narrative and which some hope to see become a new moment in the future of narrative fiction. Constructed like a videogame, the world of *Neuromancer* funnels its characters through a serial structure of episodes in which Molly and

Case must level up before proceeding with the next challenge on their quest. However, one must not be too quick to simply conflate pre- and postmodernity, so I would hasten to add that if early tales are serial, episodic, paratactic and most importantly oral, video game narratives are all of those things as well as haptic, sensuous and corporeal. In other words, following the work of Andrew Darley, I would concur that whatever narratives video games may produce answer to the contemporary same demand for a haptic sense of being there, that is, engagement of the body as well as the mind in sound and sensation.⁸

NARRATIVE, ARCHITECTURE AND THE BODY

I stated at the outset of this article that *Neuromancer* has received a good deal of attention from philosophers, and this is not without its justification in the text. Although I do not wish to speculate on what Gibson's authorial intentions may have been while he was writing the novel, I think it's fairly clear that he wanted readers to notice that his book is about metaphysics and the question of being human. For example, when Case asks what artificial intelligence really *is* Wintermute replies that he is an "I, insofar as I have an 'I' – this gets rather metaphysical, you see – I am the one who arranges things" (p. 120). And later, in a conversation with the Dixie Flat-liner, a talking floppy disk who begs to be erased, the finer shades of what it means to exist in this possible world come into focus. When Case asks, "Are you sentient, or not?" the Flat-liner replies,

It *feels* like I am, kid, but I'm really just a bunch of ROM. It's one of them, ah, philosophical questions, I guess [...] but I ain't likely to write you no poem [...] your AI, it just might. But it ain't no way *human*. (pp. 131, 205)

The closest thing to what one might think of as classical human beings are the cyber cowboys like Case, whom we encounter casually picking chips out of carbon sockets sprouting from behind their ears as they mingle seamlessly with the fictional cities of the text. Their future, Case imagines is "a gradual and willing accommodation of the machine, the system, the parent organism" (p. 203). In such a world, Case knows his girlfriend has really fallen in love with him when he sees "her personality fragment, calving like an iceberg, splinters drifting away" and becoming one with the technoscape (p. 8).

If readers are supposed to notice that *Neuromancer* is profoundly metaphysical, I think that the essay on semiotics and the construction of Straylight featured in the novel written by a DNA/AI construct named 3-Jane, is another loaded hint about architecture and being human. As Case enters a room in Villa Straylight, where the floor is “covered by a single square of brilliant carpet patterned after a microchip,” a bejewelled head atop a glass pedestal tells him:

The Villa Straylight [...] is a body grown in upon itself, a Gothic folly. Each space in Straylight is in some way secret, [an] endless series of chambers linked by passages, by stairwells vaulted like intestines, where the eye is trapped in narrow curves [...] the hull's inner surface is overgrown with a desperate proliferation of structures, forms flowing, interlocking, rising toward a solid core of micro circuitry, our clan's corporate heart [...]. Ours is an old family, the convolutions of our home reflecting that age [...]. The semiotics of the Villa bespeak a turning in, a denial of the bright void beyond the hull [...]. We have sealed ourselves away behind our money, growing inward, generating a seamless universe of the self. (p. 172)

What 3-Jane's undergraduate semiotics paper explains is that the architecture of Straylight is artificial and organic at once, its flying buttresses fashioned after intestines, covered in hideous growths all fed by a giant corporate heart. According to Cavallaro this is a hallmark of the cyberpunk genre that began with *Neuromancer*, namely “all engulfing structures” and cities of multinational economies” that churn out corporate identities of sub cultural groups, and through which in turn “human beings and objects circulate as so any fragmentary commodities” (Cavallaro 2000: 138). Here, cyber citizens merge with the monstrous body of late capitalism as they glide through the “unmappable system of late capitalism itself” (p. 134).

VIRTUAL BODIES

There are good reasons then for asking oneself questions about being and questions about architecture as one makes the journey through *Neuromancer*, but the issue of textual difficulty that I raised at the outset remains. Why, I want to ask, do many of my new media students, the very audience to whom one expects that this novel speaks, tell me they never managed to finish it? And why furthermore, is the notion of textual difficulty still almost synonymous with this novel?

In offering a partial answer to this question I would like to bookend this article with another anecdote from my journey through the hallowed halls of the university. While conducting doctoral research I organised a conference entitled *Body of Literature/Literature of the Body*.⁹ In the plenary phases of the conference someone asked why the body had become such a hot topic in the 1980s in sociology, literature, philosophy, anthropology, art, architecture and other disciplines. The consensus of opinion was that people were clearly coming to feel that the body was the final frontier – that after the human subject had been constructed through discourse à la Foucault, and deconstructed as a discourse as Derrida might have put it, human anxiety was telling us “this far and no farther.” The body it was hoped would constitute a locus where the gliding signifier would at least have to wait before passing on.

Some years earlier I attended another conference at McGill University entitled *Bodies and Boundaries*.¹⁰ On one of final panels a speaker told the audience that she had attended a conference where Luce Irigaray was accused of essentialism and of centering her discourse in the body, which prompted this purveyor of postmodernist feminism to ask “*what* body?” According to the speaker, Irigaray then got out of her seat, walked over to woman, kissed her, slapped her, pinched her, shook her and said “*this* body.”

What I mean to say to by citing these last two anecdotes is this: readerly frustration aroused by the utopian or dystopian world presented in *Neuromancer*, peopled by hybrid, heterogeneous, posthuman beings who drift through what the narrator calls the “collective hallucination” of the internet, speaks volumes. What readers’ laments say to me is that while we may remember arcade games, they have not yet come to dominate the architectural space that structures urban life nor contemporary narrative, and most of us do not yet feel that we live and work in a videogame. Likewise if video games need to be corporeally stimulating in order to be successful, this implies that the contemporary human still needs to have a body in order to play.

However, *Neuromancer*’s characters do inhabit a space that grew out of arcade games and which is frequently down-loaded and projected from memory in the text. Hence, at turns the denizens of this possible world project themselves in the form of “life-size cartoons,” Molly with “beasts too large” and an “impossibly narrow” waist (p. 208). It is tempting to equate the growing popularity of

television programs like *Extreme Makeover*, on which participants have flesh surgically removed and fat deposits sucked out in the process of anesthetizing bodies which for which they appear to entertain the sort of Gibsonian “relaxed contempt” propounded in *Neuromancer*, with the notion that the contemporary construction of the body is headed in that direction. At the same time however, many would counter that no one is really turning into Lara Croft anytime soon. But this said, I would like to conclude with the somewhat obvious suggestion that perhaps more radically cybernetic constructions of the body and the architectural spaces through which we travel are more a question of *yet* and *when* –part of what Hayles calls the “posthuman future that is already upon us” (Hayles 1999: 39). If this is the case then it is probable that our protests to the contrary are merely, as Case would say, “just the meat talking” (Gibson 1984: 152).

NOTES

1. The question of how much the world of the text and the reader’s world need to overlap in order for the text to be understandable has been directly addressed by possible worlds theory. See for example F. E. Sparshott’s ‘Truth in Fiction’, *JAA*, 26, 1967, pp. 3-7; Raymond Bradley and Norman Swartz, *Possible Worlds: An Introduction to Logic and its Philosophy*, particularly Chapter 1, ‘This and Other Possible Worlds’, pp. 1-25 and Martin Minsky, ‘A Framework for Representing Knowledge’ in *The Psychology of Computer Vision*.
Wolfgang Iser has also explained that if the text “goes too far,” that is, if the text is so experimental that nothing in it is familiar and every attempt on the part of the reader to make sense is frustrated, boundaries of comprehension will be overstrained and “the reader will leave the field of play,” that is, stop reading (p. 108).
2. See Frederic Jameson on postmodern architecture to which he refers as the “expression of transnational corporate realities [and] global paranoia itself” (p. 38). According to Jameson, these find “exceptional literary realisation” in the work of William Gibson (1984). In his critique of postmodern architecture, Jameson also cites the Peachtree Center in Atlanta, Georgia as an example of the disorientation that characterises postmodern architectural space
3. Gibson has also famously remarked that his inspiration for *Neuromancer* came from a glance into a video arcade on Vancouver’s Granville Street where “rapt kids [...] believed in the space games project [...] some kind of *actual space* behind the screen, someplace you can’t see but you know is there (cited in Cavallero 2000: 63).

4. See for example Godzich's 'Subjects without Society' and Comay's 'Gifts Without Presents: Economics of 'Experience' in Bataille and Heidegger'.
5. It is worth noting here that the downward trend in print literacy is inversely proportionate to the rise in image literacy, which has led however circuitously to the concept of the videogame sweatshop. Sweatshops in countries such as Mexico, Romania, Indonesia and China pay wage slaves as little as 56 cents per hour to produce virtual items for video games such as *Lineage II*. See James Lee's article at <<http://www.1up.com/do/feature?cid=3141815>>, Edward Castronova's 'Virtual Worlds: A First-Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier', or Julian Dibbell at <<http://www.juliandibbell.com/playmoney>>, particularly 'Play Money, Meet Big Money'.
6. See Lance Olsen's 'William Gibson', 1992. <<http://www.cafezeitgeist.com/neuromancer.html>>.
7. See Auerbach's (1953) *Mimesis*, particularly 'Odysseu's Scar', p. 1-20.
8. See Darley (2000), p. 147-167.
9. The full title of the conference was *Corps/Corpus: The Body of Literature/Literature of the Body*. It was held in April of 1995 at the l'Université de Montréal.
10. *Bodies and Boundaries: East and West* was held at McGill University, Montreal, February 1990 and was organised by Sandra Buckley and Brian Massumi.

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