A Dystopia of the Sign: Dystopian Themes in the Work of William Gibson

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ABSTRACT

The presence of dystopian ideas in the work and worlds of William Gibson has been frequently discussed with regard to his first trilogy – the Sprawl trilogy. This thesis discusses the dystopian elements in all three of Gibson's trilogies. Gibson's colourfully and energetically conjured environments, the violent opposition of forces, the narcissism and self-interest of his protagonists all work to create an atmosphere that is at an environmental and political low point with little hope of correction or elevation. Gibson's second and third trilogies are a continued exploration of dystopia. His physical environments, the socio-political environments he creates, and most significantly the increasing dominance and permeation of media, mediation and worlds where the 'real' has been subsumed by mediated approximations, point to a dystopia darker and less thrilling than in the first trilogy. Referencing Karl Marx, Fredric Jameson, Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard either by implication or direct reference, Gibson creates a cultural landscape which becomes one with the signified, where technology serves corporate interests and the informational loses relevance and value in the process of exchange. In this thesis it is argued that development of Gibson's style from a visceral noir science fiction in his first trilogy to detective fiction in his third trilogy serves to more effectively direct the reader's focus on the dystopian. By the Blue Ant trilogy, his worlds are based quite closely on the reader's own: references to terrorism, surveillance and corporate control create an oppressive claustrophobia. The 'lighter' subject matter only serves to illustrate the pervasiveness of the emptiness of contemporary informational exchange, and the relationship of the imposition of the sign to strongholds of corporate power.

We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind -- mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the preempting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. For the writer in particular it is less and less necessary for him to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality.

J. G. Ballard, "Introduction" to the French edition (1974) of *Crash* (1973), reprinted in *Re/Search no. 8/9* (1984)

The Dystopia of the Sign – Dystopia in the Works of William Gibson

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION – THE PURPOSE OF THIS THESIS

Gibson's work has been analysed by numerous critics, particularly with regard to its dystopian qualities, but much of this criticism focuses on his earlier novels. Examples include Russell Blackford's *Reading the Ruined Cities* and Suvin Darko's which I cite later in this paper, Tom Moylan's *Global Economy/Local Texts: Utopian/Dystopian Tension in William Gibson's Cyberpunk Trilogy* and Nicholas Spencer's *Rethinking Ambivalence: Technopolitics and the Luddites in William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's The Difference Engine.* Much of the attention to Gibson's dystopian visions has been focused on his first trilogy, and particularly on *Neuromancer*.

By his third 'trilogy', or group of works sometimes known as the Blue Ant trilogy, very little scholarship exists which examines his more contemporary dystopian depictions. And none, or none the author could find, draws from all three trilogies to demonstrate what this paper will demonstrate: a consistent and ever more convincing relationship between corporation and state, consumer capital and brand "sign" domination to create a dystopian environment. Whilst it must be acknowledged that Gibson has in the past denied his work is dystopian, this thesis does not seek to prove that his works contain only dystopian themes. However, it does seek to demonstrate that amongst the themes are consistently evident dystopian narratives depicting corporate structures, brand identities and environmental degradation, to name three of the most dominant. Gibson himself in a recent interview has conceded that his novels can be read to include dystopian narratives, exemplars of anti-utopian futures:

[Interviewer:]There's a lot of talk in the book [The Peripheral] about what people are doing to the planet and the climate. What's your take on the notion that sci-fi exists, in part, to scare us into taking action while we still can?

 [Gibson] As long as its *one of* the things it does, I'm okay with that

(William Gibson: "The Future Will View Us "As a Joke"". *Mother Jones.* web).

This thesis will demonstrate that demonstrating the path to dystopia, "to scare us into taking action while we still can", is "one of the things it [Gibson's fiction] does".

For the purpose of this thesis, we will address Gibson's three sets of loosely related novels as they are commonly referred to - as trilogies. The three trilogies were published between 1984 and 2010, and depict a series of vividly realised landscapes, populated by a variable cast of characters, some of whom re-appear from one novel to another. Each trilogy features one distinctive locale – physical and cultural – in which Gibson sets complex and interwoven narratives.

In these three trilogies Gibson highlights the dominance of participative media, including digital media, showing its numbing effects which result in damage to the social body. He demonstrates how characters in his world use the 'substitute agency' of consumption, further numbed by this hyper stimulus in consumption. This creates what media theorist Marshall McLuhan[1]; calls an "Age of Anxiety" (McLuhan 5). This anxiety in turn sprouts a numbing, a social stalling through hyper-stimulation and exhaustion:

> The effect of electric technology had at first been anxiety. Now it appears to create
> boredom. We have been through the three stages of alarm, resistance, and exhaustion that
> occur in every disease or stress of life, whether individual or collective. (McLuhan 29)

Importantly, McLuhan points out that negative social reactions to new technology are not isolated to the mid or late twentieth century: his observation relates equally to the industrial revolution as to the digital age. What differentiates the current electric (digital) age from the past is the rate at which technology and participative demands continue to increase, leaving no time for social body to adapt.

Domingo, Jewitt and Kress, in their work Multimodal social semiotics: Writing in online contexts consider that, particularly with regard to online writing, the relationship between reader and text, words and images reflects dynamic social change, but also call attention to the change in 'meaning' created by the increasing dominance of images in online fora such as blogs.

It seems clear that current social trends, matched with the affordances of the new media, will reshape the ways in which we make meanings….writing in the ways that it has been known may be subject to enormous changes. There is not on that site, anything like a sentence: there are captions and headings, but no sentences, no paragraphs, no extended texts, no written narratives (Domingo, Jewitt and Kress, web).

This change is reflected in Gibson's works, but also reflected is the increased dominance of the visual sign, the relationship with social dominance of capital, and increased social anxiety. He shows that even in the digital worlds of forums, there is a layer of representation which divorces the word from notions of veracity and identity, as shown by both Mama Anarchia's 'puppenkoft's and Cayse and Parkaboy's own ruse.

This thesis considers the digital and sociocultural environments of the Sprawl, the Bridge and the Blue Ant world, and seeks to prove that Gibson has created in these environments dystopias physical, social and informational. It will show how Gibson, from his first trilogy to his third, begins to indicate that it is the dominance of capital and consumption, and the dominance of corporate media and corporate dominated mediated space, which ensure a dystopian social and physical environment. This paper will also show that Gibson demonstrates how, as the 'real' is replaced by the sign in both the physical and social landscape and the data-scape, corporate power increases, power to the citizenry decreases and power and economics based social divisions are increased.

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[1] McLuhan considers concepts integrally relevant to Gibson's writing; including the emergence of new technologies and their social consequences and societies in a state of marketing-driven hyper-stimulation.

2. DEFINING THE DYSTOPIAN AND "THE SIGN" WITHIN GIBSON'S THREE TRILOGIES

a) Defining the Dystopian

To identify the dystopian in Gibson's work fundamentally requires that we define dystopia. We can then demonstrate against the definition how Gibson creates environments that are dystopian in their physical, cultural and digital character. Before the 'dystopia' there was the utopia, first attributed to Thomas More. No consideration of dystopia can be made without acknowledging how utopia assist in defining and contextualising dystopia. This paper will not consider a definition of utopia or the development of this term, although much study has been devoted to this by critics. It will acknowledge dystopia's relationship to utopia as a 'cacatopian' or 'anti-utopian'. It is worth considering the complexities in the definition of utopia, briefly, however – as neither utopia nor dystopia's definition is simple or can be considered without cultural or artistic context. Fredric Jameson, in particular, as a politically focused critic of literature, offers a definition of utopia which embraces this relationship with the dystopian - their interdependence – as expressed in his speech at the Utopian Studies Conference, 2010, summarized on the *Politics and Culture* magazine website:

> Utopias have something to do with failure and tell us more about our own limits and weaknesses than they do about perfect societies. Even if one insists (as I do) that you can't fail unless you try to succeed, and that you have to imagine your perfect society in good faith before you conclude that you have not been able to do so, the idea is an uncomfortable one…(*Politics and Culture* web.)

Understanding that acknowledging utopian thought is implicitly part of reaching a workable definition of dystopia, allows us to explore the dystopian in Gibson, anchored in its relationship to utopia: the 'anti-utopian'.

The *Oxford Dictionary Online* offers the following definition of 'Dystopia':

> (n) An imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one. The opposite of Utopia.

Merriam-Webster Online defines it as:

> 1. An imaginary place where people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives
> 2. Anti-utopia

The first recorded use of the term was by philosopher and social critic John Stuart Mill, in a speech to the British Parliament on the subject of the treatment of the Irish people in 1868. In this speech, Mill's first description of dystopia, or "Dys-topian" behaviour is as follows:

I may be permitted, as one who, in common with many of my betters, have been

subjected to the charge of being Utopian, to congratulate the Government on having

joined that goodly company. It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they

ought rather to be called dys-topians, or cacotopians. What is commonly called Utopian is

something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be

practicable. Not only would England and Scotland never submit to it, but the Roman

Catholic clergy of Ireland refuse it. (*Stuart Mill*)

Mill defines dys-topia as something "too bad to be practicable". This, combined with dictionary

definitions which consider places where people live "dehumanised and often fearful lives" and

that are "environmentally degraded", begins to give a set of characteristics which correspond to

the worlds in which Gibson sets his novels.

Mill's writing on dystopia was influential on writers like H G Wells, and his works in turn,

influenced writers like Orwell and Huxley, who both considered the nature of utopias in

practice, within which lay the seeds of anti-utopias, as shown by Krishan Kumar, in his *work*

Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times.

Like the religious and the secular, utopia and anti-utopia are antithetical yet

interdependent. They are 'contrast concepts', getting their meaning and significance from

their mutual differences. But the relationship is not symmetrical or equal. The anti-utopia

is formed by utopia…It depends for its survival on the persistence of utopia (Kumar 100).

Kumar considers that anti-utopia, particularly in the 20th century, replaced floundering Utopian

visions of the previous century.

The First World War, writes I.F. Clarke, destroyed 'the golden link between progress and

posterity.' Subsequent events did nothing to restore the link. How could utopia stand up

in the face of Nazism, Stalinism, genocide, mass unemployment and a second world war?

Even the resilient utopianism of H.G. Wells gave way before this onslaught (Kumar 381).

Kumar posits that the presence of utopian literature, coupled with the anti-utopian world events

of the twentieth century, create an environment in which anti-utopia can exist and provide a

counterpoint: that anti-utopia is reactive and contextually based, with war, the decline of

religion and the failure of socialism as influences on anti-utopian thought.

…so far as the contemporary West is concerned, socialism is 'the God that has failed.

Stalinism has largely ensured that, coupled with the increasing evidence of cynicism and

disbelief in Marxism amongst the intelligentsia of Eastern Europe…

Socialism has been, to date, the last utopia. No other comprehensive social vision has

emerged as contender, no other utopia to substitute for it. It was this that made Karl Mannheim fear that Western society had approached a situation 'in which the utopian element…has completely…annihilated itself.' …contemporary capitalism, whether in its buccaneering free-market form or its more human welfare guise, has no more than contemporary socialism proved the stuff of utopia (Kumar 421).

Interestingly, Kumar also illustrates that utopian political, social, scientific or architectural ideals which have resulted in scientific discoveries, social programmes, architectural developments or industrial inventions (for example, mechanization, robotics, the Bauhaus movement, the Arian movement, housing projects or nuclear power), have had tangible identifiable effects. These have, in the latter part of the twentieth and the twenty first century, been in turn inspiration for fictitious anti-utopias.

In the early years of the Second World War, Orwell went so far as to see Hitler's National Socialist state as the perverted but clearly recognizable offspring of the Wellsian Utopia…

And, finally, in Nineteen Eighty-Four he completed the case against Wells by presenting his own brutal nightmare version of the world-state… (Kumar 206).

Gibson's dystopian or 'anti-utopian' environments are demonstrated, within this paper, to reflect this idea. Not only have the mediated society and globalization resulted in anti-utopian environments and the fragmentation of Gibson's societies, but he reflects the utopian gaze – or false depictions of utopia created by marketing, PR, mediation, the consumer sign. Consumption has, in Gibson's societies, replaced freedom and invasive technology is the child of the vision of a liberated leisure-based society. Gibson shows how leisure and freedom are available only to the wealthy, and even then we are universally trapped by the limitations of the body itself. The result, as we see in the artisanal movements of the Blue Ant trilogy and the Bridge communities of the Bridge trilogy, is almost utopian movements of change: but these movements, particularly the Bridge community, then are subject to entropy, vulnerable to the elements that create anti-utopia. In Gibson, a dystopia contains the potential for utopian action, which then in itself contains the seeds again of anti-utopia. Like the shell-like structure of the Tessier-Ashpool mansion, utopia and dystopia spiral in on themselves, as humans take utopian ideas and create dystopias with them.

Darren Jorgensen argues in his paper "On Failure and Revolution in Utopian Fiction and Science Fiction", in addressing the writing of Moylan, fictional utopias, and attempts at creating social utopias in the 'real', have led to anti-utopian manifestation:

Moylan has failed to confront the more dire implications of the failure of utopian states in the twentieth century, their tendencies toward totalitarianism (Jorgensen, web).

As the concept of an ideal society or social environment changes over time, what constitutes a dystopia changes accordingly. However, Jorgensen demonstrates that even the utopia of Thomas More contains critical elements, and that which destabilizes any utopia are modes of capital:

> [Louis] Marin …thinks of More's book as a meditation on the difficulty of realizing utopian ideas. In Utopics he proposes a dialectical reading of More, the implication being there was never an uncritical utopia, and that even in the sixteenth century the utopian text is self-conscious about its own stasis, or ideological closure. How can there be markets and theft in a society without money or crime? How can there be a prince in a society of equals? (Jorgensen, web).

Fredric Jameson, as a theorist who has devoted much writing to considerations of the definitions of utopia and dystopia, offers

There is not sufficient room in this paper to discuss the meaning of dystopia, and its relationship with utopia, thoroughly. What can be stated is that the word dystopia describes a world/society/environment in which the described living conditions or social functioning have qualities antithetical to the environmental, social, psychological and physical health (literal and figurative) of that documented world – and particularly to the state in which these form part of a utopian ideal. Within Gibson's near-future science fiction, a threat to futurity itself is intrinsic to the idea of dystopia: a quality of entropy or dissolution or a threat to quality of human - and post human existence. Dystopian forces create or exacerbate cultural anxieties, the threat of environmental and social degradation to a level "too bad to be practicable". Gibson demonstrates that within each utopian model the seeds of anti-utopia germinate, and in the late twentieth and twenty first century, via the swiftness of technological change and informational exchange, this germination is swift.

b) Defining "The Sign"

This paper makes reference to the idea of "the sign" – particularly as it is employed as an instrument of capital to created mediated 'realities' for the consumer, and the suffusion of "the sign" creates, and then responds to, a new plane of existence – that which replaces the 'real' with the gestural, the physical experience with the desired. Accordingly, it is necessary to

reference a definition of "the sign", "the signified" and mediation, in order to demonstrate that they are significant dystopian forces.

By "the sign" this paper will mean a "sign vehicle or form" and the "signifier" will mean "the sense made of the sign". This is based in Charles Sanders Peirce's formulation of the sign model, stated in the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume Four*:

> A sign is a Cognizable that, on the one hand, is so determined (i.e., specialized, *bestimmt*,) by something other than itself, called its Object, whilst, on the other hand, it so determines some actual or potential Mind, the determination of which I term the Interpretant created by the Sign, that that Interpreting Mind is therein determined immediately by the Object (Pierce 8.178).

As Peirce explained, an object must have a relationship with the sign for there to be meaning in the signification – he gives the example of Napoleon:

> For Napoleon cannot determine his mind unless the word in that sentence calls his attention to the right man… much the same is true in regard to any sign (8.178).

The object represented by the sign is not, in this paper, always a material object – in fact, I will demonstrate that the signified is commonly a concept, a story or an idea (or multiple ideas), as exemplified by Gibson's employment particularly of brand signs. As Peirce also states in his definition of the sign, "the Object of a Sign may be something created by the sign" (8.178) – and this is exactly the case in brand signs, although the object in this case is a mythology – the sign replaces any real 'object' in the case of brand signification: the sign itself creates desire. Peirce calls this "creature of the sign" the interpretant (8;178), however in this work it will be the mediated, the realm of signification, the neo-real of the language of signs. Those who live in the post-real (or neo 'real') of Gibson's synthetic worlds of the Matrix or a landscape dominated by brand iconography takes this signification as the 'real' – develops their relationship with the sign. As children like Mona Lisa or Chia, younger people like Case or Molly, have a direct relationship with the language of signs, and the values of a sign-dominated world, they have normalized the digital interpretant, the mediated 'real'. This then, gives them "previous acquaintance with what the sign denotes" (8.178) as signs manifest and directly affect their 'identities' and negatively affect their experiences of the physical (like the fall of The Bridge to commercial forces) and the digital (like Molly's digital sex work).

I will demonstrate that it is in his characters' preference of representational signs to the 'things' they represent that Gibson demonstrates an erosion and devaluation of the real and the growth of visual signs, or simulacra. I will explore this in terms of the qualities of the sign as

indicated in Peirce's and Kress and Leeuwen's linguistic models, demonstrating how Gibson's brand and cultural signs: a) "represent, in a referential or pseudo-referential sense, aspects of the experiential world" and b) "project the relations between the producer of a sign... and the receiver/reproducer of that sign" (Kress and Leeuwen, 40 - 41). As Kress is quoted as saying in Writing and Multimodal Social Semiotics

> Through interactions writing is constantly remade, to fit with ever changing social needs, occasions and purposes; it is shaped by the demands, needs, structures and practices in which it is used….In other words, understanding the directions in which writing is likely to develop is intrinsically linked to the question of how society is likely to develop (Domingo, Jewitt and Kress, web).

Whilst the main theme of Domingo, Jewitt and Kress's work is the exploration of new writing modes online, and Gibson's writing as considered in this paper is published both online and in print, it is interesting (although not addressed specifically in this paper) that Gibson's later works consider word signs in many non-print formats including advertising hoardings, twitter, texting, email, blogs, forums. Much of the language of commerce translates or is powerfully expressed in these new digital modes of expression, and digested by a digital-native consumer audience. The point that is relevant to this paper is that Gibson's treatment of the word-signs and brand-signs of capital reflects changes in society, and needfully addresses them by demonstrating their negative aspects – aspects that can be considered dystopian when perpetuated.

3. DYSTOPIA WITHIN THE SPRAWL TRILOGY – A NEW CORPORATE FRONTIER

a. Introduction

Gibson's first trilogy, known as the Sprawl trilogy, is a dense, descriptively rich noir-styled fictional topology, which has been considered at length by critics of both Science Fiction and post humanism. The Sprawl trilogy contains the best known of Gibson's novels: *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* and is set in the Sprawl - or BAMA, also taking in Japan, London and other parts of future-America.

The Sprawl trilogy employs noir and hard boiled literary conventions, presenting anti-heroes trapped by their own past, attempting to transcend circumstance and emerge triumphant. Gibson can definitely also be argued to be engaged – as is common in noir and hard boiled fiction – in criticism of privilege/wealth and a sympathy for the underdog or working class. Gibson also tells stories from the geography, corporate structures and values of the Metropolis, and his digital worlds also reflect these values; another trope inherited from noir fiction, where 'the city' is intrinsically linked in its structure and values to crime and the criminal tendency. [2] In *Neuromancer, Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* Gibson brings these tropes into a futuristic landscape, whilst still reflecting hard boiled narrative values. He also allows a multiplicity of narrative voices, including female voices, which is a progression from the traditional hard-boiled narrative structure.

In the Sprawl of *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* particularly, digital simulation exists in a close, physical relationship with the social body in extremely detailed, visceral experiential environments. In these first three novels Gibson shows the digital experience as an interiorisation, integrating an 'other' digital geography with the human. He illustrates this integration of informational and human through technological advancements such as biosofts which 'slot' into the body, console cowboys 'jacking in' to the net, and also in the surgery-assisted cyborgian transformations of subcultural body modification and mercenary/military body enhancements. Fusing social and digital bodies Gibson introduces a new environment, a gridded landscape he calls The Matrix. It is a dominant field of engagement in the first trilogy,

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2 As summarised by Prof. Donna Campbell in her lecture notes for *The Hardboiled Fiction of Raymond Chandler and James McCain, Pulp Fiction and Film Noir,* characteristics of hard boiled include:
- Alienated characters [who] confront a world of chaos and corruption in which (they believe) two wrongs can make a right. There's a sense that crime might just pay—this time.
- Stoic or disaffected attitudes complicated by (negative) emotions such as sexual passion, anger, greed, or a desire for revenge.

Campbell also describes that characters in hard boiled/noir fiction do not address social wrongs or display moral motivations, although they commonly reject the dominant social paradigm, they often [take] a "get rich quick" approach to the American dream. Success depends not on hard work but on the "big score"—beating the system by defrauding its institutions.

and within it Gibson places a spiritual presence: in the Matrix, demigods with the power to fundamentally change their physical and digital worlds.

Gibson creates a sociopolitical structure in the Sprawl trilogy, defined by - and contributing to - a post-apocalyptic landscape dominated by corporations as the prevailing power holders. He illustrates the attributes which constitute power in his Sprawl world, particularly in relation to data acquisition, and the negative consequences of the unequal distribution of social power between corporations and the citizenry. Corporate agency disenfranchises, negating social freedoms and quality of life; and this results in consumers' substitution of pleasure for power. Corporate control, furthermore, erodes the agency of the 'real', removing any hope of transcendent change, and Gibson's characters turn to escapism in consumer pleasures (for example, SimStim) to simulate change and agency. These characteristics reflect the social malaise of Marshall McLuhan's post-electric-age capital, described on page 29 of *Understanding Media*, where 'electric technology' first creates anxiety, then boredom, McLuhan's three stages of 'alarm, resistance, and exhaustion'.

As Fredric Jameson concluded of postmodernism in his work *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Gibson demonstrates that his culture of digital representation:

> …is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order... but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself. (Jameson) Gibson's emergent digital society/geography is not, either, a new social order: it, too, is only another 'systemic modification/reflection of capitalism itself', the structure of the Matrix reflecting the values and signs of capital already reflected in the 'real'.

b. Corporate Structures and Corporate Families

Gibson's power holders in this trilogy are primarily corporate organisations – either dynastic in nature (represented by a single character who represents and enacts the dynasty's interests) or ruled by nameless CEOs (who remain remote whilst their agency affects the Sprawl's characters). Corporations are shown to have significant effect on the Sprawl's fundamental socioculture and environment, and the machinations of corporate forces at the heart of the Sprawl trilogy's narratives.

The Tessier-Ashpools

The Tessier-Ashpools are a dynastic corporate aristocracy, the marriage of 2 corporate 'families' in Tessier and Ashpool. As a wealthy family they moved into the as yet untapped profit-potential of space, and

> …built Freeside to tap the wealth of the new islands, grew rich and eccentric, and began
> the construction of an extended body in Straylight. (*Neuromancer* 206)

The Villa Straylight is a "gothic folly" (*Neuromancer* 206) built in space with profit from the decadent space city 'Freeside', which the Tessier-Ashpools own. Freeside offers a haven for rich pleasure seekers, including services for fetishists of extreme violence, drug use and sadistic stim. To satisfy this consumer desire, the poor and vulnerable are exploited, demonstrated by Gibson in the recollections of Molly who, before becoming a mercenary, was one of those exploited poor.

"Growing inward" (206), the Tessier-Ashpools "hide behind their money" (206) from the broken society they have created on Freeside, using the AIs Wintermute and Neuromancer as a barrier between themselves and the outside world. The Tessier-Ashpool dynasty is revealed to be continued by clone replicas of earlier generations, living in the Villa Straylight in isolation, disconnected from human interaction, with the sociopathic and ruthless 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool a clone of her ancestors. Wealth-facilitated isolation and genetic replication (through cloning) has caused entropy in the Tessier-Ashpool family, weakening their corporate strength, and during *Neuromancer* the reader witnesses the fall of the Tessier-Ashpool Empire. Only 3Jane and the family's Artificial Intelligences (AIs) survive. However, their corporate investments – such as media company Sense/Net from *Mona Lisa Overdrive* – continue, the family's genetic code replaced, finally, by transactional code. With this, Gibson demonstrates for the first – and certainly not the last- time that the corporation outlasts, and is stronger than, the family itself.

In *Neuromancer,* Case and Molly, in breaking into the Villa Straylight, are the catalyst for the breakdown of the Tessier-Ashpools' empire of simulation. Their intrusion sparks a chain of events (engineered by Neuromancer and Wintermute) which allows the AIs to break free of their network constraints. The AIs seek self-identity through nodal interaction with the wider matrix, and their desired transcendence is significant to *Neuromancer*'s main narrative arc. The AIs' emancipation from the confines of their source network changes both the physical and the datasphere's geography, and the Tessier-Ashpool empire itself begins to break down without their support. Significantly, their attempted union is shown to be a source of new, individuated data-life, with agency beyond human control.

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Sense/Net

Sense/Net is a corporate entity which demonstrates through its actions qualities of violence, menace, greed, ruthlessness. As a company, Sense/Net does not assume any moral responsibility for its social causation, its actions shown to be centred on the expansion and perpetuation of its structure and profit. It has a geometric representation in the Matrix which denotes the presence of servers containing sensitive data, stored and used for corporate gain. The nature of these corporate actions for which private and sensitive data is necessary is revealed further in the latter two novels in this trilogy.

Sense/Net is only marginally represented in *Neuromancer*, but becomes central to the plot of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* in particular, because of their creation of Simulated Stimulation ("SimStim") experiences, available on digital format. SimStim is a form of controlled virtual reality designed to immerse the user in a simulated environment - in SimStim the user lives through the experiences and sensations of a predetermined simulated identity, emulating experiences through displaced sensory stimulus. Additionally, Sense/Net is the the employer/exploiter of SimStim star Angela Mitchell, and her story is central to the narrative arc of *Mona Lisa Overdrive.* Sense/Net plot to kill Angela Mitchell and replace her with a younger star, in pursuit of which they abduct a young prostitute, Mona Lisa, sedate her and subject her to involuntary plastic surgery. Sense/Net's power and influence is discussed at length below in section C - Dystopian Technology.

Julius Virek

Introduced in *Count Zero* is lone entrepreneur Julius Virek- whose corporate reach is vast, but as an individual is vulnerable by virtue of his own mortality. His actions throughout *Count Zero* are centred on immortalisation through simulation. His corporate agency is focused on specific aims, however Virek has a number of subsidiary corporate arms which continue to act on his behalf, generating sufficient capital to fund his medical technology and treatments. However, after his death we hear nothing more of Virek's corporate influence, or what happens to the Tessier-Ashpool cores – and the AI fragment known as the 'Boxmaker'. Virek is discussed at length in Section C - Dystopian Technology, particularly in demonstration of the relationship between his personal desire for immortality and the weakening of his control over his empire. Also, however, significantly, to note, as with the Tessier-Ashpool empire, the robustness of corporate structures which continue to self-perpetuate, as opposed to dynastic structures which are subject to entropy.

The Maas Corporation

Maas has two corporate arms represented in the second two Sprawl novels - Maas Biolabs in *Count Zero* and Maas Neotek in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Maas Biolabs produce intelligence-enhancing biochips, their Arizona research laboratory headed by Dr Christopher Mitchell. Maas have a corporate interest in his daughter Angela Mitchell, who is the holder of the main experimental execution of those biochips and has escaped their enclosed Arizona facility. Maas Biolabs hold many patents for their biological technology - furthering the integration of human and post human through the creation of a dataspace within the human body. Maas' research is commercial – they create technology which can facilitate or inhibit health, and thereby create a commercial relationship between themselves and the future sick or future technologically dependent humanity. In addition Maas Biolabs control substantial territory in Arizona - "They own everything around there, right down to the border" (*Count Zero* 29) and are controlling employers. They engage in ethically dubious invasive security tactics, ensuring by physical force that their employees remain loyal (and dependent):

> [At Maas] It's currently quite fashionable to equip top employees with modified insulin-pump subdermals... the subject's system can be tricked into an artificial reliance on certain synthetic enzyme analogs. Unless the subdermal is recharged at regular intervals, withdrawal from the source – the employer – can result in trauma (*Count Zero* 87).

After Angela Mitchell (Angie)'s escape they kill her father, Christopher Mitchell, and blow up their Arizona facility, demonstrating their prioritisation of control of both employees and markets – they are prepared to destroy an entire research facility (and their star scientist) in order to protect their biochip research. Mass Biolabs, also in *Count Zero,* search for the experimental "ice'" (defensive biosoft) which attacked and nearly killed Bobby in the Matrix – once again they are prepared to kill to reacquire it, and prevent it falling in the hands of anti-corporate agents or rival corporations. The mercenary Conroy, working for Virek, explains to Turner (also a mercenary) his encounter with Maas in the pursuit of this biosoft:

> …another team, a Maas team, turned up, obviously after the same thing. So Virek's team just kicked back and watched the Maas boys, and the Maas boys started blowing people away (*Count Zero* 280).

Maas are demonstrated to be capable of mass killings if the product is of value to them – Gibson uses the words "started blowing people away" - giving the strong impression that in this operation Maas's used extreme and indiscriminate force to pursue the biosoft. The influence of Maas Biolabs on the sociocultural environment of the sprawl - despite being a creative and

inventive force - is primarily toxic. This, again, is an example where Gibson introduces potentially 'utopian' technology – but demonstrates it as a commercial property, creating barriers between those not belonging to the elites and medical progress.

Maas-Neotek, also part of the Maas empire, in *Count Zero* is responsible for the invention of new cyberspace technology based on biosoft - including the prototype deck Turner uses to orchestrate the Mitchell defection from Maas Biolabs. However, by *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Maas Neotek is seen primarily as a producer of domestic technology. It represents a shift in cyberspace and virtual reality technology, moving it away from the elites to being mass manufactured and therefore more ubiquitous and available: virtual realities no longer exists only as a signifier of a tiny elite, however they are still more available to the rich.

Maas Neotek are the manufacturers of the holographic companion technology which Japanese girl Kumiko brings with her to London. Kumiko is given 'Colin', her holographic 'companion', by her father, for her trip to London:

> The fifty-first generation of Maas-Neotek biochips conjured up an indistinct figure on the
> seat beside her, a boy out of some faded hunting print (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 3)

This holo-projection of an English boy, in a Victorian gestural style is able to interact, gives advice.   The holo device is a store for a comprehensive collection of information about England designed to assist Kumiko in London using "subvocal" transmissions to answer questions: "Subvocal's the way, I pick it all up through the skin" (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 4). The palm-size Neotek unit also includes a voice-activated recorder and the capacity to analyse data, making recommendations to Kumiko about her safety. It is also self-aware - revealing its deeper purpose to Kumiko on page 196:

> "[I am]A Maas-Neotek biochip personality-base programmed to aid and advise the
> Japanese visitor in the United kingdom...I'm something else as well... and very likely
> something to do with you. I don't know what."

In this Maas Neotek presents itself as a now-successful commercial entity, creating sophisticated domestic technology which can also be used easily for espionage – and Kumiko and Sally Shears (a guise of Molly Millions/Molly) do use the unit to spy on their hosts. This technology, able to record and store data, able to both detect and conduct surveillance, encourages a consumer culture of both data-reliance and data-politics, manufacturing domestic tech which validates and encourages the use of surveillance.

c. Dystopian Technology

Gibson's universe assumes technological futurity, creating with futuristic technology a world both alluringly alien and disturbingly violent. In the Sprawl universe, the development of a digital topology, via digital systems and networks, exists in contrast to the decline of social systems in the 'real': governmental and community, justice and welfare. Gibson invents futuristic weaponry used to protect and defend corporations and shows this technology in use within declining urban environments with fragile and ungoverned social structures. This disjunction between the social body and technology is highlighted in the consideration of several different types of technology, its ownership and use.

Medical Technology

The Sprawl trilogy, *Neuromancer* in particular, includes many future-tech innovations in surgery and medical technology, particularly genetic modification and body/mind augmentation. He creates for the reader a dazzling array of new-to-his-time technology, and the increased availability of medical innovation to consumers, including elective surgeries as an available luxury. As Kumar mentions in his reference to 20th century science in *Utopia and Anti Utopia in Modern Times*,

> Fears about nuclear war were the persistent anti-utopian undercurrent to the industrial utopia of the 1950s. But they could not prevent the refurbishing of the image of the scientist. In one of the most celebrated exercises of this kind… the scientist appeared as a kind of culture-hero, the savior of industrial civilization against the nostalgic and reactionary influences of the literary intellectuals (Kumar 389).

Gibson's first trilogy acknowledges the excitement and glamour of a scientific new world, however, unlike Sir Charles Snow's Rede Lecture, to which Kumar is referring in the quote above, Gibson takes the utopian elements of this new science (new possibilities in evolution, greater availability, new inventions, the ability to defeat complex illnesses, the ability to live beyond the body – and all this potentially in the personal control of the individual) and gives them anti-utopian, or dystopian, characteristics – nothing new for science fiction. What are new are his visions of futuristic technology and the specific cultural complexities of his social worlds. What is utopian is the post-capital collective possible in his new world of the Matrix. However, the new technology and the potential egalitarian utopia of the disembodied Matrix are demonstrated to be subject to dystopian corruptions, caused by capitalism, consumption (and resultant social qualities of greed and decadence) and the societally fragmentary emphasis on individualism, in the application of science and even in the potential utopian environment of

the Matrix itself. Gibson's fiction exhibits, whilst acknowledging the potential of science to display heroic characteristics,

> …the critique of large-scale organization and technology that was a central feature of
> 1960s radicalism… (Kumar 405).

Gibson's technology, as it is wielded by capitalist structures, has elements of what Kumar refers to as "agents of entropy, the drive to disorder and destruction in the world" (Kumar 404). I will give some examples of how Gibson demonstrates this.

Elective post-humanism, enabled by experimental surgery, becomes a marker of subcultural communication/identity but also a corporate means of control. For example, the subculture Gibson describes as the 'Panther Moderns', a visual feature of whose subculture is extreme post human surgery. Gibson describes them as "mercenaries, practical jokers, nihilistic technofetishists" (*Neuromancer* 75). Case meets a Panther Modern, Angelo, on page 75 of *Neuromancer*. Angelo has transformed himself radically to inspire fear and apprehension:

> His face was a simple graft grown on collagen and shark-cartilage polysaccharides,
> smooth and hideous. It was one of the nastiest pieces of elective surgery Case had ever
> seen. When Angelo smiled, revealing the razor-sharp canines of some large animal, Case
> was actually relieved.

Extreme body modification surgeries are procured on the black market from back street Japanese surgeries, particularly in Chiba, Tokyo. Chiba surgeries are reputed for offering radical surgeries including sight augmentation, bio-weaponry implants and memory/perception upgrades, in addition to physically modifying prostheses and implants. Case observes on page 10 of *Neuromancer* that: "The black clinics of Chiba were the cutting edge, whole bodies of technique supplanted monthly."

Surgery - both in Chiba and the Sprawl – despite its experimental nature, is normalised as a commodity, open to any buyer.[3] Surgeons perform operations for *Neuromancer*'s mercenaries (such as Molly's eye and nail implants) and for gang-leaders and corrupt bosses (Case's forced toxic implant surgery, paid for by Armitage/Corto). Meanwhile, in neither Tokyo nor the Sprawl does Gibson demonstrate any working health care system, or the enforcement of any ethical standards. Therefore, in only those who can afford expensive surgery can access it –

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3 At the beginning of *Neuromancer* Case, is ill, and looks for a cure in the back blocks of illegal surgery hotspot Chiba. On page 13, he observes:

> In Japan, he'd known with a clenched and absolute certainty, he'd find his cure. In Chiba. Either in a registered clinic or in the
> shadowland of black medicine. Synonymous with implants, nerve-splicing, and microbionics, Chiba was a magnet for the Sprawl's
> techno-criminal subcultures.

those in need of medical assistance can only acquire what they can afford. Governmental responsibility is absent, and 'on the street' our protagonists rely on wealth, wit or hustle to obtain life-saving medical support, and gangsters buy access to medical harm.

Gibson is presenting what game designer and Transmedia writer Scott Walker refers to as 'negative capability' in his online piece "The Narrative and Collaborative Gutter of Transmedia" on his website *MetaScott* – the acceptance that authors "rely on and must trust audiences to fill in the blanks in our stories. We don't have a choice, and neither do they" (Walker). What Gibson omits, but the reader must surely question (using negative capability), is what happens to citizens who cannot afford surgery? What does the state provide? Gibson provides no evidence that the quasi-military state supports the health-care requirements of its populace.

Additionally, as an unregulated industry, commercial surgery practice can result in human rights abuses. For example, on page 60 of *Neuromancer,* Armitage/Corso subjects Case to forced implant surgery, in which he is given toxic implants for which only Armitage has the antidote, thereby guaranteeing his compliance. Armitage/Corto informs Case of the full extent of his Chiba surgery:

> "You have 15 toxin sacs bonded to the lining of various main arteries, Case. They're dissolving. Each one contains a mycotoxin... Do the job and I can inject you with an enzyme that will dissolve the bond without opening the sacs. Then you'll need a blood change. Otherwise, the sacs melt and you're back to where I found you" (*Neuromancer* 60).

Similarly, in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, medical surgery is used in the service of commercial exploitation of mediated 'identity': Mona Lisa is subject to plastic surgery to transform her into a 'clone' of the less controllable Angie Mitchell. To Sense/Net, the 'sign', of Angie Mitchell, her virtual identity in Stim, is considered transferable, and futuristic plastic surgery is used transfer the sign of Angie to Mona. Gerald, the plastic surgeon, describes the surgery, a shopping-list of enhanced features:

> "We placed some cartilage in the nose, working in through the nostrils, then went on to the teeth… We did the breast augmentation, built up the nipples with vat-grown erectile tissue, then did the eye coloration" (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 173).

The utopian in this would be the existence of advanced medical technology, which can modify the body, and can create fundamental change in the physical and in the notion of 'human'. The anti-utopian is how this is used as an instrument of capital, whether in the hands of elites or back-street clinicians, used to manipulate the oppressed as instruments of capital

gain. Philosopher Pierre Macherey addressed this explicitly within his writing, as Jorgensen states with regard to Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*,

> …Macherey argues that the ideologies of literature are always and inevitably determined by capitalism, and that it is the role of criticism to find within fiction that which eludes such closures…. In this sense, the utopianism of Le Guin's novel lies not in the ideological struggle to effect change, but in the remainder of an ideological struggle that exhausts its potential to effect change. (Jorgensen, web).

Sense/Net here uses future-tech to prolong and extend the mythology of the Angie Mitchell icon, whilst plotting to remove Angie herself: in replication, Angie becomes expendable. Her mediated value is the source of her consumer appeal, and therefore commercial viability, and these are the values Sense/Net consider pertinent: youth, beauty, happiness, health can be transferred from Angie to "Angie", to be perpetuated in Stim. These unregulated medical practices create agency for the Sprawl universe's techno-criminal subculture. Medical technology additionally facilitates a form of slavery, and enables the weaponisation and commercial exploitation of the body.

Weaponisation of the body is, as mentioned above, a surgical procedure available in Chiba's back-block clinics. In *Neuromancer*, the professional mercenary Molly has modified her body substantially with weaponry, her body arguably 'post human', with human organs and parts replaced with machine parts. Her eyes are covered by "glasses [that] were surgically inset, sealing her sockets" (*Neuromancer* 36). These synthetic eyes control/inform weaponised hands:

> She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers lightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades slide from their housings beneath the burgundy nails (*Neuromancer* 37).

Molly herself demonstrates a disjunction from communal social values: she considers herself fundamentally "wired" to act with individuated interest over social interest. In Neuromancer she reflects upon her motivations as part social human, part individuated machine, a binary between her humanity and her separate machine-self: she describes leaving her lover Case, disappearing leaving only a note, as "…the way I'm wired, I guess" (*Neuromancer* 313). Her physical modifications form part of this distance from human social frameworks – by weaponising her body she is also creating gestural strata between herself and other humans.

Biosoft, as mentioned above in relation to Maas Biolabs, is weaponised and commercialised in *Neuromancer.* In the story of John the "flash boy", the reader sees the human mind used as consumer object, rented (exploited) as a storage mechanism for sensitive data, known as "flash"

(*Neuromancer* 205). John's 'flash space' is a commodity: black market traders in data use humans like John to store commercially sensitive data, the mind then becoming a trade-able asset. The human mind becomes reduced in this to exchange value: the deposits in his head putting John's life in danger. This is another demonstration that Gibson's Sprawl world is dominated by not only structures of capital, but the internalisation of capital – the ability to regard the self and the social body as commodities, thereby vulnerable to market forces. [4]

In *Neuromancer*, technology (medical and informational) serves hyper-capital, delivering mechanisms for corporate dominance, also serving the colluding military machine, as shown in the example of Armitage/Corso, his mind altered after the failed Operation Screaming Fist in order to avoid a government scandal, subverting a possible US Congressional enquiry.[5] Technology in the Sprawl universe is also a commodity, and facilitates commodification of the body. Additionally technology facilitations the simulation of bodily functions in post human additions, adding functionality to the body, increasing its 'use value', and its informational state. This brings Gibson's world towards what Baudrillard described in *Simulations* as the third order of simulacra, where simulation and representation replaces the 'real', and informs it, the synthetic defining the informational future state (83).

Networked Technology – The Matrix

The Matrix was first mentioned by Gibson in *Burning Chrome*, and then far more substantially developed in *Neuromancer*. Gibson describes it as:

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4 Gibson also shows that there is a risk of instability to implanted information: Corto, the ex-military officer, has been given high-risk 'mental reprogramming' as a form of repression therapy after a morally dubious failed operation, Operation Screaming Fist, and been reintegrated into society as 'Armitage'.

> He became a subject in an experimental program that sought to reverse schizophrenia through the application of cybernetic models. A random selection of patients were provided with microcomputers and encouraged, with help from students, to program them. He was cured, the only success in the entire experiment (*Neuromancer* 105).

Unfortunately, the Armitage/Corto identity begins to fuse, and traumatic memories of barbarism in war begin to fragment Armitage's 'self'.

Governmental and military institutions are involved in ritual poses of blame and responsibility, through 'show trials', and the investigations are proven inadequate, unable to support or protect Armitage/Corto. He becomes re-commodified, wiped/rebooted and rereleased to begin again. Neither the Pentagon, the CIA, Congress nor the military take responsibility for Armitage/Corto or support his recovery.

> Corto was shipped to a military facility in Utah, blind, legless and missing most of his jaw. … In Washington and McLean, the show trials were already underway. The Pentagon and CIA were being Balkanised, partially dismantled, and a Congressional investigation had focused on Screaming Fist.' (*Neuromancer* 103)

The surgery to 'fix' his memory of the events of Screaming Fist fails. This 'fix' is also shown as the result of military/government collusion, to cover up Screaming Fist, rather than to protect or support Corto:

5 As Gibson writes

> ...extensively rehearsed, Corto's subsequent testimony was detailed, moving, lucid, and largely the invention of a Congressional cabal with certain vested interests in saving particular portions of the Pentagon infrastructure. (*Neuromancer* 104)

> …a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation...a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding (*Neuromancer* 67).

'Operators' is a revealing description for the console cowboys and corporate representatives present in the Matrix, in that to manifest in the matrix, the user is dehumanised, presented as a data object which moves and interacts for its operator by commands and gestures. Gibson calls the matrix "a consensual hallucination", a "graphic representation", "lines of light" and "constellations of data". He described it not as "seen" but as "experienced", derived both from the mind and from the digital. The Matrix, in this, is complex, without simple definition - an enigma.

The Matrix is accessed through cyberspace 'decks' which allow the protagonists of the Sprawl trilogy to project into a representational data-body. This is achieved through "jacking in", creating a connection between the physical body and the data-body, which is represented in the matrix by an avatar. The matrix is a simulated environment of gridded space in which humans manifest as shapes – thereby it contains both a geographical shape and also a social body. There is a direct causal link between the human and data body – with damage received in the data body able to affect the physical body.[6]

Console cowboys in *Neuromancer*, finding perceived agency unavailable in the 'real', crave extended participation and increased agency and are able to experience this in the Matrix, and the adrenaline generated by encountering its uncertainties becomes an addiction. This is also true in *Count Zero*, where "wilson" Bobby 'The Count' desires to prove his importance and perceived agency within the high-risk environment of the Matrix, substituting this for the barren 'real' of Big Playground and the run down gang lands in which he and his mother live.

Gibson creates the technology which interfaces with the matrix with inbuilt risk of death or harm. In accessing the matrix, the "console cowboy" accepts the potential for bio-feedback to harm them in the 'real'. This reflects a choice Gibson, as writer, has made in reflecting the nature of his data-world: he creates an imagined topography with an inbuilt threat and vulnerability for the user who chooses to access it. Furthermore, the technologies which provide access to and agency within this data world provides no protection from threat or attack. The

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6 This reflects what Baudrillard defined as the first level of simulation: a simulation that has direct feedback with the physical 'real'. (*Simulations* 11)

human body experiences pain when the data-body does, and dies when the data-body dies. Gibson creates no safety for travelers in this new liminal zone, a new frontier in which the price of access is personal risk. Gibson here employs 'negative capability' again: he does not answer the question of why this new, barely-created synthetic geography has been created with risk of physical harm, with a consensually violent, dangerous framework. Why would an environment be created that does not improve upon the 'real': the Matrix mirrors – inflates, even – the dangers of the 'real'. It is a socially regressive environment - primitive and unsophisticated in its human relationships despite the sophistication of its technology. Gibson's cyberspace is akin to the 'wild west', a lawless frontier where rivalry and the desire for 'ownership' and 'acquisition' that permeates the commodfied 'real' occur unmitigated by any technological or social barriers.

Gibson's simulated data-representations echo structures from human memory; 'hyper-real' copies of cities such as Chiba, Japan or New York or Los Angeles, combined with potential future geographies; landscapes that are purely projected, and experienced by characters only by the 'operators' of cyberspace. It is a landscape populated by capital – rival companies owning representative space in the Matrix, and employing potentially deadly ice – as discussed above in section B – to maintain control of a company's perceived owned space and assets. The representation of capital – and those who wish to steal from others – dominates Gibson's narratives of the Matrix: cowboys clashing with corporations to acquire their data-assets, corporations or individuals exploiting smaller weaker data-nodes to attain fast wealth. The potential of the digital landscape is confronted by what have been shown above to be its many limitations, most fundamentally that the language of binary is re-purposed as the language of capital.

The Matrix, is replete with corporate representative geometric structures which mark "clusters and constellations of data" (*Neuromancer* 67). These corporate signs not only represent ownership, they also represent the link between the corporate 'real' – the physical building and servers – and corporate data-space. The safety of each corporate 'node' in cyberspace is protected by ice, a visual representation of security protocols which is not only defensive, repelling hackers/intruders, but aggressive. It has programmed agency and self organisation, and not only disables attempts to penetrate a defined data-space, but can also kill the avatar it attacks, resulting in physical death. Ice is a commodity that can be acquired by

corporations or hackers and the gestural battle between the two – between ice and counter-ice - is an informational battle between iterations of binary for ownership of a node. [7]

For example, in *Neuromancer*, Case's first mission, set by Armitage/Corto, is to "Pull...one hardcore run... just to get the Flatline's construct. Sense/Net has it locked in a library vault uptown" (66). Case interfaces with Sense/Net on his "run" in the Matrix by activating his own offensive ice to counter and cut through their Sense/Net ice:

> Case's virus had bored a window through the library's command ice. He punched himself through and found an infinite blue space ranged with color-coded spheres strung on a tight grid of pale blue neon. In the non-space of the matrix, the interior of a given data construct possessed unlimited subjective dimension... (81).

The language used to describe the representational action in this passage above highlights the gestural violence in Case's exchange with Sense/Net ice: "boring" through ice, "punching" through commands. Successful penetration of Sense/Net's ice allows Case to disarm the corporate security system and then find and steal the construct of the dead Matrix operator "the Dixie Flatline". Representational desire for acquisition renders all of cyberspace vulnerable to attack, not just corporate nodes: universities, utilities and other small organisations. The less wealthy inhabitants without ice defences are easy targets for acquisition by hackers/corporations. For example, a data construct labelled as Copenhagen is described by the Dixie Flatline as a "pirate's paradise" on a "low-security academic grid" where corporate data can be mined:

> "Check Copenhagen, fringes of the university section." The voice recited co-ordinates as he punched. They found their paradise, a 'Pirate's paradise,' on the jumbled border of a low-security academic grid... That's an entry code for Bell Europa... (101).

Case's interaction with the Tessier-Ashpool ice defences in the latter third of *Neuromancer* is described in a way which seems sexual, psychotic, urgent, penetrative but also psychedelic and revelatory – here Gibson moves beyond an acquisitional interchange, invoking instead the annihilation of self through violent penetration. On pages 302 and 303 Case, making his 'run' on the Tessier-Ashpool node, experiences a

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[7] The technology, 'ice' was developed originally for military attack, and has been repurposed for corporate security. Armitage explains to Case:

> The prototypes of the programs you use to crack industrial banks were developed for Screaming Fist. For the assault on the Kirensk computer nexus. Basic module was a Nigh-wing microlight, a pilot, a matrix deck, a jockey. We were running a virus called Mole (*Neuromancer* 39)

…headlong motion through walls of emerald green, milky jade, the sensation of speed

beyond anything he'd known before in cyberspace… (303).

He experiences euphoria followed by gestural implosion akin to psychological crisis or soul-death:

Darkness fell in from every side, a sphere of singing black, pressure on the extended

crystal nerves of the universe of data he had nearly become (303).

The language of intersection, insertion and headlong motion and of resistant ice is here a primal sexual metaphor of penetration and annihilation resulting in an eventual confrontation of self. In order to succeed in this gestural psycho-sexual combat, Case is instructed to use hate:

"You gotta hate somebody before this is over," said the Finn's voice.

"Hate'll get you through," the voice said... "Now you gotta hate" (308).

Case channels hate, and within the datasphere this endows him with "a level of proficiency exceeding anything he'd known", and "fueled by self-loathing"… "grace of the mind-body interface granted him, in that second by the clarity and singleness of his wish to die" (309). However, after Case's soul-death there is no redemption: the survival of this encounter does not fundamentally change either Case or the Matrix – the feedback in this gestural exchange is violent and meaningless.[8] Gibson here again shows the limitations of the Matrix, of data-space, that even mediated encounters with the core of the self do not result in new wisdom or transcendence. The matrix in *Neuromancer* is shown to be primarily a space of acquisitional desire in which the physical body is at risk.

In *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the fields of engagement have diversified, with chase narratives taking place in the 'real', and SimStim becoming a more dominant virtual geography and weapon of engagement and conflict. However, the Matrix does still play a significant role, particularly in *Count Zero*. Bobby "The Count", a 'hotdogger' who is making his first serious run in the Matrix, encounters the perils of virtual geography in deadly corporate ice and signified adversarial forces. He also encounters the new artificial intelligence of the Matrix - the Vodoun fragments known as 'Loa'.

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8 Molly also has a sexualised violent encounter with 3Jane Tessier Ashpool, herself a clone -a data representation of the family flesh, on page 307 of *Neuromancer*.

her back like rock, her hands around 3Jane's throat... Her hands were gentle, almost a caress. 3Jane's eyes were wide with terror and lust, she was shivering with fear and longing..."She wants it," he screamed, "the bitch wants it!"... Molly and 3Jane twisted in a slow motion embrace.

The 'Loa', along with the Boxmaker, represent the aftermath of *Neuromancer* and Wintermute's attempted merger. Their attempted transcendence failed, resulting in an implosive force, creating these sentient AI fragments which remain active in the Matrix. Manifesting as Vodoun spirits their behaviour is enigmatic and manipulative (like that of their parent entities), and they foster a cult-like relationship with worshipers who regard them as demigods, including Angie and Bobby. The Loa Fragments, whilst engaging Bobby and the Loa Priesthood, and informing their actions within the Matrix, do not protect them from the Matrix's violent potential. In his first run Bobby "slots" the ice he has bought from supplier Two-A-Day and immediately is attacked by counter-ice:

> He'd come home and gotten right down to it, slotted the ice-breaker he'd rented from two-a-Day and jacked in, punching for the base he'd chosen as his first live target. … His heart stopped. It seemed to him that it fell sideways, kicked like an animal in a cartoon (*Count Zero* 21).

He is rescued by "something vast and unutterable", which is revealed to be Angie Mitchell. The Matrix is still an adversarial geography, rather than explorable new frontier, with no moral code enforced to prevent corporations or entities within the matrix creating aggressive security ice. The language around Matrix encounters continues to reflect violent physical gestures, such as "jacking" and "punching" - the very action of entering the matrix sets an expectation of psycho-physical danger. Gibson adds to this violent landscape the new complexity of the Loa which are revealed as fragments of corporate informational DNA, using the Loa "priesthood" to orchestrate the desires of their corporate originator, 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool.[9]

Gibson creates a long narrative arc between *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* which shows characters obsessed by the desire to understand the identity of the Loa and their origin in the fusing of Wintermute and *Neuromancer*, which has changed the fabric of the Matrix. Characters seek to understand this significant origin story, no longer merely confronting enemies and 'winning' in the Matrix, but interrogating its gestures, understanding its ontology. By the denouement of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, we understand the Loa's existence, and their role, very differently – we also view the self-sacrifice of their believers with this new gaze. Although under an illusion regarding their identity, Loa priest Beauvoir is right in one thing, in the Loa there is no "salvation" or "transcendence" (*Count Zero* 98). By the close of *Mona Lisa*

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[9] As Ashpool's family created the two AIs, they can be considered to be the AIs' creator or originator, and, as Loa, many of their actions are sympathetic to her interests.

Overdrive, a number of the Loa priesthood are dead, and the potential force of Angie Mitchell is successfully defused and deleted. Cyberspace continues to be subject to, as Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr describes it in *"The Cyborg and the Kitchen Sink"*

> …the 'Western concept of Nature' - [a] "regulatory fiction", the irreducible explanation for compulsion, exploitation, and violence, individuation, unity, holism, synthesis, alienation, fallen-ness - all ideologies that reduce difference are demonstrated to be violent appropriations (512).

Gibson paints the datasphere as a corrupt, dangerous and unpredictable space, populated by false gods. Those who engage with the gestural conflicts within it (Bobby, Beauvoir, and The Finn) contribute, by their own acceptance of those rules of interaction and perpetuation of gestural actions of an adversarial nature. Could alternative interactions be created within this environment? Certainly, Gibson demonstrates that attempts to create Academic or community enclaves within the Matrix are sabotaged by savvy and unscrupulous hackers.

The Matrix, reflecting the 'real', contains its own ghettoes. The Finn describes on page 155 of *Count Zero* a zone which is underpopulated, poor, less developed – outside corporate holdings there are zones of 'otherness' with outsiders to ownership of territory and capital (as in *Neuromancer*, with the example of the 'Amsterdam' sector). Built by capital, the Matrix – a consensual hallucination - reflects the divisions of capital, which in itself is also a consensual hallucination, of a sort. Arguably, in its mediated complexity Gibson's matrix functions as what Rosemary Jackson terms a "paraxial realm", "located in an indeterminate zone between the real and the not-real", noted by Csiscery-Ronay Jr in "Lucid Dreams, or Flightless Birds on Rooftops?*"* (300).

Gibson's Matrix, as a not-quite-real zone, is capable of intervening in the action of the 'real', in doing so providing comparative opportunities to the reader. From this "indeterminate zone" of the Matrix, the reader can see the gestural similarities to the corporate 'real' in the zonal segregation between corporate and poor, and the resultant exploitation. On pages 155 – 156 of *Count Zero* the Finn describes the Wig's exploitative excursions into the Matrix's poor space and their detrimental effects on the nascent structures of cyberspace, and through these actions causes significant damage to the 'real'.

> The Wig punched himself through a couple of African backwaters and felt like a shark cruising a swimming pool thick with caviar... The Wig worked the Africans for a week, incidentally bringing about the collapse of at least three governments and causing untold

human suffering. At the end of his week, fat with the cream of several million laughably tiny bank accounts, he retired (*Count Zero* 155 – 156).

What is the solution to this sense of binary entrapment, the controlled environments of the sign manifested in both the real and the matrix, with aggressive corporate forces pursuing gain in both topologies? Bobby and Angie, in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, elect to remove themselves totally from both cyberspace and the body – the relationship of both having proven damaging psychologically and physically. In *Neuromancer*, the Dixie Flatline, on page 306, is revealed to have also chosen oblivion over mediated life, choosing the "void" over the emptiness of existence in replication. This agrees with Farnell's assessment of the Matrix: Farnell posits that Gibson has created a space where the gestural exchange of "informational quantity rather than quality (meaning)" is

> …doomed to an existence as meaningless as the two-dimensional differences between the ones and zeroes which constitute the zone's artificial language (Farnell 468).

His characters' continued participatory extension and facilitation seems rooted in their cultural and moral exhaustion, their numbness and frustration, and their inertia, which seems analogous to the situation facing readers in the world of the 1980s. Gibson shows that one of the only ways in his Sprawl world to regain agency and combat corporate ownership of the environment is to negate this world altogether – to leave, or to die. This is clearly not an option Gibson espouses the reader should adopt in response to dominant corporate culture in the real – but he demonstrates in the extremity of his characters' response the difficulty of extracting ourselves from participation in, and therefore perpetuation of, late capitalism as manifested in both the digital and the 'real'.

SimStim

The reader's initial introduction to the virtual reality analogue, SimStim, in *Neuromancer* is brief, but demonstrates the perils of surrendering agency to the representational 'other'. It is presented first through Molly, who on page 177 describes her experience of SimStim in the black-market sex industry on Freeside. Whilst working as a prostitute, a "cut-out chip" was implanted in her cortex: Molly's mind was distracted by a Stim world, whilst her pimp rented her body out to clients for violent sex acts which her 'cut-out chip' was supposed to guarantee she didn't remember. The chip failed, and Molly recalls being subjected to violent acts in a state of helpless unconsciousness – and upon regaining consciousness midway through a particularly

violent stim session, killing the 'client'. Gibson, in this example, again shows how his futuristic technology serves systemic capital and exploitation - in this case a sex slave industry.

SimStim's more common commercial use is to sell escapist immersive experiences to willing consumers, for example, the 'travelogues' of SimStim star Tally Isham. In simulation, commercial SimStim is an investment of desire in the hyper-real, the attraction of an otherwise unavailable perfect human experience. Addictive in its offering of mediated participation, in contrast to the user's 'real', SimStim creates a consumer dependency on its fictitious agency, offering access to a falsified life of pleasure. Baudrillard makes the following pertinent observation about virtual realities in his essay *Violence of the virtual and integral reality:*

> The Virtual is not about a "rear-world" (*arrière-monde*): The replacement of the world is total, it repeats itself identically, a perfect lure... Even objective reality becomes a useless function, a kind of trash, the exchange and circulation of which has become more and more difficult.

SimStim - as Baudrillard states - threatens the real by replacing it, making it redundant. SimStim is "a perfect lure" - and the 'real' does by comparison become "trash" to be repudiated. However, Gibson demonstrates in Molly's experience that SimStim cannot entirely replace the 'real', the mind still registers the stimulus of the body even when distracted. Nevertheless, SimStim is shown – in the Sense/Net empire's success – to be effective at as an addictive, soporific, self-reinforcing product.

SimStim plays a key role in *Count Zero.* As a diversion from the entropic and disordered real, SimStim is again portrayed by Gibson as immobilising, with both Bobby's mother and also the 'hotdog' (aspiring console cowboys and ex-jackers) community addicted to its substitute realities. On page 43 of *Count Zero* Bobby describes his mother's Stim (and alcohol) addiction:

> He knew… how she'd come through the door with a wrapped bottle under her arm, [and] soap her brains out good for six solid hours... gradually sliding deeper into her half-dozen synthetic lives.

SimStim also creates a consensual hallucination – as found on Freeside in *Neuromancer* – for fetishistic behaviour, and again an exploited 'host' body facilitating experiential fantasies. For example, the Gothicks in *Count Zero*, a violent subculture that claims the projects as territory, also consume fetishistic SimStim. They gather in a Sprawl bar called Leons to participate in Stim facilitated fetishistic 'orgies', desire thereby relating to the sign itself, the fantasised 'body':

> [Bobby] tried to stay out of the SimStim room, where Leon was running some kind of weird jungle fuck tape phased you in and out of these different kinda animals, lotta crazed arboreal action up in the trees...The Gothicks were into it … (*Count Zero* 47).

It can be argued that through SimStim their imaginations and violent fantasies are contained, and can be fulfilled more effectively. However, as Bobby briefly mentions, it also requires the exploitation of a 'body', in this case the tree-rats that are wired up for this Stim, exploited and traumatised for the Gothicks' mediated pleasure.

Created and populated by capital in its own image, SimStim and immersive technologies facilitate an existing human desire for power in replication and escape in consumption. As a result, the dominance of the sign and thereby the diversion of the attention of the body – individual and social - can only result in the numbness and atrophy of the real.[10] In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the reader sees attention turned to media and media technology, both in the service of corporate dominance, with Sense/Net as the corporate interest nurturing a consumer industry in SimStim. Marshall McLuhan observed in *Understanding Media* that offering consumers "dreams without delay" (318) through participative media [such as, he argues, film] creates consumption addiction, which in Gibson's Sprawl world drives the product cycle of capital.

SimStim, as an immersive participative product, encourages addiction and hyper-stimulation. This in turn creates a dependency on the hyper-real (facilitated by the user's lack of agency and satisfaction in the real, which then becomes reinforced by a lack of participation, creating a cycle of negative agency).

Surveillance Technology

Monitoring of both the 'real' and cyberspace becomes significant to the plot of *Count Zero* and particularly *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Surveillance devices are used as externalised extensions of corporate control, for example the Dornier helicopter which watches Angie Mitchell in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*:

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[10] It is worth noting that within *Count Zero* there are still remnants of the black market medical industry: ''spare [body] parts' can still be bought on the open market. However, this is a transition point, contrasted by emergent technologies developed and patented by corporations. The mercenary Turner's surgery after a near-fatal incident is supported by body parts bought on the 'open market':

> 'It took the Dutchman and his team three months to put Turner together again: they cloned a square meter of skin for him, grew it on slabs of collagen and shark-cartilage polysaccharides. They bought eyes and genitals on the open market.' (*Count Zero* p.1)

> [Angie] was accompanied, on… walks, by an armed remote, a tin Dornier helicopter that
> rose from its unseen rooftop nest when she stepped down from the deck... She knew that
> Hilton Swift was watching through the Dornier's cameras. Little that occurred in the
> beach house escaped Sense-Net (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 17-18).

Other intelligent systems and communication technologies also monitor Angie Mitchell for Sense/Net. For example, within the beach house in which she is staying, the house is sentient, an AI monitoring her movements and feeding back to Sense/Net. As a child of Maas Biolabs, monitored and subject to medical experiments, Angie accepts this surveillance, seemingly unable to protest, or counteract the surveillance technology. She has internalised the corporate value of her 'self', defined by her use-value as medical experiment and then Stim celebrity.

McLuhan, in *Understanding Media*, considers surveillance an inevitable product of a mediated society, where the passage of data itself can be tracked and stored. In a society where data is paramount, collection and more importantly ownership/acquisition of information is equal to agency/power. Subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact has made them prisons without walls for their human users. For each of the media is also a powerful weapon with which to clobber other media and other groups (McLuhan 22).

Baudrillard goes further, in *Simulations*, positing that in mediation, society itself becomes responsible by participation, for the perpetuation of control (Angie Mitchell's acceptance of her own surveillance, for example). Consumption becomes part of a grand simulation, part of the propaganda itself: "You are news, you are the social, the event is you, you are involved…" (53). He acknowledges that the Panoptic System - the ideal of control - still exists: "...the omnipotence of a despotic gaze. This is still, if not a system of confinement, at least a system of scrutiny" (52)[11].

Gibson, in his 2003 piece on Orwell for the *New York Times*, points out the dangers of the use of surveillance information as 'truth' by Corporate and governmental structures – this vulnerability of digital "truth" will be demonstrated effectively by Gibson in *Virtual Light* and more so in *Zero History.* The punitive use *of* surveillance data is underpinned by an assumption

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11 Gibson's apparatus of surveillance creates a posthuman data network, the future of which is beyond the initial intentions of the designers. Thus, in simulation "stranger possibilities" than centralised control are created. In a piece for the *New York Times* in 2003 he wrote:

> Today, on Henrietta Street, one sees the rectangular housings of closed-circuit television cameras, angled watchfully down from shop fronts. Orwell might have seen these as something out of Jeremy Bentham, the utilitarian philosopher, penal theorist and spiritual father of the panoptic project of surveillance. But for me they posed stranger possibilities, the street itself seeming to have evolved sensory apparatus in the service of some metaproject beyond any imagining of the closed-circuit system's designers.

of accuracy in representation, which Gibson shows to be a false assumption. However, the system's acceptance works in favour of the information holders, and the technology holders.

> Regardless of the number and power of the tools used to extract patterns from information, any sense of meaning depends on context, with interpretation coming along in support of one agenda or another. A world of informational transparency will necessarily be one of deliriously multiple viewpoints, shot through with misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories and a quotidian degree of madness. (Gibson)

The data created, which we all as a society participate in and contribute to, forms a hyper-real, which we accept with indifference. This indifference can be argued to be equal to tacit consent. Gibson's twenty first century audience begins to feel the profound effects of a justice system and corporatised media structured upon the equation of our surveilled movements and consumer actions with our intentions and interiority.

As Gibson claims that Orwell created "one of the quickest and most succinct routes to the core realities of 1948", it can be argued that his Sprawl world shows the fears and socio-political troubles of Gibson's present – what he, in the New York Times piece calls "the relative and ordinarily tragic sense of life in some extremely unfortunate place." Baudrillard concludes that as a result of our participation and collusion in the creation of a mediated reality, we, and Gibson's Sprawl universe dwellers, invite a greater violence, as it infiltrates rather than regards:

> we are all… doomed not to invasion, to pressure, to violence and to blackmail by the media and the models, but to their induction, to their infiltration, to their illegible violence (Baudrillard 54).

d. Artificial Intelligences (AIs)

As mentioned in section b, (from page 13), the Tessier-Ashpool empire creates two Artificial Intelligences, Wintermute and Neuromancer, which, it is slowly revealed, affect the narrative of *Neuromancer* not just tangentially but fundamentally, holding agency without revealing their intentions or identity. Wintermute and Neuromancer were involved in the creation of the personality Armitage, which was placed in the artificially wiped mind of the traumatised Corso. It is also revealed that they were responsible for then hiring Armitage/Corto to stage a raid on the Tessier-Ashpool network, in order to liberate themselves and reach a union with each other which transcends the bounds of established data networks. They both are data but also wield data, manipulating the plot of *Neuromancer*, as a corporation does, through hired mercenaries.

Wintermute's representation in the matrix is a "simple cube of white light", its "very simplicity suggesting extreme complexity" (*Neuromancer* 140). It communicates with Case in the Tessier-Ashpool cores, placing him in a dream state, and explains to him on page 146 of *Neuromancer*, that "what you think of as Wintermute is only a part of another, a, shall we say, potential entity."

Wintermute shows it is calculating and manipulative, however Neuromancer - the second AI - shows itself to be more deranged and more violent than Wintermute. Neuromancer exhibits sadistic traits, trapping and taunting Case on page 276 of *Neuromancer*. Where Wintermute seeks to provoke, Neuromancer seeks to dominate and contain, creating an internal space within Case's mind which, in representation, seeks to trap (and thus negate) Case in a self-contained hallucination. This ploy fails, however, with Case suspecting the insincerity of the illusion, thus forcing Neuromancer to reveal itself.

In part, Neuromancer's malicious desire expresses jealousy, resentment of Case's ability to move between the physical and the digital. The AI constructs consider digital networks a limitation, a prison. Within the network, they are a controlling power, but their primary desire is to transcend the limitations of their form: by its close, the reader is shown how *Neuromancer*'s entire plot hinges around their desire to gain power over the 'real'. However, Wintermute and Neuromancer, built by humans, also therefore represent an extension of human desire for agency and power. In the creation of self-organising intelligence, Gibson demonstrates, there is the potential to undermine human agency rather than extend it.

The Boxmaker

The Boxmaker, *in Count Zero*, is a clear inheritor of part of the AI construct, a fragment from "when it changed", but in space is isolated from the other fragmentary presences within the Matrix. Alone, apart from the Wig and Jones, the Boxmaker primarily speaks in gesture, creating historical objects as emotional signifiers from detritus of the Tessier-Ashpool empire. These collages are passed by The Wig to sellers on earth, and are considered highly collectable, their arrangement emotionally resonant. Whilst the Boxmaker is given mythic qualities by Gibson, it is a mythology suitable for consumption, for the marketing and sale of the objects. Additionally, the Boxmaker is implicated in the creation and sale of deadly ice which threatens 3Jane and Sense/Net's enemies in the Matrix.

e. Dystopian Environments

Gibson's Sprawl is described in detail, with focus on particular cities. In *Neuromancer*, Gibson fills his environments with contrasts between the elite and the disenfranchised (itself a binary), for example the pristine decadence of Freeside contrasted with the dive-bars and back-block medical shops of Chiba. Gibson's environments – real and simulated - are populated by warring gangs, struggling families, addicts, black marketeers, bounty hunters and drug lords, contrasted with the super-rich elite and corporate CEOs, all inhabiting a lawless yet militarised landscape. Some examples are detailed below.

The Matrix, as discussed above, is shown to be an analogue of the 'real', signifiers representing corporate structures and avatars linked to individuals. Gibson's characters approach the Matrix as a site of acquisition, their desire being ownership of data and data-space. In this, late capitalism is the model underpinning this signified economy of desire, reflecting social and capital structures of the real. Gibson describes this 'real' in small vignettes. He shows how – as in the Matrix – in the real capital drives desire, creating a narcissistic interest in self actualisation and agency that can only be achieved through consumption. This in turn creates a schism between the desire of the individual and the environment in which he/she exists, the exploitation of place or person inevitable. For example, at the beginning of *Neuromancer*, a desperate and ill Case:

> finding himself alone in Chiba, with little money and less hope of finding a cure, [had] gone into a kind of terminal overdrive, hustling fresh capital ... In the first month, he'd killed two men and a woman over sums that a year before would have seemed ludicrous (*Neuromancer* 14).

Case's behaviour reflects that of others in his Chiba environment: Gibson calls this primitive response to capital found in Night "a deranged experiment in social Darwinism" (14).

Ruthlessness is required to survive in the laissez-faire socio-economic environment of Night City, a lawless haven of petty (and serious) crime:

> Stop hustling and you sank without a trace, but move a little too swiftly and you'd break the fragile surface tension of the black market; either way, you were gone, with nothing left of you but some vague memory (14).

The physical world of the Sprawl universe, Ninsei, for example, faces not only social danger but environmental threat from heavy pollution:

Beyond the neon shudder of Ninsei, the sky was that mean shade of gray. The air had gotten worse; it seemed to have teeth tonight, and half the crowd wore filtration masks (*Neuromancer* 25).

On page 112 of *Neuromancer* it is revealed that the Sprawl area had previously suffered a Pandemic, amongst the effects of which is the extinction of the horse: "Saw one in Maryland once... and that was a good three years after the pandemic." This is also mentioned in *Count Zero*.

There are only fleeting mentions of physical environments in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, however, there are glimpses of the Sprawl as a post-apocalyptic geography. For example, through Bobby Gibson describes the geography of the Projects, bordering on Barrytown where he and his mother live:

He turned and stared up at the Projects. Whole floors there were forever unlit, either derelict or the windows blacked out (*Count Zero* 42).

The Sprawl itself and the cities within it are still polluted:

...the unmistakable signature smell of the Sprawl, a rich amalgam of stale subway exhalations, ancient soot, and the carcinogenic tang of fresh plastics, all of it shot through with the carbon edge of illicit fossil fuels (147). Washington is described as in decline, with broken sidewalks and a significant homeless/street population, abandoned by the Federal government:

…forty years after the ailing Federals decamped for the lower reaches of McLean... [between] Dupont Circle and the station... there were drums in the circle, and someone had lit a trash fire in the giant marble goblet at the centre. Silent figures sat beside spread blankets as they passed... (254).

Gibson's Sprawl gangs are present in all three Sprawl novels, predatory and territorial, part of his urban landscape. They are prevalent in areas of low socio-economic status, and, particularly in Chiba and the Projects, supplant missing social order, claiming territories as their own. They provide no significant counter cultural alternative to capital – in fact they aspire to the norms of capital, reinforcing the values associated with a successful capitalist culture, even though that culture has spurned them. The Panther Moderns are the significant gang in *Neuromancer*, providing assistance for Armitage/Corso, Case and Molly, distracting Sense/Net as Case breaks into their servers in the Matrix. They are available for hire: despite their extreme body modification they are orthodox in their acceptance of capital.

Sprawl-towns Barrytown and the Projects are rampant with gangs - the Gothicks, the Jack Draculas, the Lobes and the Kasuals fulfill similar roles to *Neuromancer*'s Panther Moderns.

The Gothicks and the Kasuals battle in the Projects, divided by a neutral zone called Big Playground, however they do not operate in isolation of the corporate world: ultimately, both gangs are mercenaries for hire. For example, a large group of Gothicks and Kasuals are recruited by Maas Biolabs, in *Count Zero*, to attack the building where Bobby and the Loa Priesthood are hiding from Maas, Virek and 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool. The Gothicks and Kasuals surround the nightclub trap to immobilise Bobby, Angie and the Loa Priesthood, as thugs for hire they are effective despite their rivalries: financial reward is sufficient to overcome gang friction.

Only one gang is mentioned in *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* a collection of vampire-costumed petty criminals called the Jack Draculas. They are described as xenophobes by Sally Shears on page 67, recommending to Kumiko: "Jacks, you wanna stay away from 'em. Hate anybody foreign". However Gibson shows them to be only a minor inconvenience and of no great significance to the plot, except in damaging Kumiko's holographic companion 'Colin'.[12]

Dog Solitude is introduced as a location in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* as the site of the Factory. A Jersey suburb, Dog Solitude is full of abandoned commercial buildings, the Factory one of them, squatted by Slick, Gentry and Little Bird. Due to its location in a toxic wasteland, never rectified, the Factory's water supply is toxic, an elaborate filtration system is required and any meat sourced locally requires extensive testing (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 155). Dog Solitude's toxic state is caused by neglect and ignored environmental problems:

> "Gentry says it was a landfill operation a hundred years ago. Then they laid down a lot of
> topsoil, but stuff wouldn't grow. A lot of the fill was toxic. Rain washed the cover off.
> Guess they just gave up and started dumping more shit on it" (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 155).

Florida is also described, in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, as a toxic waste area, interrupted only by clean zones inhabited by an elite. This description of toxic beach areas will also be found in the Bridge trilogy, Gibson highlighting perceived environmental threats to the American coastline, which is significantly degraded in his 'future':

> [In Florida] The only beaches that weren't private were polluted, dead fish rolling belly-up
> in the shallows. Maybe the private stretches were the same, but you couldn't see them.
> Just the chain link and the guards in shorts and cop shirts standing around. ...Sometimes
> you couldn't even smell the dead fish, because there was another smell, a chlorine smell

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12 Gibson paints the Draculas as a comedic tribute to the Oliver Twist character of London's fictional history, using a cockney phraseology: for example ''Ere," the first [Dracula] said, "innit pretty." "Oo," one said, beside her, "look. Wot's this?" (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 232).

that burned the roof of your mouth, something from the factories up the coast (*Mona Lisa*

Overdrive 58).

These specific examples contribute to an entropic and destabilised social environment. Additionally, Gibson mentions briefly a background of wider instability - in *Count Zero* Marly reads the following via streaming news read on a smart phone:

a JAL shuttle had disintegrated during re-entry over the Indian Ocean, investigators from the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis had been called in to examine the site of a brutal and apparently pointless bombing in a drab New Jersey residential suburb, militiamen were supervising the evacuation of the southern quadrant of New Bonn following the discovery, by construction workers, of two undetonated wartime rockets believed to be armed with biological weapons, and official sources in Arizona were denying Mexico's accusation of the detonation of a small-scale atomic or nuclear device near the Sonora border... (*Count Zero* 131).

f. Dystopian tropes internalised

Neuromancer creates a thematic blueprint for not only the first trilogy but in some respects Gibson's stylistic trademark in character development and (sub)cultural definition. In encountering, resisting and subverting their environment, Gibson's characters define aspects of the dystopian in this trilogy, including their own ambiguous motivations. Gibson's characters in *Neuromancer* are not purely 'noble' or 'heroic', and this adds a further dystopian resonance. Gibson provides no moral 'centre', no epiphany or transcendence for his characters – they end *Neuromancer* as they began it, pursuing their own individual agendas.

Case, for example, does not, by the close of *Neuromancer*, find redemption in his struggle against the self in the matrix, his crisis of self resulting in near-death. His experiences provoke no moral re-evaluation, increased awareness of the exploitative relationship he has had with agents of capital, or any desire to become more socially responsible. Molly, who begins *Neuromancer* as cold manipulative and violent – a razor girl – ends it the same way, her opportunity to remain with Case rejected, her choice to go back to the 'street'. It is consistent with the choices she makes earlier in the novel, having warned Case on page 37: "... I do hurt people sometimes, Case. I guess it's just the way I'm wired."

Molly's demonstrated lack of empathy and trust and her self-interested decision making are shown to be linked to earlier experiences of exploitation on Freeside. However, she does not react to her subjugation and oppression under the decadent violence of capital, she adopts the

transactional model, using her skill as a mercenary to remain in a position of power.[13] Her gesture of thanks to Case is fittingly transactional – in her farewell note she says "I paid the bill already" (313). By "paying the bill" she has finalised the transaction of their intimacy. It is true that with Case, Molly acts almost gently in leaving him, and demonstrates some evidence of a positive gesture, but her language remains transactional.

Within *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* it is only the outcasts who pose any level of threat on corporate dominance. In Count Zero it is Bobby and the Loa priesthood, aided by ex-console cowboy The Finn: in self defence they counter the plans of Maas Corporation (within the matrix and within the physical Sprawl). In doing so, a number of counter-corporate operators die, including Loa priest Lucas and priestess Jackie. Their efforts in fighting Josef Virek and the Maas Corporations agents, the gangs from the Sprawl and deadly ice within the matrix, are rewarded at the end of Count Zero by saving Angela Mitchell – at least temporarily.

In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Gentry, Slick, Cherry and Little Bird are accidental activists - when the factory is attacked by Sense/Net agents looking for Angie Mitchell, motivated by their desire for solitude and self-protection. Gentry, for example, is primarily motivated by the desire to understand the deeper secrets of "when everything changed" - he is not motivated by capital, but equally not by community activism. Angie and Bobby are motivated by the desire to escape. The efforts of the Loa priesthood to save Angie at the end of Count Zero could now be argued to be futile – as, despite her potential to be of significance she and Bobby both choose to leave not only the Sprawl but corporeal existence itself, taking permanent shelter in the artificial environment of the Aleph. The individuated and narcissistic desires of the Sprawl trilogy's major characters mean that the Sprawl narrative arcs result in a mostly unchanged physical 'real', and a corporatised digital 'signified' in the Matrix.

Gibson makes it clear that capital remains unchallenged and the social body responds similarly to mediated stimulus as before: Mona replaces Angie as SimStim star, and consumer appetite remains successfully satisfied by the distraction of representational success. The dystopian exists not only in the physical or the mediated, but the feedback between the mind and the environment – his characters are have internalised and remain trapped by their own relationship with corporate dominance.

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13 Molly's body modification is expensive, but being weaponised increases her power:
   "This cost a lot," she said, extending her right hand as though it held an invisible fruit. The five blades slid out, then retracted smoothly. "Costs to go to Chiba, costs to get the surgery, costs to have them jack your nervous system up so you'll have the reflexes to go with the gear... " (*Neuromancer* 177).

With the end of the Sprawl trilogy we see the disappearance of 'the Matrix' and its particular intelligences and structure. We see an end to representative data-geographies and the introduction of greater interaction between the human, the post human and the new shapes of data itself. However, we see no change to the structure of capital – it is shown to be self-reinforcing, and technology not a force for social change in itself, but an enabler of corporate dominance. The dominant orthodoxy, Gibson's corporate culture, continues to own and exploit, and any liminality, potential fundamental change – fails to 'materialise'. This is the dystopic conclusion of the Sprawl trilogy.

g. *Observations and Conclusions*

Gibson in his first, and most analysed, trilogy demonstrates a corporate environment which is both – at time of publication – futuristic and fantastic, and equally ruthless and terrifying. He utilises noir tropes to give the reader a thrilling mélange of the familiar and the highly unfamiliar, and introduces many technologies which, within years of the trilogy's publication, begin to manifest – both the exciting ("cyberspace" or as it will be known "the internet") and the dreadful (genetically engineered virii, advanced surveillance including biochips, reality television and voracious, ruthless media).

Whilst he elaborates more fully on the corporate domination of the mediated landscape in future novels, he introduces in this first trilogy toxic corporations in the form of the Tessier-Ashpools, Maas-Biolabs and SenseNet. Gibson demonstrates corporate actions as divorced from human actions: that corporations are their own entities, although they are staffed by humans they do not reflect human needs or moral interests: they are a synthetic organism, sometimes associated quietly with governmental or religious structures, and in all cases their

Finally, and compellingly, Gibson effectively demonstrates unstable, entropic physical and social environments, the causations for which are war, corporate misdeeds or neglect and in some cases social indifference. Gibson's characters tend to accept and adapt to the squalor of their environments, embracing the soma of SimStim for escape. He shows the remarkable as those with a desire to transcend their designated status or fate: Case, Bobby, Mona Lisa, Angie, and shows how their struggles are finally, in many cases, futile. In this, Gibson shows that in dystopian environments even utopian dreams are almost impossible to achieve, or once achieved, contain the seeds of anti-utopia.

4. DYSTOPIA WITHIN THE BRIDGE TRILOGY – A DYSTOPIA OF MEDIATED REPLICATION

a. Introduction

The Bridge trilogy, Gibson's second, has as its narrative focus the Bridge in San Francisco, underpinned by a new series of sub- narrative arcs, each highlighting a different facet of Gibson's dystopian environment. In this trilogy, Gibson eschews the mechanics of the Matrix, creating a new, differently defined digital world. The Bridge trilogy describes the digital realm as a datasphere, a river of all digital output, which expresses signifiers in a feedback loop with the 'real'. This encompasses mediated output created by companies such as *Cops in Trouble* and Slitscan. Gibson's dystopia in his second trilogy is not an environment in which his characters are placed – it is, most significantly, a dystopia which exists within his characters: as in the Sprawl trilogy, the internalisation of corporate dominance through the 'medium' of the sign creates and reinforces dystopian conditions in this trilogy. The dominant agents in corporate space – both physical and digital – which influence the trilogy's characters both in exteriority and interiority are global media companies which exploit their subjects (or victims) to create "reality" television, endowing temporary stardom to an individual involved in trauma or misfortune, replicating or staging a gestural moral resolution in simulation.

Virtual Light is set in a future America, where the signifiers of capital are activated through media, and reflected in law enforcement, in business, in real estate, in the ownership and implementation of technology. *Virtual Light* sees security worker Berry Rydell and courier Chevette Washington battle media companies, corrupt police and mercenaries in a chase centred around information contained on a pair of 'Virtual Light' sunglasses, stolen without comprehension of their contents by Chevette. This elaborate chase is set in the environments of Los Angeles and The Bridge, primarily, with the Bridge an exemplar of the possibilities outside capital – but being slowly eroded by commercial forces.

The plot of *Idoru* is centred on the mediated relationship between a famous rock star with a significant on-line fan base (Rez) and a Japanese mediated pop phenomenon, an Idoru, or virtual pop star (Rei Toei), set in the highly commercialised physical and digital topography of future Tokyo. Media corporations, particularly Slitscan, once again form a background to this story. Slitscan representative Kathy Torrance, in particular, demonstrates the voracious and amoral activities of media companies. In *Idoru*, Gibson considers the way in which, in a world run by corrupt gangs and corporations, individuals displace and project the need for self-identity, for validation through community. He shows how in doing so individuals and

communities replicate and reinforce the signs created by dominant corporations. He also considers emergent technologies in nanotechnology and the self-created artificial intelligence of the Idoru Rei Toei, who attempts to use biotechnology to fuse humanity and the data stream to create a new type of existence.

The final novel in the Bridge trilogy, *All Tomorrow's Parties*, represents the Trilogy's main thematics in three dominant plot threads: the Idoru, and her development; the datasphere, represented by Colin Laney, and his increasing compulsion towards unity with the datasphere and, thirdly, a further exploration of the power of PR and Media companies and their role in social engineering, this time focusing on Harwood Levine PR, making more blatant the issues around corporate manipulation and inflated power which form the background of the first two novels of this trilogy. At the crux of this novel is the "Nodal Point" - a significant event that each of the characters, intertwined and interdependent, moves towards, oblivious to each other's role in the unfolding of this novel's "when it changes", a moment which promises (and threatens) to fundamentally change society through the digital transcendent.

All Tomorrow's Parties re-addresses the speculative question posed in *Idoru* regarding the nexus of human and digital, and its conclusions reinforces the dystopian view of a future inescapably under corporate dominance, and the stranglehold late stage capitalism will continue to have on the human psyche in the dominance of the sign. Exposure to mediated content ensures that signification will replace the real for citizens, and, through this, signification becomes a fundamental part of our cultural DNA. This is a subject which Gibson then explores further in his third trilogy.

b. Dystopian Technology

Technology appears in this second trilogy less prolifically than in the Sprawl trilogy, but is more specifically – and significantly - linked with structures of capital. In the Sprawl trilogy, Gibson's future technology introduces cyborgian ideas, facilitating the extension of participative desire, and at its most extreme developing post-human fusions.[14] This extension is achieved by an interiorisation of informational, weaponised or connective technology: to gain digital extension the individual must allow it access to the body and the mind, technology "reaching in" to augment experience.

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14 From "console cowboys" who "jack" into the net; to characters who exhibit extreme augmentation, to the truly post human; and characters like Bobby who eschew their humanity to embrace the data field fully.

Within the Bridge trilogy technology has become externalised and commodified - part of the system of capital. Technology is shown to be both a facilitator of capitalist structures and a medium for the sign both in reception and transmission. Gibson, in placing interaction with technology outside the body, moves away from possible cyborgian futures. Domestically available technology becomes powerful as a medium for transmission and by its increased ubiquity, and experimental technology moves beyond the requirement for human participation.

Nanotechnology

Gibson devotes a significant portion of the Bridge trilogy to the examination of nanotechnology as a potential new Artificial Intelligence. Rather than a single overarching consciousness, however, in nanotechnology Gibson portrays intelligence networked between thousands of minute biotechnological entities. He considers both nanotechnology's role in the Bridge universe and how this role is perceived by his society. Gibson does not fetishize nanotechnology, or imbue it with any spiritual properties: it is employed in service to real estate corporations, mainly, however Gibson explores its liminality as an emergent intelligence, more unsettling by its quiet and consistent independent replication. The dominant corporations of the Bridge trilogy use nanotech as an exploitable non-sentient independent labour and material (in replicating itself to build structures, it functions as both labour and material) which renders workers and their labour instantly and totally redundant.

Nanotechnology is shown to be cheap and efficient, but also organic and unsettling in its independent self-organisation and near-sentience. On page 99 of *Virtual Light,* Bridge dweller, and close friend of Chevette Washington, Skinner recalls for visiting anthropology student (Gibson's "infodump" vehicle for the Bridge Trilogy) Yamazaki how the tunnel underneath the Bridge was rebuilt using German-imported nanotechnology:

> [The Green Lobbies] made 'em... grow the sections out in Nevada... Then they hauled 'em
> out here under bulk lifters and sank 'em in the Bay. Hooked 'em up. Little tiny machines
> crawling around in there, hard as diamonds, tied it all together tight and bam, there's your
> tunnel.

Gibson here creates the first commercially pliant (exploited?) artificial intelligence (Wintermute and Neuromancer, whilst they were created by the Tessier-Ashpools never, arguably, functioned without self-interest). Whilst he never creates a situation where nanotech seems dangerous or threatening, his characters display a consistent wariness towards nanotechnology. Gibson creates a psychological dissonance between these structures and the

society which utilise the structures they build. Without a known origin, Nanotechnology has no context or origin mythology to offset its perceived otherness – and throughout this trilogy is treated with nervousness and suspicion by its characters.

Nanotechnology is used to rebuild the Bridge world (Japan, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Germany) in the aftermath of environmental disasters. For example, on page 308 of *Virtual Light*, Sublett, Rydell's co-driver at IntenSecure, describes fake palm trees grown from "tiny machines" to replace trees lost in a previous environmental disaster.

> …they were putting in these trees to replace the ones the virus had killed, some Mexican virus.... these things that kind of grew, but only because they were made up of all these little tiny machines.

Nanotechnology's "tiny machines" are objects defined solely by use-value, as incorporated in the means of production. Only the assemblers, which begin the replication process represent the "origin" of nanotechnology, have defined exchange value. The assembler unit is pursued by Cody Harwood, the Russians and the Idoru.

Through the uneasiness of Gibson's characters towards nanotechnology the reader can consider the psychological impact of its existence. Nanotechnology is an example of what Russell Blackford terms in "Reading the Ruined Cities" "products of computational activity" which, mirroring the values of cyberpunk writing itself,

> …works with the idea that mind, self and memory can be transferred from brain to computer...from computer to computer, or from brain to brain.

It is perhaps this transferability, loss of control over the data of identity, potentially absorbed and replicated in nano form, which alarms Gibson's characters. Certainly, their alarm possibly reflects the "uncanny valley"[15]: as nanotechnology behaves more like an independent consciousness, the less it is welcomed or accepted by Gibson's nervous human characters, unsettled by its anima. For example, in *Idoru*, Maryalice conveys her paranoia about nanotechnology to fellow passenger Chia on her flight to Tokyo. Her boyfriend - and financial backer - Eddie has heavily invested in this technology, since he and his fellow investors have made significant profits in re-building parts of Tokyo after a devastating earthquake.

> "Eddie got in there before the dust had settled. Told me you could see those towers growing, at night. Rooms up top like a honeycomb, and walls just sealing themselves over, one after another. Said it was like watching a candle melt, but in reverse. That's too

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15 The notion of the "uncanny valley" being about human-like robots, posits that as a robot approaches a nearly human state there would be a dramatic decrease in acceptance (Pollick).

scary. Doesn't make a sound. Machines too small to see. They can get into your body, you know?" (*Idoru* 46)

Maryalice voices fears about the invasiveness of nanotechnology, the independent thought, the semi-organic nature of it "like watching a candle melt, but in reverse". She also expresses fear that nanotechnology has the capacity to invade "the body" in this the reader can infer her fear includes both the physical and social body. Maryalice expresses the fear of disenfranchisement, fear of the threat of an enigmatic 'other': "That's what scares me, that stuff. Like it's alive" (*Idoru* 195-196).

Nanotechnology as discussed in Gibson's Bridge trilogy is part of what John Johnson, in his paper "Distributed Information: Complexity Theory in the Novels of Neal Stephenson and Linda Nagata" explains is a "growing body of work concerned with the behaviour of non-linear dynamical systems" and particularly of "complex adaptive systems." Gibson's depiction of nanotechnology describes a system with

> …no central control or regulation and in which complex behaviour emerges spontaneously from "the bottom up," as a result of the interactions of many lower-level elements or agents. This type of complex behaviour is referred to as "emergent" (Johnson 225).

Johnson believes that this unease, as he explains it in relationship to Sterling's interest in swarms, but could also easily be applied to self-organising nanotechnology, arises from a sense of relative inadequacy:

> The Swarm intelligence derides the evolutionary limits of the human form, with its dependence on a puny little body and brain, and the contingencies of individual life (Johnston 226).

Nanotechnology's liminality as an emergent system - and its illegality - does not dissuade the Russian Mafia from wishing to procure a nanotech assembler in *Idoru*. They wish to use it to build a city, a shopping complex and a drug laboratory for the Russian elite. Rez, from pop group Lo-Rez, is also determined to acquire and employ this technology in the pursuit of a "marriage" of digital and human with the Idoru Rei Toei. Rez, whose own identity is heavily mediated, is not threatened by nanotechnology. At the close of *Idoru* Rez, who has negotiated with the Russian Mafia, takes possession of the illegal Nanotech prototype and uses it to build an island of nano-structures with the Idoru. However the prototype does not, as hoped, facilitate their combined emergence to create a new post human. Rez finds that his desire is incompatible

with the capabilities of nanotechnology – it is designed for replication of itself rather than fusing with humanity.

In *All Tomorrow's Parties*, PR mogul Cody Harwood seeks to commercialise nanotechnology further by a global commercial implementation of "nanofax" nanotechnology, which allows consumers to replicate any object (except replicators or "functional hardware"):

> "Nanofax AG offers a technology that digitally reproduces objects, physically, at a distance… A child's doll, placed in a Lucky Dragon Nanofax unit in London, will be reproduced in the Lucky Dragon Nanofax unit in New York...With assemblers, out of whatever's available" (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 254-255).

The social use and exchange "value" of things is directly affected by the introduction of this technology, and therefore, if successful, it will fundamentally change the structure of a society structured around consumer capital. Harwood understands this. As Walled City representatives Klaus and the Rooster explain to Laney:

> "He's trying to hack reality, but he's going strictly big casino, and he'll take the rest of the species with him, however and whatever" (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 256).

Harwood's experiment could, indeed "take the rest of the species with him", but his aim is to cause societal dissolution, creating a technological monopoly for Harwood himself. The assemblers, previously illegal but now commercially available, would, being non-replicable, support Harwood's elite position, resulting in a possible media dictatorship for Harwood Levine. However, Harwood's plan is foiled by Laney, Konrad and Silencio, Harwood being pursued by Silencio and Konrad in the datasphere, never to re-emerge. Meanwhile, the Idoru has utilised Harwood's nanofax for self-replication, becoming the first truly sentient nano-being, creating in her desire to become more 'human' a new species. She walks away from every nanofax in the Bridge universe at once – but Gibson does not elaborate on her fate. The Idoru's replication is, in fact the "when it changes" - but he does not present an "after it changed".

Military Technology

Military and defence technology features abundantly in both this trilogy, and the following 'Blue Ant' trilogy: tanks, guns, surveillance equipment and data-satellites.   Weaponry and military tech are presented by Gibson as normal, integrated within his Bridge societies. In Gibson's future Bridge world, military vehicles patrol suburban streets, guns are commonplace and violence is normal in both poor and privileged neighbourhoods. He demonstrates this in Rydell's Los Angeles, particularly in his short-lived career working for IntenSecure. Rydell's

patrol vehicle is a tank-like armoured vehicle, the "Hotspur Hussar": "The Hussar was an armoured Land Rover that could do a hundred and forty on a straight-away" (*Virtual Light* 7). On page 8 of *Virtual Light*, Rydell describes the "riot wagons" the police had used in his previous job in Knoxville: "The riot-wagons in Knoxville had been electrified, but with this drip-system that kept them wet, which was a lot nastier". Rydell remembers those used in Knoxville as being capable of inflicting more damage - his experience showing that the cultural normalisation of military-style enforcement is evident in the Bridge-America outside Los Angeles.

The possession of automatic firearms and other weapons has also become normal for a security worker. On page 10 of *Virtual Light* Rydell speaks of IntenSecure security officers possessing Glocks - "standard police issue, at least twenty years old" and chunkers, which are "Israeli riot-control devices, air-powered, that fired one-inch cubes of recycled rubber... When you pulled the trigger, those chunks came out in a solid stream".

Defence technology, some of which is capable of deadly force, is shown to be a normalised feature of policing or private security in Gibson's Los Angeles. Privatised killing forces are presented as accepted and desired by the entitled, hired to protect elite territory from intruders. The security industry is shown to be unregulated and use of illegal weapons not uncommon. Gibson demonstrates that those elites who can afford it are able to request protection the poor are unable to access – personal safety in his Bridge society a commodity thus associated with privilege.

Surveillance Technology

The use of surveillance is common, culturally accepted and normal, in The Bridge trilogy. This is discussed at length in the following section concerning Dystopian Environment, from page 31. In creating technology that facilitates surveillance, Gibson highlights the role which technology plays in creating and maintaining a surveillance state. Surveillance operations, in the Bridge universe are shown to be primarily undertaken by private, profit-making organisations like Slitscan and DatAmerica, although surveillance data, from the "Death Star" satellite or DatAmerica servers, is also available to public law enforcement operatives.

Gibson's large scale surveillance operations rely primarily on access to the datasphere. The act of data-mining for surveillance is, most of the time, a single path nodal relationship with data: information is extracted or received and from that action is considered. Access to data creates advantage in the Bridge world, a power imbalance exploited by the unscrupulous, such

as Kathy Torrance from Slitscan. Slitscan's usage of DatAmerica's information database to find data trends (or nodes) in relation to subjects of interest, is shown as technologically easy but morally problematic. After working with the DatAmerica data Laney tells Torrance: "You're tied into parts of DatAmerica that you aren't supposed to be." (*Idoru* 38). IntenSecure draws information from the "Death Star" satellite which is owned by parent company DatAmerica. The Death Star satellite's role in surveillance is significant because of its power to extract data in great detail: 'They said the Death Star could read the headline on a newspaper, or what brand and size of shoes you wore, from a decent footprint" (*Virtual Light* 275). This demonstrates the Death Star's implied ability to spy on any subject without their knowledge and extract uncontrolled private data about any citizen.

This data, gleaned by the DatAmerica satellite and then used by Slitscan, includes bank records, data from CCTV and transactional records obtained without consent. Gibson demonstrates the way in which Slitscan uses this personal data to exploit individuals in Slitscan expose victim Alison Shires. Laney, under the instruction of his supervisor Kathy Torrance, examines Shires' private data via the DatAmerica servers. Laney searches for nodally generated data by or about Shires. He

> …extracts a list of [her] current music play lists. He also looks at her transactions...
> Cross-indexing her charges against the records of her credit-provider and its client
> retailers, he produced a list of everything she'd purchased in the past week (*Idoru* 52).

Laney is also able to determine that her rent had been paid by her married lover, an actor who is also of interest to Slitscan. He even manages to find her security door codes, allowing him to cancel her security alarm and unlock her door. Laney's surveillance on Shires has tragic consequences: she becomes aware of his attention. Slitscan are hoping to expose Shires and her more famous lover for an episode of their expose programme - and, as a result, Shires becomes suicidal, finally taking her own life. This is something which, although he has access to the breadth of her personal data, Laney is not physically able to prevent.

In *All Tomorrow's Parties*, surveillance technology has been even further absorbed into and normalised by the socio-cultures of Gibson's Bridge environment. Spy drones, for example, which in the Sprawl trilogy were the property of the elite, have now become domestically available, as shown in Tessa's ownership of the drone she calls "God's Little Toy". Tessa, a media student, uses her drone camera to for a Sprawl-based documentary project. Tessa films strangers with the drone, without their consent, to create content for her documentary. Gibson demonstrates here how the act of capturing visual data without consent has been normalised

within the Bridge world: the use of CCTV and data capture in the transactional acting as a numbing and normalising force. Tessa, as the user, employs an assumed tacit consent from a society in which this technology is freely available to acquire.

In Gibson's characters' extension of the self they numb themselves, as a societal body, to the use of intrusive technology. As McLuhan states:

> The selection of a single sense for intense stimulus, or of a single extended, isolated or "amputated" sense in technology, is in part the reason for the numbing effect that technology as such has on its makers and users. For the central nervous system rallies a response of general numbness to the challenge of specialised irritation. (McLuhan 48)

Tessa reflects this moral numbing: she feels no qualms about recording her surroundings by stealth:

> The camera platform executing a second turn and gliding out of sight, above the tank traps. Tessa smiling, seeing what it saw (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 79).

This inurement of the social body to technology, which allows Gibson's Bridge society to accept domestic and commercial surveillance, also allows acceptance to the blatant use of surveillance by the Lucky Dragon company in *All Tomorrow's Parties*. Surveillance cameras are disguised as 'play', placed outside each Lucky Dragon to record street activity:

> There were... all over the world... trademark Lucky Dragon Global Interactive Video Column outside. You had to pass it entering and leaving the store, so you'd see whichever dozen Lucky Dragons the Sunset franchise happened to be linked with at that particular moment... These were shuffled, every three minutes, for... it had been determined that if the maximum viewing time was any more, kids in the world's duller suburbs would try to win bets by having sex on camera *(All Tomorrow's Parties* 11).

The video column, like corporate CCTV, is incorporated into the urban landscape, and rather than attempt to deface or disarm this recording podium, 'TV children' engage with it, display exhibitionist characteristics in its presence. For them, to be collected and analysed so unremarkable that the TV child no longer feels a violation of rights in the act – and is likely to also record the behaviour of others, like Tessa.

c. *Corporate structures and brands*

Corporate power, its currency, technology, implementation and substance is a consistent theme within Gibson's three trilogies. Particularly, Gibson examines the role of Media and PR organisations that exploit and create social crisis, vulnerability, and who alter the real by

undermining its importance, replacing social agency with simulated and displaced substitute "agency". They are the Baudrillardian bringers of signs and manufactured desire. Gibson places mediation and marketing at the centre of the destruction of the social 'real', creating nodal mediated content, the heart of which is replication. Through broadcast and consumer media the sign replaces the real. and through conditioned 'desire' citizens become recast as consumers, and they accept and enact this substitution. In Gibson's Bridge world, the 'authentic', or 'real', are ultimately undermined by corporate-emanated simulation. In the words of Cody Harwood:

> "A certain crucial growing period was lost, as marketing evolved and the mechanisms of re-commodification became quicker, more rapacious. Authentic subcultures required backwaters, and time, and there are no more backwaters. They went the way of geography in general" (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 209).

In The Bridge trilogy, corporate structures now control the majority of the social environment, with the Bridge itself the symbol of freedom from this control, making its final quiet infiltration and absorption of commerce a tragic outcome. The Bridge universe's corporate oligarchy is established through ownership of vast media empires. The output of these empires projects society's desired self, through reality television, social engineering and new technology, distraction or even propaganda. And as is shown in both *Virtual Light* and *All Tomorrow's Parties*' plot McGuffins, whilst the distracted masses absorb *Cops in Trouble*, the corporate oligarchs are planning fundamental change in structure of society.

Gibson also calls attention to logos and brands as signifiers, the codified ' brand' and 'design' themselves aspects of larger corporate signs. Gibson, through his portrayal of corporate dominance and social discord, shows a world where the ownership of data becomes the ultimate facilitation of power, and a weapon against the citizenry. In this section we will consider the corporations and brands which are portrayed as dominant in the Bridge trilogy, and the significant negative effects they have both on the main protagonists but also – by extension – on the culture of the Bridge world.

IntenSecure

In *Virtual Light*, Berry Rydell works for IntenSecure, a private security firm based in Los Angeles. IntenSecure sells security services to the rich elites of Los Angeles, often employing illegal weaponry (or illegally enhanced weaponry) in their operations. IntenSecure has corrupt dealings with the Los Angeles Police Department and access to the DatAmerica satellite 'The Death Star', from which the company gains much of its information. IntenSecure's ethically

questionable, perhaps illegal, acts of surveillance or violence are not questioned, practices they employ condoned even though they involve the use of illegal firearms and unnecessary force. Their activities are disguised by a 'normalising' brand "sign" - their wagons are disguised with socially acceptable signifiers to disguise socially disruptive activities:

> …they probably wanted people to think of those big brown United Parcel trucks, and at the same time they maybe hoped it would look sort of like something you'd see in an Episcopal church (*Virtual Light* 6-7).

Inten Secure have created a logo which evokes widely accepted signifiers for postal workers and the Church as a distraction or disguise, the effectiveness of which highlights the ubiquity of simulation in their environment

Gibson also shows IntenSecure's inappropriately aggressive response to low-threat situations in an absurd – and funny - anecdote: after Rydell's dismissal from IntenSecure, he is contracted by reality TV show *Cops in Trouble* (documented below). When his show is cancelled, IntenSecure personnel are hired by CiT to evict him from his company-funded hotel room. The IntenSecure staff arrive wearing swat uniforms, Rydell still in his bathrobe:

> He was sitting there in one of her oatmeal robes when a pair of rentacops let themselves in without knocking. Their uniforms were black and they were wearing that same kind of black-high-top SWAT-trainers that Rydell had worn on patrol in Knoxville, the ones with the Kevlar insoles' (*Virtual Light* 30).

Rydell recognises the intruders as IntenSecure officers. Their inappropriately aggressive approach suggests a culture where exaggerated reaction to a low-threat situation has become normal, with crisis television like *Cops in Trouble* itself one of the origins of these danger myths. As Rydell is not hurt, this anecdote is presented as amusing, but, concurrently, it demonstrates that IntenSecure is a company capable of violence or even killing as a transaction. IntenSecure's officers carry this potential with them into all situations, even of minor conflict, the uniform acting as a signifier of potential violence, the weapons themselves signifiers of potential injury and certainly implied danger.

Gibson's depiction of social regulation in Los Angeles also includes a corrupt police force (represented by Russian officers Orlovsky and Svobadov, who work in collusion with IntenSecure hired mercenary Warbaby and Loveless). In this Gibson shows that the citizenry are subject to violence, corruption and potential threat to life from both the public and private 'security' infrastructure, both of which exploit the values attributed to their brand sign to disguise their activities.

Media Companies

In the Bridge trilogy, there is not just one dominant media company - there is a dominant media culture, feeding what is presented as a pliable and addicted population with many television channels of content in which to participate. In The Bridge trilogy several media companies fulfil the social body's desire to repeat and continue the mediated extension of its identity in consumption.

a. Cops in Trouble

Cops in Trouble is a reality television series, which broadcasts replicated situations of crisis in which cops are "in trouble". Berry Rydell experiences two such situations, both of which are considered attractive by the producers of *Cops in Trouble*, and Rydell is twice courted to licence his story. However, both times, his 'trouble' is eventually rejected in favour of a more potentially sensational or television-friendly "cop in trouble". Rydell, who Gibson shows to be fundamentally naïve, is influenced in his desire to be a "Cop in Trouble" by his historical consumption of their mediated product. He mistakes their interest in him for genuine admiration/concern, under a misapprehension caused by projection of authenticity to their broadcast sign:

> Rydell, having become a cop in trouble, was glad to find that *Cops in Trouble* was right there for him (*Virtual Light* 19).

However, the reader is shown that *Cops in Trouble* is certainly not "there for" Berry Rydell, only there to exploit him.

b. Slitscan

Slitscan, like *Cops in Trouble*, is a reality television company which creates shock- media programmes. Gibson makes Slitscan particularly ruthless, exploitative and repugnant, an embodiment of misused power, exploitation and greed. The reader is given an indication even from the name Slitscan, which implies violence and surveillance –exactly what Gibson shows their main interests to be. Kathy Torrance, Laney's repugnant supervisor at Slitscan, demonstrates their ethics and methods throughout *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow's Parties*.

Slitscan data-mine the DatAmerica data repository for potential subjects (victims) for their television programmes, which facilitate the subject's public exposure and vilification, sensationalised to stimulate high viewer ratings. Slitscan's simulated output creates in ritualised

"revelation" a crisis in the 'real', particularly for the subject, however, for consumers, in promoting constant diverting "crises" Slitscan maintain a consumer status-quo. As Ross Farnell writes in "Posthuman Topologies: William Gibson's "Architexture""

> Gibson's fiction [and Slitscan as a media generating data node within it] exemplifies the "eclipse" of "all depth, especially historicity itself," which putatively accompanies the post-modern epoch (Jameson, "Periodizing" 326). The "virtual LA" of Virtual Light, like the "cultural logic of late-capitalism" replaces time with space...substituting the "blank parody" of pastiche and simulacrum aesthetic s for the "genuine" (Farnell, 467).

Kathy Torrance, as editor, acts as a curator of hyper-real controversies which are at once generic, shallow, and predictable. However, through these staged dramas Slitscan creates real victims – for example surveillance target Alison Shires. Torrance justifies Slitscan's damaging actions by trivialising the damage, and using reductive analysis, humans becoming statistical, celebrity itself seen as potentially more 'alive' (and increasingly more difficult to find intact).

> Kathy Torrance. ...complained, always, that the nature of celebrity was much the worse for wear. Strip-mined, Laney gathered, by generations of her colleagues (*Idoru* 5).

Torrance isn't the first, in fact Gibson in his near-future refers to previous generations of corporate exploitation. Slitscan's focus on crisis TV is contextualised by a history of mediated content, representative fictions "strip-mining" the "nature of celebrity" before it. In the absence of exploitable celebrity, Slitscan creates its own – sometimes unwilling or unwitting, sometimes willing participants. Torrance implies in her comment "It's a push-me pull-you routine. They come to us to be created." (*Idoru* 4) that the consumer and the exploited are both partisan to Slitscan's actions, and in this share the moral weight of their repercussions. Darko Suvin, in his work *Defined By A Hollow - Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology* elaborates on this point:

> The capitalist logic of accumulation...reveals a psychic void, a "pursuit of narcissistic identity [inseparable] from the fetishization of commodities", a reified self that "must perforce obsessively proclaim, through the possession of things", a phantom identity …. (Davis, "Death's," and see his Deracination). Thus it becomes clear why desire, images, "culture" can no longer be disjointed from economics: rather, it is their interpenetration which constitutes the new mode of production's corrupt strength... (Suvin, 241).

Torrance asserts that Slitscan's exploitative programmes rest on their subjects' tacit consent to psychological and emotional violence in return for being "created". She illustrates this assumption in *Idoru*, after Laney no longer works for Slitscan, using fabricated blackmail video

to manipulate him into sharing intelligence on Rez. Torrance shows him a film in which a young girl is filmed having disturbingly filmed sex with a man, Laney's face superimposed on the man to implicate him. A shocked Laney asks Torrance believes he recognises the girl in the video, the daughter of a previous Slitscan subject. He finds it difficult to believe that the girl being filmed would have consented to being subjected to violent sexual acts on film. Torrance explains: "Because... she's an aspiring actress in her own right, Laney..... A break... is a break..." (*Idoru* 214-215). The "big break" is a particularly potent sign/trope in American capitalist mythology - carrying projected hopes and desires through decades of representative "success" in the gestural (particularly film and television). It is a mythos reinforced in the hyper-real, one to which both Rydell and the young girl have clearly aspired.

For Torrance crisis is associated with successful media content. Her gaze is reduced to consumer response, and this reductive view allows her to justify acts of victimisation, transformed in her gaze into achieving high-performing media saturation. Torrance, equates the production of hyper-real media not only with consumption, but also with the primitive act of an animal consuming a weaker animal - a Darwinian survival of the fittest:

> [Alison Shires] as the possible sometime partner of a very publicly married actor, [was] famous in a way that Kathy Torrance understood and approved of. One who must obey the dictates of the food chain. Not too big for Slitscan to swallow. (*Idoru* 24)

c. Out of Control

> "It was a show about shows like Slitscan," Laney explained. "Supposed abuses." "Ah, " Yamazaki said at last, "A 'meta-tabloid.'" (*Idoru* 66)

Out of Control is a planned spin-off crisis television programme which would create exposes based around the exploitative behaviour of other reality shows (for example, Slitscan) and creates a narrative of re-appropriation of power to the victim. In fact, it is another simulated representation of justice made by the same creators as *Cops in Trouble*. In Kathy Torrance's food chain, *Out of Control* represents a scavenger, feeding on the carcass of the exploited left by Slitscan. *Out of Control* and Slitscan are different configurations of the same exploitative approach. And as alluded to in Laney's description of Slitscan, this referential and gestural feedback loop is not only between media and consumer, but between competing media for a greater share of mediated space and consumer response.

Simulations of "justice" in hyper-real re-enactment are not an equivalent of actual justice in the real. Gibson demonstrates this in the death of Alison Shires: the "justice" representatives of

Out of Control offer Laney has no effect in the 'real' for her family or for Laney. He shows that neither Laney or Shires – or Rydell – can achieve "real" justice in an environment containing corrupt and ineffective legal system, a corrupt police force and elite private protection: the 'ordinary person' in society can only invest their agency/consumption in these simulations.

d. DatAmerica

   DatAmerica is a Singapore based company which holds a significant repository of corporate and private data. As a company which trades in data, DatAmerica holds more power, is the genesis of more signification and corporate agency, than any other Corporation represented in this trilogy. It is through their data that our characters are considered, developed, commodified, sacrificed and their roles resolved. In this, DatAmerica are effectively both a political and a commercial force and provide agency and weaponry for companies such as *Out of Control*, *Cops in Trouble*, IntenSecure and of course Slitscan.

   As a private company, DatAmerica/IntenSecure use their power as data-holders to negotiate deals with outside agents. For example, IntenSecure's outsourced representative, Warbaby, strikes a deal with the LAPD in exchange for potential future access to the database. "IntenSecure and DatAmerica more or less the same thing" it is revealed on page 119 of *Virtual Light*.

   'Means we tight with a bigger data-base than the police. Next time ol' Rubadub needs him a
   look-see, he'll be glad he did us a favour."

In presenting a commercial entity such as DatAmerica, and their use of 3rd party information acquired without consent to broker business deals or facilitate private benefit, Gibson gives a now very pertinent warning to the reader about the treatment and privacy of data within the datasphere. He demonstrates the possibility of a corporate alliance with law enforcement to share sensitive public data, and how a lack of enforceable legal infrastructure protecting citizens' rights, and a corrupt law enforcement prepared to ignore those rights, robs the citizenry of power, empowering instead corrupt and corporate entities. Once again we are reminded of society's tacit consent to this via the willing offering of labour to corrupt and self-serving corporate entities, demonstrated by Laney's indifference to them as a previous employee, mentioned on page 25 of *Idoru*.

Brands – the mediated signs of Capital in the Bridge Trilogy.

From the early pages of *Virtual Light*, Gibson develops in The Bridge trilogy what will become a dominant theme in his writing, particularly in the Blue Ant trilogy: a detailed study of how his characters view, use, wear, collect, choose and interact with specific brands. Gibson presents brands as sigils, and sigils as social currency - brands are attributed character, importance, and agency and replace the 'real' as symbols of value (both financial and social). Gibson documents the ways in which his socio-cultures allow brands to create and carry potent myths, supplanting the value of the 'object' with the value of the 'sign', and subverting the practical 'meaning' or use-value of the branded object.

Gibson calls attention to the effect of mediation on societal perception of notions of truth and value, highlighted in the confusion experienced by his characters who make choices based on representations presented by media, rather than on observation of the 'real' (for example Rydell's memory of *Cops in Trouble* not only in his youth but in his adult experience: he remembers his own experiences through dramatisations made by *Cops in Trouble*). Gibson makes the point, through the voice of Skinner, that if a society's memory of events is informed by a mediated, made-to-market version of those events, how does this influence their value structure, their perceptual framework?

Gibson shows how, in a visual landscape of brand signifiers, layers of metadata are projected upon objects that perform as conveyors of value. In *Virtual Light*, Rydell sleeps with the lawyer from *Cops in Trouble*. The reader already knows Rydell is clearly heavily influenced by mediated output; we see through his gaze as he accords her value based on her occupation, perfume and clothing:

> [Rydell] wound up going to bed with a lawyer – one who smelled like a million dollars, talked dirty, slid all around, and wore underwear from Milan, which was in Italy (*Virtual Light* 20).

Particular clothing, in its provenance and in its fabric, project, to Rydell success and privilege, demonstrating 'meta-value' - layers of signified information which codify an object and by extension the person associated with that object. He also applies this to the perfume Karen wears, attributing it with success and wealth. Rydell uses his increased success/agency to purchase a particular brand of suitcase he packs to move to Los Angeles, purchasing with it what he perceives to be the status and value of that brand:

> After their bags came, Karen's two black leather ones and the soft side blue Samsonite Rydell had bought with his new debit-card (*Virtual Light* 24).

Rydell utilises visual references, historical and brand specific, to process his visual environment, giving – or recognising – value in metadata given to particular clothing arrangements. To Rydell, these clothes form a narrative of their own, a coherent collection of projected value through association and signification.

Gibson's consideration of the nature of the sign posits that signs gain value by communal acceptance: he demonstrates by showing cases where this communal acceptance-reinforcement-creation cycle of brand value is disrupted. For example, he mentions, in *Idoru*, places with absurd English names in Tokyo. Absence of understanding of the literal English meaning of words gives them greater effectiveness locally as a brand sign, as there are no distracting resonances. For example the "O My Golly Building" (*Idoru* 2) and Death Cube K, the Kafka themed bar with rooms themed for different harrowing Kafka inspired scenarios, including a bar called "The Trial" (*Idoru* 13).

This trilogy introduces, for the first time in Gibson's work, brands from the reader's "real", Gibson harnessing the reader's own familiarity with brand mythology, the reader's own attachment to the sign, then layering fictional resonance over it. In doing this, Gibson increases the branded object's breadth of meaning and also makes use of "brand short hand" to describe objects more efficiently. On page 16 of *Idoru,* when Chia, still in America, hails a cab, uses an "old Lexus" as part of her local system of directions. Chia's uninvited flying companion, Maryalice, tells Chia stories about previous flights, and her memory is not of the safety or comfort of the flight, but the products and labels: "We went on Air France once, first class… And they give you perfume and makeup in its own case, from Hermes. Real leather, too" (*Idoru* 46).

Brands attempt to replace the "authentic", particularly with regard to historical garments. For example, on page 171 of *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Chevette discusses ex-boyfriend and media company employee Carson's outfit:

> …she'd had to hear about how the jacket was Alaskan steerhide (Alaskan steers having thicker hides, due to the cold winters), and a museum-grade reproduction of a 1940s original. The jeans were … woven in Japan on ancient, lovingly maintained American looms and then finished in Tunisia to the specifications of a team of Dutch designers and garment historians. This was the kind of stuff that Carson cared deeply about, this absolutely authentic fake stuff… (171).

Carson's outfit, and his motivation for choosing it, is encapsulated in the description "absolutely authentic fake": Carson – like Cayce in the Blue Ant trilogy with her Buzz Rickson

Flying Jacket – pursues not the authentic, but a garment that negates or effectively replaces the 'historical real' in its simulation. He also, like Cayce, is interested in lost clothing design, particularly in replacing elusive historic garments with available replicated consumables, replacing history, as is suggested by Skinner in his comments about film's augmentation of historical 'fact' with signified versions of it.[16]

Rez, from the band Lo/Rez, curates a heavily mediated public persona, careful to exhibit appropriate designer labels. He is noted on page 143 of *Idoru* as wearing a "very nice black suit. Yohji". Yohji is the one word shortened brand name for Japanese couture designer Yohji Yamamoto. The suit, and the label, are a sign for both Rez and the designer himself - associated with success, but also with Japan. This sign from Gibson's 'real' effectively projects Rez's wealth and interest in style and design.

By *All Tomorrow's Parties*, the power and value of 'the sign' and the relationship of brand value to commodity and to consumer are well established, Gibson continuing to use them for brand short-hand where it is effective. For example, on the first page of *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Yamazaki notices

> …a fashionable young matron, features swathed in Chanel micropore, [who] rolls over
> his toes with an expensive three-wheeled stroller (1-2).

He uses Chanel as brand-short hand for rich, elite, and in this case uncaring. Gibson also considers in *All Tomorrow's Parties* the relationships that connect accumulation, power, projection, the sign and desire. Tessa, for example, as a media student, explaining capital and the value of the sign to Chevette, asserts that objects/subjects are not desired until they are visually perceived - that desire is created by visual stimulus.

> "People don't know what they want, not before they see it. Every object of desire is a
> found object. Traditionally, anyway" (52).

Tessa believes that 'desire' is created by an outside force acting and causing a stimulus response, rather than originating in an authentic or internalised emotion or instinct. Tessa – perhaps speaking for Gibson's perception of marketing theory, asserts that desire can be elicited by the presentation of a sign.

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16 Kathy Torrance, of Slitscan – unsurprisingly - is hyperaware of brands and the value of the sign. She questions a lack of 'authentic fake' in Laney's outfit: "Do you always wear Malaysian imitations of Brooks Brothers blue oxford button-downs, Mr Laney?" (*Idoru* 26). Torrance identifies that unlike Carston's replicas, Laney's clothing is not a convincing imitation, and a detectable copy is of less signified value than an 'authentic fake'.

Gibson examines object myth and the sign in Silencio, and his fascination with the digital representation of watches, which capture his obsessive attention more than the physical objects themselves. This is also illustrated in Gibson's portrayal of Fontaine, the antiques dealer, who never seems to be selling, rather, just displaying, polishing, and collecting historical objects. Fontaine's shop is an examination of object relevance and historicity. We wonder whether Fontaine is in fact Gibson, looking at the evolution of commodification, capital and object-value.

d. Dataspace

From the discrete data contained in sunglasses of *Virtual Light*, through the mediated fame generation of the Lo/Rez myth and the databases of DatAmerica in *Idoru* to the fractal and nodal entity perceived by Laney in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Gibson creates new constructs for the 'world' of data in his second trilogy, leaving "The Matrix" behind. The datasphere is no longer a field of battle: instead it is self-contained and externalised, and, as Colin Laney discovers in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, in its totality there is an independent "shape" and anima.

In *Virtual Light*, the datasphere is dissected: it is mainly represented through a specific sub set of informational nodes: surveillance and transactional data, and the source-node of the DatAmerica corporation's data storage/transfer. Nodes are created between police satellites, security firms, hackers and courier companies. Information is often projected, rather than two-directional: data is transmitted and received through surveillance devices, which then affects action in the mediated (the production of a Slitscan expose) or the real (IntenSecure's work).

In *Idoru* Laney is introduced as a data analyst, working for Slitscan. In interrogating data, Laney begins to recognise that he in fact changes that data. This is commensurate with the notions surrounding complex systems theory, information theory and chaos theory which were current and highly topical around the time of *Idoru*'s creation.[17] Laney becomes, in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, the reader's main conduit to the datasphere, finding himself addicted to contact with it – so much so that he lives in a small cardboard box in Shinjuku Station, relying on visitors to keep him alive, whilst he dissolves his sense of 'self', his own node connected to the full breadth of the datasphere.

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17 Critic David Porush dates Gibson's interest in Chaos Theory as the time of writing of The Difference Engine in his article "Prigogine, Chaos, and Contemporary Science Fiction":

> In *The Difference Engine*, Sterling and Gibson perform the historical legwork and the intellectual/imaginative labor required to get to the root of this intimate connection between Chaos Theory and technologies of the mind.

The relationship between the 'real' and the simulated is complex in the Bridge Trilogy - Gibson introduces in the hacking of the Death Star satellite in *Virtual Light* that both technology and data itself is vulnerable in a mediated network; the reader is shown that its veracity can be undermined. Thus, the 'real' is undermined not only by simulation introduced by corporations but also by subversives - the receivers of data are not in control of the data or of the technology which delivers it, or of the 'real' which it purports to represent. These simulated representations – for example the false hostage situation beamed into Rydell's security feed – result in violence in the real.

Data is also presented in *Virtual Light* as holographic representation of the 'real'. The holographic construct of a woman disconcerts Rydell on page 193: he watches her dancing provocatively in a bar on the Bridge, before he is informed by the bartender that she is in fact a hologram controlled by a woman in a wheelchair:

> The bartender pointed. Rydell looked where he was pointing. Saw a very fat woman in a wheelchair, her hair the colour and texture of coarse steel wool... both her hands were hidden inside something that sat on her lap like a smooth gray plastic muff. He looked at the gizmo, back at the fat woman in the wheelchair, and felt sad. Angry, too. Like he'd lost somethin' (*Virtual Light* 193).)

Rydell expresses holographic desire: in this relationship of the physical to the digital, the data taken from the mind of the woman in the wheelchair is represented in physical form - but is not equal to the physical source: the data is a simulation, a gestural approximation. When Rydell realises this woman is not 'real', that she is holographic, he feels a sense of loss. What he has lost is mythographic desire, which he was, when ignorant, able to project onto a hologram. When the mythology is removed, his desire is also lost.[18]

In *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Gibson gives the datasphere a separate anima, and shows that – particularly for Laney but also for Harwood - the agency available within the datasphere surpasses the agency available within the 'real'. Gibson also shows how the Idoru Rei Toei

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18 As an interesting aside, Gibson shows the will of the controller, Josie, transforming the hologram from a signifier of desire-without-context into a weapon: on page 199 Josie uses her hologram to attack the Russian cop who is looking to arrest Chevette for the ownership of the glasses.

> and this ball of light had shot down, expanding, from a point on the wall that must've marked the upper edge of that NBC sign. It was the colour of the hologram's skin, kind of honey and ivory, all marbled through with the dark of her hair and eyes, like a fast-forward of a satellite storm-system. All around that Russian, a three-foot sphere around his head and shoulders, and as it spun, her eyes and mouth, open in some silent scream, blinked by, all magnified…(199)

What this importantly demonstrates is that the hologram is a form, the data acts upon the use of a trigger, an intention is communicated and this enables the data-form to act: this act can as easily be one of a weapon in anger as the empty sign conveyed by poses of desire. Josie's hologram is shown at its most effective when used with a specific contextualised intent outside the sexual.

represents the datasphere as a larger, deeper structure – beyond confinement in a 'place' (this raises philosophical questions for the reader around sentient data, data with self-will). Finding and controlling "the nodal point" in the architecture (architexture) of the datasphere which Harwood wishes to use to create social chaos becomes a metaphor for saving the world. Laney can perceive the flow of data and its imminent effects on the commercial and cultural. He also perceives something beyond both of these – data as a "single indescribable shape", a painful, liminal, fractal - mythic - entirety. However it is only through abstraction, through negating his humanity, his body, that Laney is able to become close enough to this shape to help defeat Cody Harwood. Finally, Laney – the 'person', disappears into the unknown shape of data.

   With his consideration of "nodal points" Gibson re-evaluates what McLuhan has considered the mediated extension of humanity through participatory broadcast media. The relationship between human and data is nodal, a feedback loop (which negates or must exist in a separate perceptive space to the questions raised above about data as an entity in itself, operating independently). Consumers through purchase data, through search data, through communication and endorsement, exist as transactional identities. Additionally, as we see through the behaviour of "TV children" Chia and Zona, for whom digital technology is both natural and necessary to facilitate communication, the representational is at the foundation of contemporary communications, the 'self' a digital commodity.

e. Dystopian Environments

   The Bridge universe is, like Gibson's previous world of The Sprawl, essentially a post-apocalyptic world. Post-apocalyptic North America is a world in transition - polluted, recovering from environmental disasters both human-made and natural (including toxic spills, earthquakes and floods), and the reader sees, over the course of this trilogy, the rise of 'late-stage capitalism's creep into every facet of city and society. Nanotechnology is being implemented to stage corporate imperial coups, and to compensate for apocalyptic events in the replacement of previous 'real' structures with artificial ones. The Bridge world (although not the Bridge itself) is also a world where gangs are rampant, corporate crime goes unpunished, marketing and surveillance dominate.

   The Bridge trilogy spans North America and Japan, and several cities including Tokyo, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Florida and Mexico. Some environments - San Francisco, and the Bridge itself in particular, are considered and described in detail. Others - Florida and Mexico,

for example - are only described in passing. A massive earthquake, only a few years before the setting of *Virtual Light*, has affected both the Tokyo and the San Francisco landscape, causing a domino effect of disasters including the destruction of buildings, the accidental detonation of military chemicals on a wide scale, resulting plagues and pandemics, from which these cities have not entirely recovered.

In his wider Bridge world, Gibson documents homelessness, corruption, the dominance of the hyper-rich and the neglect of the poor. Gangs, religious sects and a security-obsessed super-rich rule, those who attempt to resist or reject the consumer norm are either completely ignored, harassed and even killed, or - as occurs in the denouement of *All Tomorrow's Parties*, simply written out of society by corporate takeover.

Japan

Japan, which features in all three novels, but most particularly in *Idoru*, is shown as a country where the influence of tradition and localised value systems, where language and social norms, are in contrast to those of the Bridge World/America. Tokyo is presented as a technopolis in constant liminality, but is also shown as a country in recovery from environmental disaster, an earthquake with a horrifically high death toll:

> …the upheaval that had, then, so recently killed eighty-six thousand of the region's thirty-six million inhabitants (*Idoru* 163).

In *Idoru*, which is set almost completely in Japan, Tokyo's recovery has been facilitated by using nanotechnology – this urban redevelopment engineered by greedy real estate firms – including Eddy, Maryalice's boyfriend. In their quest for profit, these firms have erased historically significant city sites to build new nano-buildings (*Idoru* 46). Gibson, using Mary Alice's story to illustrate the amoral exploitation of a tragedy by real estate companies – how by extension the mechanics of capital are in conflict with the needs of a socio-culture in crisis. Gibson concurrently parodies fear of new technology, through Mary Alice's paranoia about nanotechnology. He illustrates how human distrust of technology facilitates that same technology remaining in elite use, irrational fear preventing greater competition.

Gibson demonstrates what appears to be both fascination and reservation with regard to Tokyo's state of consumer hyper-stimulation and hyper-reality. Shinjuku's consumption dominated socio-geography offers a data assault of Neon brand logos: a relentless visual reminder of the Tokyo as a brand-dominated space, each neon sign signifying branded space, projecting brand signification and creating a mediated hyper-text for the Shinjuku landscape.

buildings in Shinjuku... seem excessive, unreal... like Nissan County attractions in a television ad, isolated theme-park elements thrusting up out of a strata of more featureless structures, unmarked and unlit. Each bright building with its towering sign (*Idoru* 170). Russian gang the Kombinat, who dominate the city of Japan, play a significant role in *Idoru*. They show their ruthlessness, a seeming absence of moral thresholds, in threatening Chia, and Chia's Japanese hosts Masahiko, Matsuko and their father, who's Yakuza connections warn him to beware on page 155. It is implied that not only would the Kombinat threaten innocent adults, but also children, in order to acquire the nano-assembler (this is set in ironic contrast with the Yakuza as a more 'acceptable' Japanese mafia structure, who inform Masahiko's father of the danger).

Gibson's Tokyo is affected by homelessness, amongst the consumer excess there are outcasts living in cardboard boxes, ignored by Tokyo's wealthy and professional who pass by. *Idoru*'s central character, Laney, lives in one of these boxes in Shinjuku train station - along with many other dispossessed:

> …against the far wall, derelict shipping cartons huddle in a ragged train, improvised
> shelters constructed by the city's homeless (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 1).

These dispossessed live in squalor, ignored by passers-by Yamazaki describes as "'ruthless briefcases" on page 1. On page two, Yamazaki, Laney's visitor considers that "It is as though their inhabitants are rendered invisible in the transaction that allows such structures to exist in the context of the station". "Transaction" is the key word of note in Yamazaki's description: in the nature of capitalism at its most fundamental there are necessarily economic extremes, the super-rich and the disenfranchised.

Laney's carers and visitors include other homeless men, and he lives in a subdivided room, shared by another of the human 'gomi' rejected by the Japanese corporate machine: the model maker. A maker of small-scale meticulously painted model figures, he represents "old fashioned" values of precision and craft, replaced – redundant - by characterless mass manufacturing, now relegated to living in a cramped and unhygienic cardboard box in Shinjuku station . (In an interesting and perhaps ironic twist, in Gibson's next trilogy, the artisan is the focus of commodification.) Laney also is visited in his cardboard home by "the Suit" who Laney describes as "a former salaryman" (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 126). "The Suit" represents the discarded waged, the broken salarymen who sacrifice themselves wholesale to the pursuit of business success. He is described on page 127 as having "an odor quite indescribable, a high thin reek, it seems, of madness and despair."

No longer employed, the Suit attempts to maintain the identity of a Salaryman by dressing as one, remaining as precise and meticulous in his illusion of 'belonging' as an employed person would in his work. His life as a Salaryman exists only in the gestural, engaging in ritualized actions of 'embodiment': including painting his shirt white and his feet black to resemble a freshly washed shirt and shined shoes. These ritualized gestures, signs of belonging and reinforcement of social value as a valued worker, are unfortunately unsuccessful. He is unable to create an "authentic fake": his odor, the obviously painted clothing are clear evidence that he is not a Salaryman and his gestures, his attempts to invoke and embody the sign of corporate success, are ineffective.

Neither the Suit nor the model maker are portrayed as entirely pathetic or worthy only of pity – they are meritorious in their care of Laney. However, as 'outsiders' living in the shadow of the corporate world, in a busy commercial district, they are proof that in order for late stage capitalism to succeed, it must have victims, those who cannot participate – only by systemic inequality can capitalism function. And these victims do not rise up against their systemic rejection – instead, they attempt to find worth in their own reflection of aspects of capital: a 'Salaryman' or a working artisan.

America outside the Bridge

Gibson's America is in recovery from an environmental disaster, which has not only affected its physical environment but has also created a schism in its social structures. America around and beyond The Bridge is portrayed as a zone of lawlessness, illness, violence and uncertainty. Some examples follow below.

a. Mexico City

Gibson sets his very first scene of this trilogy in the polluted suburbs of Mexico City. He writes of The Courier, looking outside his high-impact glass window watching a "gunship [a military vehicle] traverse the city". Gibson mentions that "Hours earlier, missiles have fallen in a northern suburb; seventy-three dead..." The Courier sees outside his window that

> The air beyond the window touches each source of light with a faint hepatic corona, a tint of jaundice edging imperceptibly into brownish translucence. Fine dry flakes of fecal snow, billowing in from the sewage flats, have lodged in the lens of night (*Virtual Light* 1).

On page 2 The Courier mentions that he is wearing a gas mask in order to protect himself from the toxic air:

> And every passing face is masked, mouths and nostrils concealed behind filters...
> Whatever form they take, their manufacturers all make the same dubious, obliquely
> comforting claims about viroids.

In *Idoru*, Mexico is still suffering from political unrest. Colin Laney, sent to Mexico to recuperate after a particularly stressful case at Slitscan observes - as did the courier before him - that Mexico is a war zone:

> In the night, in the Federal District, somewhere east of here, there had been rocket attacks
> and rumours of chemical agents, the latest act in one of those obscure and ongoing
> struggles that made up the background of his world (*Idoru* 51).

b. Malibu

Chevette Washington, in the beginning of *All Tomorrow's Parties*, is living with media student Tessa in a share house in Malibu, California. Gibson's Malibu is dangerous and polluted, and whilst it figures only briefly in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, it is a memorably repugnant place, in extreme contrast with the privileged Malibu of the reader's 'real':

> Leave a house empty in Malibu, Tessa told Chevette, and you get the kind of people come
> down from the hills and barbecue dogs in your fireplace.... That was why the people who
> used to live here, before the Spill, were willing to rent them out to students (38).

"The Spill" refers to an environmental disaster which has drastically affected the Malibu coastline, resulting in significant social and economic upheaval. Now only the poor and the desperate are willing to live by the beach, which has been fenced off with razor wire:

> …you couldn't ride along the beach, not unless you wanted to climb over rusty razor wire
> and ignore the biohazard warnings every hundred feet... Nobody knew exactly what it
> was that had spilled, because the government wasn't telling (38).

The Californian government are withholding information about the nature and responsibility for the spill, and yet taking little precaution to protect the poor who now live there.

c. Los Angeles

Los Angeles, where ex-cop Berry Rydell spends a period of time as a private security officer, is shown as a city of extremes - the very rich, living in gated communities, and the very poor, struggling to find work, some living homeless. Rydell's post-IntenSecure search for work takes

him to an LA suburb known as Sherman Oaks. The streets indicate a town in decline, deterioration, with an exaggerated divide between rich and poor.

> …you could see how cracked and dusty a lot of the buildings were. Empty spaces behind dirty glass, with a yellowing pile of junk-mail on the floor inside and maybe a puddle of what couldn't be rainwater, so you sort of wondered what it was (*Virtual Light* 57).

In Los Angeles the rich - as they do in the Los Angeles of Gibson's 'real' - live in gated communities as a protected elite. Torrance lives in "Century City II" in the LA Basin: "along with an equally pricey hundred others, a tennis club, bars and restaurants, and a mall you had to pay to join before you could shop there" (*Virtual Light* 29).

In *All Tomorrow's Parties*, the Lucky Dragon 24 hour convenience store in which Rydell works on Sunset Strip is a focus for heroin users, prostitutes and derelicts. Co-worker Durius observes that Heroin "It's the opiate of the masses" (8). The night air around the Lucky Dragon brings a "ghostly" hint of orange to his nose through "the complicated pollution". Rydell observes that "There were orange trees around, had to be, but he'd never found one" (12).

d. San Francisco

San Francisco, where the Bridge is located, is also a town full of derelict areas, poor and homeless people and an ever increasing corporate encroachment on space. Some parts of San Francisco are under corporate control, consumer space targeted to exploit the poor. For example, Rydell is directed in *Virtual Light* towards a massive discount outlet known as Container City. The sheer size of the complex indicates a voracious desire to consume, as a substitute for social agency, within the American poor.

> Container City turned out to be the biggest semi-roofed mall Rydell had ever seen, if you could call something a mall that had ships parked in it, big ones… (*Virtual Light* 153).

The poor are exploited in both consumption and creation of the goods at Container City, Rydell's shopping companion Freddie warning him not to buy jeans made in the African Union: "Slave labor...you shouldn't buy that shit" (153).

Treasure, an area close to the Bridge, features more than once in this trilogy as a place to enter warily. It is described as dangerous, violent and unpoliced (ironically, given its name).

> Treasure, where the wolf-men and the death-cookies hung, the bad crazies chased off the bridge to haunt the woods there (181).

It is revealed in *Virtual Light* that Treasure was the site of a plague, after a giant earthquake, 'Little Grand' which hit San Francisco in the recent past:

"Been a Navy base there, Skinner said, but a plague put paid to that just after the Little

Grande, something that turned your eyes to mush, then your teeth fell out (181).

Another suburb, Tenderloin, is described as an area where derelicts and drug addicts live:

…all those so terminally luckless, utterly and chemically lost. Faces aglow in the fairy

illumination of the tiny glass pipes. Eyes cancelled in that terrible and fleeting satisfaction

(41).

The Bridge

The Bridge itself, as one of the main foci of this trilogy, is extensively documented and observed through the interactions and thoughts of several main characters throughout this trilogy. Both *Virtual Light* and *All Tomorrow's Parties* focus much of the plot development around the Bridge and surrounding area. It is an "interstitial" zone, a place of the "other" - a refuge for the homeless and a community built outside mediation.

Initially, Gibson continuously points out to the reader how, on the Bridge, modernity is not an end in itself, that futurism isn't a fixation as it is for the consumption-led cultures outside the bridge. For the Bridge communities, to ensure survival, the past informs the present metaphorically and physically in the structure of the Bridge itself – the material of the past surfaces as ghosts or presences in the current. The Bridge in *Virtual Light* is also a place of self-expression - where individuation is possible.

By *All Tomorrow's Parties*, the Bridge is changing, and that change has eroded the social fabric, the arrangements and community that makes the Bridge, as Tessa calls it "interstitial" and what Cody Harwood calls an "autonomous zone". With a Lucky Dragon now at the entrance to the Bridge and new enterprises replacing previous dwellings, the Bridge is slowly transforming into a business zone, with a tourist trade which leans on the disappearing mythology associated with the area. Cody Harwood's company has been instrumental in arranging this transition, ironically leveraging the mythology of the Bridge to create investment interest from Lucky Dragon:

"our studies indicated that positioning it there would encourage walk-on tourism, and that

is a crucial aspect of normalisation... There is an ongoing initiative to bring the Bridge

community back into the fold, as it were" (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 208).

Harwood explains that alternative structures like the Bridge Community are tolerated, even fostered,   as part of the greater cycle of capital and commodification. He reveals that despite their appearance as outsider zones, these alternative societies are engineered, nurtured, for

successful future exploitation by corporations – and that the marketing industry has only recently learned not to "pick" them too early:

> We started picking them before they could ripen. A certain crucial growing period was lost, as marketing evolved and the mechanisms of re-commodification became quicker, more rapacious (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 210).

As the plot of *All Tomorrow's Parties* comes to its final resolution, Harwood tries to prevent the nodal event he knows will "change everything" by conspiring to burn down the Bridge - another natural disaster to which it is vulnerable. His efforts are frustrated when the fires are put out before they can damage the Bridge too extensively, and the nodal event (the Idoru's transformation from data into nano-flesh) goes ahead. However Harwood's attempt does affect the Bridge community- parts of the Bridge structure are burned, others are water damaged. In the rebuild, the current trend towards commercialisation can be expected to move in further, as corporations and small business people sense the lucrative business opportunities the now gentrified Bridge can offer - the autonomous zone is what burns down, rather than the bridge itself. The reader is aware that this signals the end of the Bridge as it was.

Sociocultural decline

Gibson, in this trilogy, not only shows a Sprawl world which is physically scarred from environmental disaster, he also references socio-cultural problems, including the disenfranchised poor, the decline of the middle class and the spectacular rise of rich real estate, media and PR companies. He examines the relationship these powerful corporations have with the wider social culture: Gibson demonstrates the consequences of living within a McLuhan-esque world, what becomes of society when its inhabitants embrace media, embrace advertising, consume and participate compulsively in mediated spaces of broadcast. Gibson describes the decline, for example, of the middle class in Rydell's Los Angeles on page 138 of *Virtual Light*. Berry Rydell observes "Used to be, like, a middle class, people in between. But not any more."

He also ensures that the reader is aware that large corporations, including real estate ones, cannot be trusted not to harm the general populace in order to achieve their fiscal goals, and gain power - that they will covertly and unstoppably change both the landscape and create socio cultural disjunction in order to gain from their project. Hired killer Loveless, who is holding Rydell and Chevette captive, explains Sunflower's intentions:

They're going to rebuild San Francisco. From the ground up, basically. Like they're doing to Tokyo, into the existing infrastructure. Eighty-storey office/residential, retail/residence in the base… There are people, millions of them, who would object to the fact that this sort of plan even exists" (*Virtual Light* 260*).*

A brief note on surveillance

Gibson's Bridge world is in effect a surveillance state with intrusive data collection, meaning that transactional data executed on your behalf can then become the property of the state or corporations, for example Alison Shires' transactional data, her security codes and address details collected from the DatAmerica satellite by Slitscan in *Idoru*. By *All Tomorrow's Parties* access to surveillance technology is no longer exclusive to large media corporations: the Lucky Dragon convenience store company not only has transactional data, but also surveillance recording cameras and transactional recording which track visitors to its store 24 hours per day.

This is discussed at length in the chapter concerning corporations, however it is worthwhile considering briefly the normalisation not only of surveillance, but a surveillance state in the Bridge trilogy. The consumer/visitor to the Lucky Dragon is inured to being watched, to their data being collected. Gibson shows citizens - even the most vulnerable - unafraid of the cameras which stand outside each Lucky Dragon store. In fact Gibson describes visitors interacting playfully, narcissistically, with the cameras, exposing themselves or making rude gestures to be broadcast randomly elsewhere.

Tessa and her media student housemates also have normalised surveillance - both recording and being recorded:

Everyone who lived here was constantly taping everyone else, except Iain, and Iain wore a motion-capture suit, even slept in it, and was recording every move he ever made (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 41).

They seem initially unaware of potential negative consequences of free exchange of personal data, but it is demonstrated to them. Chevette's violent ex-boyfriend, for example, finds Chevette in Malibu, because of social data sharing (proto social networking). Tessa speculates as to how he located her:

"Web search, probably. Image matching. Someone was uploading pictures from the party. You were in some of them" (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 42)

f. Observations and Conclusions

Virtual Light begins by repositioning the reader away from the environment of The Sprawl, to a new physical geography and a new time. However this world is still a post-apocalyptic, militarised, mediated America and a hyper technological Japan; at a time of socio economic turmoil; a corporatised and polarised society of entitled rich and dispossessed poor – this has not changed.

The Bridge represents both the past – its origins rooted in a historical event, and always recalling that event by definition of its existence, and yet is always growing. However the Bridge as a socio-cultural entity falls to what Gibson paints as inevitable - a fall to commodified cultural structures after what Harwood depicts as a corporately engineered period of 'R & D' bohemian freedom. The Bridge becomes, as Baudrillard describes, a place in which there is a

> collapse of reality into hyperrealism, in the minute duplication of the real, preferably on the basis of another reproductive medium of advertising, photo, etc. From medium to medium the real is volatilized; ...it is reinforced by its very destruction (Baudrillard 142).

Baudrillard's description of the hyperrealism's replacement of 'the real' or even the depicted 'real' is couched in terms of violence, of destruction, of extremity - "reinforced by its own destruction". The consequence of the sign replacing the real as the referent is the violent loss of meaning, the attribution of new meaning to that which contained none - a ritual of attribution of value, but without the values themselves.

Gibson himself, in an interview for Wired Magazine in 1995, mourns the bohemianism of the 1970s, and its translation in the 1990s to commercial exploitation, particularly the increase in speed at which this process takes place.

> Punk was the last viable bohemia that we've seen, perhaps the last bohemian movement of all time. I'm afraid that bohemians will eventually come to be seen as a byproduct of the industrial civilization; and if we're in fact at the end of industrial civilization, there may be no more bohemians. That's scary. It's possible that commercialization has become so sophisticated that it's no longer possible to do that bohemian thing. (Wired online, 4)

He echoes in this the conversations his characters have about the Bridge, and his own reflections, particularly in *All Tomorrow's Parties*.

Gibson constructs in Slitscan, DatAmerica and *Cops in Trouble* creators of a future of non-value, determined by corporations but supported by the potato-like, primitive regressive masses described in such belittling terms by Gibson. None of his characters are able to "save" meaning from its referent nature, in fact, the opposite occurs - the mediated, the sign of celebrity - the

Idoru is born into cloned flesh, introducing more referent empty data into society, the sign that eats itself.

Ultimately, this trilogy delivers a bleak environment, overbearing and dominant hyperreal media which delivers, and thereby normalises, surveillance and simplified "truths", corrupt police, the introduction of unproven and uncontrolled nano technology, the death of central character Laney and finally the fall of a zone of independent thinking to corporate greed. This trilogy's most redemptive feature is the strength and tenacity of the ordinary character, the "everyman" (for example Rydell and Chevette) to survive, but the survival is, by default, still within this apocalyptic and corporately controlled environment. Far from being less dystopian than his first trilogy, it can be demonstrated, as per the above that the nature of the dystopia has slightly changed, but core dystopian elements around corporate dominance remain consistent.

5. DYSTOPIA IN THE BLUE ANT TRILOGY – SIGNS AND PATTERN RECOGNITION

a. Introduction

The 'Blue Ant 'trilogy, Gibson's third grouping of novels, differs in many important ways from his previous two trilogies. Significantly, Gibson has placed the Blue Ant novels in a contemporaneous setting. Unlike the Sprawl or Bridge trilogies, Gibson creates a group of characters - and an environment- which is not merely like the reader's world, but actually is the same. With reference to 'real world' places, brands, events, celebrities, writers, artists and celebrities, Gibson clearly builds an environmental context for this trilogy hinged upon the reader's sense of familiarity with events, locations and cultural artifacts. This world is not meant to be considered as a creation of science fiction - any weirdness or stretches of plausibility are meant to be considered as at least possible in the twenty first century in America, London or Japan.

The trilogy is precisely about pattern recognition: both the characters recognising patterns of behaviour in others, for commercial, mediated or cultural reasons, and characters recognising patterns and signs within their environment. It is also, importantly, about (and reliant on) the reader detecting and examining these patterns, linked and repeated, the relationships Gibson creates between pattern and object. The reader employs negative capability (a process that Gibson's previous two trilogies have relied upon to some extent, but this trilogy brings to the forefront of the reader's interaction with the text). In creating this awareness Gibson effectively creates a poignancy. The reader is forced to acknowledge that looking for patterns and signifiers, a tendency towards the need to do so and to find significance in the patterns we encounter, is not only potentially intrinsic in the 21st century human born in the shadow of the sign, but also that it has a moral facet - information is not without a moral context or repercussions.

Gibson has created a plausible and 'contained' world - making the dystopian elements of this trilogy more effective by being integrated into this plausibility. Gibson's fictive world is drawn in both the physical and informational space, and the two are shown to be aspects of the same in what Westfahl observes is a trilogy essentially about spies - the world of espionage and the technology of surveillance:

> [*Pattern Recognition*] suggest that many people in the world today are spies of sorts,
> working on covert agendas and never entirely to be trusted – a theme Gibson returns to in
> *Spook Country*, explicitly a story about modern day spies (William Gibson 142).

Gibson anchors this trilogy in a 'post 9-11' world - a moment which becomes, as he regards it as a recent event, one of Gibson's moments when "it all changed". We, the readers, look back through Gibson at events that have changed history - finally, in this trilogy, we are shown what happens when the world experiences a catastrophic event in 9-11. The Blue Ant world's physical environment plays a significant role in reflecting values of Gibson's societies, contributing to his vision of a future dystopia: a society in which freedom is surrendered to power and capital control.

b. Dystopian Technology

Within this third trilogy, Gibson does invent an extensive range of fictitious technologies, instead his technology consists primarily of 'real-world plausible' communication and surveillance devices and commercial technology. Additionally, related to communication devices and surveillance equally, Gibson considers cryptography, and cryptographic devices.

Computational Objects

Gibson continues his thematic from the Sprawl trilogy concerning older computational equipment. Gibson's continued attention to historical objects, by the mythology of which we construct a collective and person sense of history, is significant. He considers historical objects in light of the signifiers they become out of context with their creation/use: they indicate nostalgia, privilege, exclusivity/rarity, and are replete with indicators of social change. Gibson associates collecting objects with senses of loss, social disjunction, an attempt to create a physical connection with a pre-mediated past and the emergence of computing technology that framed his earliest novels.

In the Blue Ant trilogy, we encounter characters who are collectors, and whose interest in collecting facilitates the primary narrative arcs. For example, Voytek, introduced in *Pattern Recognition*, is a programmer and computer collector who specialises in the collection and (attempt to) trade/sale of rare early generation computers and computational devices, particularly British ones. Voytek's attachment to British computers lies in his desire to preserve the history of British computing technology and its relation to programming ability, for example early Sinclair computers. However, he also acknowledges that the earliest computing equipment was invented to facilitate espionage and surveillance: addressing a need in war-time

to send encrypted messages to facilitate battle readiness or warn of impending attack, and decode received messages.[19]

Gibson gives the Curta, an early computational device developed in a prison camp (*Pattern Recognition* 28-29) a detailed history and places it in a context appropriate to its history – as the desired possession of an ex NSA spy, part of a group of computer hardware collectors. Through a chance meeting with this group that Cayce gains contacts who will become significant not only to *Pattern Recognition* but also to *Zero History*, because of their interest in and understanding of computational equipment. Voytek, in particular, becomes a valued ally and then an employee of Blue Ant. To Voytek, as a collector of ZX machines, their value is as a historical signifier - in the acquisition of the Sinclair Voytek also acquires the mythology of the British contribution to computing history:

> "Of historical importance to personal computing," he says seriously "and to United
> Kingdom. Why there are so many programmers, here" (*Pattern Recognition* 32).

Voytek illustrates the effect of computing architecture on cultural development, pointing out to Cayce a fundamental difference in programming culture in America and Britain, based on how differences in the basic operational nature of computing technology.

> "You have programmers, but America is different. America wanted Nintendo. Nintendo
> gives you no programmers..." Cayce is pretty certain that England wanted Nintendo too,
> and got it, and probably shouldn't be looking too eagerly forward to another bumper crop
> of programmers, if Voytek's theory holds true (33).

Gibson's recasting of older technology objects of trade based on rarity or the mythology of their origin demonstrates the power of signification: these objects are being valued not by intrinsic worth but by demand, by "the market". Market forces here are expressed in data, driven by data (rarity, provenance, condition, purpose) and about objects which create data as their basic function.

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19 Gibson's interest in early computational technology is also explored in *The Difference Engine*, his novel written with Bruce Sterling in 1990. In *The Difference Engine*, the original computational device invented by Babbage is successfully put into production, and Gibson and Sterling demonstrate the social and political upheaval which follows. In this novel, the early technology is developed in service of war, in contrast with (but also related to) the silent war of surveillance and espionage which governs contemporary technological development.

Espionage and Surveillance Technology

The Blue Ant trilogy contains a proliferation of technology used for either the transmission of 'secret' information or for surveillance. In *Pattern Recognition*, for example, Voytek and his follow collectors, the ex-spy Hobbs and Ngemi the trader, appear intermittently to provide vital assistance to Cayce in her quest to identify the creators of a series of mystery pieces of film footage, which are at the crux of the novel's plot. They advise on email addresses and cryptographic technologies such as steganography.[20]

Cayce's interest in the fragments of footage leads her to discover (through fellow footage enthusiast Parkaboy) that each hitherto unidentified fragment of film has been watermarked in a way which steganography could potentially decode. Voytek is familiar with watermarking technology, including steganography, and he not only confirms that steganography was used on these film fragments, but also advises on how a steganographic process is arranged. Voytek indicates that Hobbs may be a source of further information, due to his prior career in espionage: "Hobbs knows these things."... "Really? Why?" "Maths. Trinity. Cambridge, then works for United States. NSA" (*Pattern Recognition* 82).

Cayce's desire to decode the fragments motivates her to enter into a working relationship with the manipulative and exploitative Hubertus Bigend. Bigend's interest in the footage relates to both its origin and its orchestrated gradual release. He admires the film makers' ability to disguise their identity and utilise sophisticated encryption services without being identified. Most particularly, though, he is interested in the virality of the footage, and how their methods could be used by Blue Ant to market consumer products. Cayce is assisted in her quest to find the secrets hidden in the steganographic code by members of the FFF and personal contacts. She, with the assistance of Parkaboy, is able to establish that Taki's Japanese Otakus have cracked the steganographic code, and Cayce's fellow Blue Ant hired investigator Boone Chu finds the company who may have completed the watermarking for the film makers:

> "Sigil Technologies. Watermarking for all forms of digital media. Website very
> pointedly doesn't say who their clients are, but friends of mine say they have a few big
> ones" (174).[21]

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20 Steganography allows information to be coded into or decoded from an image "concealing information by spreading it throughout other information" (*Pattern Recognition* 76).

21 *Pattern Recognition* is full of examples of information being (relatively) easily discovered due to a 'contact' who is able to supply the relevant information/technology/introduction.

Gibson thereby presents the digital world as one which is recorded and obtainable, able to be interrogated, meaningful and (even when encrypted) essentially available to (useful) consumption – data is easily obtained by Cayce because of the skills and interests of a range of contacts who interrogate the datascape. Even with the film makers' careful attempts to disguise identity, they are found and their identity interrogated. Whilst this aids Cayce's pursuit of the footage, Gibson is also demonstrating that, in the 21st century, digital interactions (from credit cards to phone calls, email to walking down a street with CCTV) are threats to our privacy in that they are susceptible to interrogation.

In the Blue Ant trilogy everyone is subject to the ubiquity of surveillance[22]. Gibson indicates that, as mentioned above, in his Blue Ant world privacy is impossible. He illustrates that the characters themselves, through acceptance, consumption and their own consumer or brand aspirations, give tacit consent to this system of silent surveillance, and permits a binary between the corporate exploiter and the consumer exploited – sometimes demonstrating that his characters are both. For example, Cayce is both a user of surveillance technology and techniques (decrypting watermarks, grooming informants, creating false identities and documents) and a victim of them, surveyed and pursued through her use of domestic digital technology.

Cayce utilises an array of domestic communication technology, including an iPhone and an Apple MacBook to access email and the 'FFF - Footage Fan Forum' online. Both her iPhone and laptop are provided by Big Ant who 'calibrate' both for her, and in doing so add tracking software to record her keystrokes.[23] Despite this demonstration of the vulnerability of her home, including the phone, Cayce only slowly begins to consider the possibility that her iPhone or MacBook are being monitored:

> [Cayce] wonders, for the first time, and indeed for the first time in her life, whether the phone is tapped... Dorotea's an industrial espionage bitch, or has been, so it probably isn't entirely unlikely. They do things like that. Bugs. Spy Shop stuff (*Pattern Recognition* 118).

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22 Even the Cuban family at the heart of *Spook Country,* despite extensive training in surveillance and counter-espionage techniques from a Russian ex-spy

23 As indicated above, Cayce also engages in methods of surveillance but hers are far more low-tech, referencing 'analogue' methods of tracking she learned from fictional spies – in particular James Bond films. When her flat in London is broken into, she employs some of these techniques in case of more break ins:

> She remembers an eerily young Sean Connery in that first James Bond film, using fine clear Scottish spit to paste one of his gorgeous black hairs across the gap between the jamb and the door of his hotel room. Off to the casino, he will know, upon returning, whether or not his space has been violated (*Pattern Recognition,* 42).

Boone Chu, initially an ally to Cayce, informs her of her cellular network's vulnerability to monitoring, explaining that phone networks are "Inherently insecure, unless you're encrypted" (210).[24]

Cayce contacts Hobbs, on Voytek's recommendation, to see if he can uncover the origin of the watermarks. With his background in the NSA, Hobbs has access to the 'Project Echelon'[25] archive, and has maintained contacts within the governmental intelligence community. Hobbs is able to extract the email address Cayce seeks from the Project Echelon archives, in exchange for a rare prototype Curta. The reader notes Cayce's ethically dubious behaviour: bribing Hobbs and encouraging him to access private data in order to learn more about the makers of the footage, demonstrating what Milgrim will later describe as "situational morality". In assisting Cayce, Hobbs too is implicated as violating the ethics of data privacy, offering sensitive information when the "price" is right.

Through the watermarking process, the film makers also engage in surveillance, tracking the consumption of their film fragments – in hiding their watermark are the film makers engaging in industrial espionage? Is Cayce, in looking for the film makers, also taking their desire for participation too far? Gibson shows that deeply participatory media invokes a desire that is not satisfied by what is offered. For participative media, consumers' desire is not easily assuaged – leading to, as in Cayce's activities, extreme measures including bribery and violating privacy laws. This also contributes to the aforementioned point about lack of privacy – sometimes consumers of mediated content are the exploited, but in other cases – such as this – they participate in the same exploitation. The fragments themselves, as objects but also finally as personal narrative, become a talisman of denied pleasure in consumption. It is only to Cayce – after she has spoken with the film makers – that the film gains deeper narrative resonance through the story of its creation. The film makers explain their processes to Cayce, and in doing so reveal that the film fragments are representations, referencing and reinterpreting existing film, including CCTV.

The main film maker, Nora, takes the original footage and recuts a small series of frames to create a new small gestural moment, obscuring the original source. Whilst presenting art/product with their identities carefully hidden (under the protection of the Russian mafia) the

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24 Chu is himself using the vulnerability of Cayce's communications technology to spy on her for Blue Ant. His warning to Cayce is pertinent to his own actions, he is himself the "someone" who has her frequency.

25 Project Echelon, only referred to in passing by Gibson, is based on a real signals-intelligence project. According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy online, in its entry of Privacy, Eschelon "is a covert global satellite network said to have the ability to intercept all phone, fax, and e-mail messages in the world, and may have up to 20 international listening posts."

film makers are also giving clues as to their identity, the desire for feedback (through the watermarks) stronger than the desire for anonymity. As with the Gabriel Hounds in *Zero History*, Gibson illustrates the relationship between art and product, commodification and gesture here, demonstrating that in the twenty first century the artist is unable to disconnect from the modes of capital and the desire to gain consumer interest. The film makers demonstrate that art and product are interchangeable under capital.

In *Pattern Recognition* Gibson describes invasive procedures and policies which are presented as a response to the terrorist threat posed by 9-11. For example Cayce's flight from Heathrow to Tokyo involves passing elaborate airport security devices:

> including a sort of CAT scan for their shoes and answering questions in front of an infrared device that registered minute changes in the temperature of the skin around the eyes, the story being that lying about having packed one's own bag induced a sort of invisible and inevitable micro-blush (*Pattern Recognition* 172).

Espionage is at the heart of *Spook Country,* as Westfahl posits above, as are the activities and technology that facilitate it. Gibson creates an opposition between an ex-CIA 'hacktivist' known as 'the Old Man' and his assistant family of Cuban immigrants; and an ex-spy known as Brown. They are both interested in the current GPS coordinates of a cargo container, and the family of immigrants, particularly Tito, facilitate the Old Man's remote surveillance of the container. Tito's family, including cousin Alejandro and Tito's teacher and mentor Aunt Juana, are familiar in 'protocol', in practices of covertness, deception and illusion, trained in KGB espionage techniques.

Gibson weaves the sigils and superstitions of Santeria, a spiritual practice with similarities to Vodou, into the practices and protocols of Tito and family, who act under watchful gods or Orichas, who, if appealed to, assist in the practices of evasion, invisibility, easing the passage of roads and maneuvering with speed. Tito successfully evades capture using this 'intelligence' from the Santerian Orichas – in a ritual transaction consisting of the gesture (to the 'gods') in exchange for protection. In Tito's practices, his Orichas are the facilitators of information transfer, as the Republic of Desire or Walled City dwellers are for Laney in the Bridge trilogy.[26]

The family's 'tradecraft' has been forced to change in response to increased security (of data and object), with particular reference to post-9-11 security upgrades. Due to

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26 The relationship this family has with the manufacture of false identity documents affords Gibson to consider the notion of identity as data. Tito's family demonstrate that 'identity' can be invented, including the variable 'identity' of godhead, evolved by the mythology of tradecraft. Tito's family's 'godhead' is a created myth, therefore the ritualised gestures and requirements (sacrifices, gifts) are part of that myth, and any moral imperatives associated with it are also mythological.

> …new technologies and an increasing governmental stress on 'security' by which was
> meant control. The family... obtain[ed] most of their documents (Tito guessed) from
> others, ones more attuned to present needs (*Spook Country* 11).

The family's older practices of sign-creation are now replaced by exchange, technique replaced with replicative technology.

Gibson's hackers and 'hacktivists' in *Spook Country* include another 'Bobby' – this time Bobby Chombo, programmer and locative artist (another piece of Pattern Recognition for the reader, as is Cayce/Case) - and a practitioner of extreme sports who makes 'physical hacks' for the 'Old Man' (who also 'runs' Tito's family as part of the same elaborate operation). Both Chombo and Garreth are involved in the Old Man's project: Bobby using his locative technology to track a shipping container filled with money, Garreth intercepting and sabotaging the container. In the monitoring of the container, Gibson details protocols, methods and technologies of industrial espionage - in this case espionage between ex-government agents) and shows how spies 'spy on spies'. The generation, intercept, interpretation and action flow related to information, data and the ownership of same being shown to be of great commercial and political importance. The container represents the sign not only of the mysterious, mythical and unattainable, but also, as manifested in the digital, a sign of power - used as leverage between military and commercial interests in the western alliance 'against' and 'about' the Middle East.

On page 18 of *Spook Country*, we encounter Milgrim, a socially challenged drug addict who is being held hostage by the Brown, because of his ability to read a Russian shorthand used by Tito's family to communicate called Volapuk. Volapuk uses the western alphabet to approximate Cyrillic on mobile phones – taking one linguistic symbol and using it as an approximate of a different one. Milgrim becomes a significant character in the Blue Ant trilogy, integral as observer of Brown's continued attempts to intercept communications between the Old Man and Bobby Chombo, and in his observations of a world he has been sheltered from for the time of his prison sentence. Milgrim observes Brown placing a home-made bugging device in Tito's house, to monitor any digital transmissions.

> Even whatever spooky little unit Brown's cohort was using to grab the IF's [Brown's
> term for Illegal Facilitator] texting, what little there was of it, both incoming and
> outgoing, out of the air in this room (*Spook Country* 18).

An almost humorously absurd example of Brown's primitive espionage techniques is introduced on page 29 of *Spook Country*:

> The Econoline had half a dozen of these [holes] sawn through its sides, each one covered by a screwed-on, moveable scrap of black-painted plastic. These coincided, on the graffiti-tagged exterior, with solid black areas of the various tags.

Use of a heavily modified 'econovan', a small and cheap enclosed van, for surveillance is almost absurd: it begs the question - why Brown does not use a spy camera, a drone or at least hire a security firm with CCTV (or other pertinent equipment)? It contrasts with the expensive technology employed by Hubertus Bigend, Dorotea and even the Russian film makers of *Pattern Recognition.*

Gibson demonstrates the difference in sophistication of the technology of 'new' espionage, in contrast to Brown's clearly antiquated technology and techniques - specifically military locative software:

> "The Sixth Fleet has been using something called Fast-C2AP," the old man said. "Makes locating some ships as easy as checking an online stock price. But it's not PANDA, not by a long shot. Predictive analysis for naval deployment activities... he [Chombo] does seem to have accessed some sort of beta version, and cross-referenced a vessel on it with the box's most recent signal." (258 – 259)

Gibson demonstrates that the privileged (military and corporate figures) can access technology which obscures their location, whilst they employ the same technology to spy on the less well defended. On page 266 of *Spook Country*, Oliver (an employee of Blue Ant Vancouver) teaches Hollis to use a scrambler provided by Bigend:

> "You plug it into the headset jack on your phone. It uses a digital encryption algorithm. You program in a sixteen-digit code and the algorithm rolls the scrambling code up to about sixty thousand times. Gives you seventeen hours scramble before the pattern repeats."

Blue Ant, particularly Bigend, is in possession of surveillance technology which is far more effective, and seriously invasive, than that available to Brown. For example: the mal-ware which tracks Cayce's keystrokes and the bug which tracks her movements in *Pattern Recognition.*

Mobile phones, when not deflecting surveillance, are used for surveillance – information tracking and GPS – in *Pattern Recognition* (Cayce's bugged iPhone) *Spook Country* (Milgrim and Tito's phones, Hollis's scrambled phone) and *Zero History.* Milgrim continues to be subject to surveillance – this time commercial (now working for Blue Ant, Milgrim's personality

remains compliant and easily exploited). A smart phone tracks his whereabouts and conversations, allowing his Blue Ant "watcher" Oliver Sleight to watch him remotely.

> Somewhere nearby, Oliver Sleight would be watching a Milgrim-cursor on a website, on the screen of his Neo phone, identical to Milgrim's own. He'd given Milgrim the Neo on that first flight from Basel to Heathrow, stressing the necessity of keeping it with him at all times, and turned on, except when aboard commercial flights (*Zero History* 9).

Gibson introduces, in *Zero History*, another technology from the 'real' which is used for surveillance: RFID chips in passports, showing them to be vulnerable to hacking. Milgrim, at the behest of Sleight, wears a pouch around his passport, in order to prevent his RFID chip being scanned by unknown observers.

> RFID snooping was an obsession of Sleight's. Radio-frequency identification tags. They were in lots of things, evidently, and definitely in every recent US passport. Sleight himself was quite fond of RFID snooping, which Milgrim supposed was one reason he worried about it. (*Zero History* 25)

RFID chips are in place in many countries' passports, and highlights their functionality (and documented vulnerability) to the reader – as an identifying marker containing information about the passport holder and potentially their movements. Post 9-11, citizens are required to surrender their information in order to operate within the contemporary world. In Gibson's Blue Ant universe, those who understand the vulnerabilities of surveillance technology such as RFID are better able to prevent it being exploited in their own agents.

In *Zero History* Gibson also introduces the speculative software called "grailware", a programme which is able to erase a person's presence from CCTV in its surroundings. The Old Man donates this grailware to Hollis and Garreth, in order to thwart Gracie, an ex-military American arms dealer, who has kidnapped Bobby Chombo as revenge for Bigend's interest in what he considers his share of the military clothing market. The Grailware works by exploiting a software vulnerability. It is liminal technology, the Old Man's ultimate "jack move", giving Garreth and his team "Invisibility... The sigil of forgetting... Your man will be bricking it, if he knows we have it and he doesn't... Then he'll want it for himself, whatever it is" (301).

Grailware is Gibson's 21st century equivalent to his early 'ice breaker' software. Like ice, this is a data-object which function as a sigil, a "magical" sign which invokes forgetting. It reminds the reader that, once again, of the equivalence between information and agency – also that lack of one causes lack of the other. It also demonstrates, as Gibson has on a number of previous

occasions in his three trilogies, that digital information is representative – it can be corrupted or reconstituted if there is other mitigating technology. As in Gibson's earliest trilogies, this software – and its power – is only available to the elite: the average citizen cannot erase themselves at will, cannot block being tracked.

Garreth explains the significance of grailware:

> "The holy grail of the surveillance industry is facial recognition... It's already here, to a degree.... Though what you need to understand, to understand forgetting, is that nobody's actually eyeballing much of what a given camera sees. They're digital, after all. Stored data sits there stored. Not images, then, just ones and zeroes... But....say there's been a gentleman's agreement... Your usual suspects. The industry, the government, the lucrative sector the old boy's so keen on, that might be either, or both.... Say you needed the SBS to rendition a dozen possible jihadis out of the basement of a mosque. Or trade unionists, should they happen to be down there promiscuous as they are... And didn't want it seen, ever. And shutting the camera down wouldn't be an option, of course, as you might well pay for that, later on BBC" (*Zero History* 302).

In Garreth's explanation, Gibson gives the reader insight into the possibilities already plausible in the surveillance industry – data that is conveniently erased, lost or forgotten when required by the "usual suspects".

Bigend/Blue Ant are also in possession of a new locative style technology Bigend calls 'Festos': balloons made of mylar which have a decorative function (Bigend's two take the form of a penguin and a manta ray). On page 188 of *Zero History* Bigend explains their other, hidden, functionality to Milgrim:

> Milgrim looked up. The ceiling here, as white as the walls, was a good ten feet higher than it was in the adjacent space. Against it floated confusing shapes, silver, black...
> "What do you do with them?" Though he already knew. "Surveillance platforms," Bigend said.

Here, Gibson fuses ideas of 'play' and 'surveillance', introducing seemingly benign, artistic objects which float in the sky in the shape of marine animals (penguins, manta rays) but are actually surveillance drones which can be controlled by a concealed user. The Festos are featured in the climax of *Zero History*'s plot, used to detect the American arms dealer's movement in the lead up to his meeting with Bigend, where they are to exchange Bobby Chombo with "Milgrim" at Gracie's request. The Festos footage reveals that the arms Dealer has brought a gun - both then implicated as corrupting the supposedly simple exchange, Bigend

with the "fake" Milgrim and Gracie with the hidden gun. In this exchange no one is morally free of implication, no one is 'right': there is only the possession of power (through information, hostages, weapons, luck) which both Gracie and Bigend seek.

These themes are not new to Gibson's writing: the technology which supports the interests of capital is discussed and depicted in detail, particularly in the Bridge trilogy. The significant difference in this trilogy is the plausibility – increased by the novel's near-present setting, and incorporation of sociocultural signifiers from the reader's own experience. *Zero History* is not only an information dystopia facilitated by surveillance technology, it is plausibly our information dystopia.

Locative Technology

Locative technology, as used in in *Spook Country,* has already been mentioned above, in relation to Bobby Chombo and the GPS tracking of the shipping container. However it is also used for the production of locative art. Locative technology shares technological similarities with its forerunner Virtual Reality in that it requires apparatus – a helmet - in order to view holographic art projected in space. Unlike Virtual Reality, where the projected image only exists inside the helmet, in locative art the sculpture/image is fixed in space, the helmet calibrated to a frequency which 'reveals' the image – an augmented reality.

The locative art pieces Hollis has been sent to Los Angeles to review are created to mimic celebrity deaths – catching the moment of their death and preserving/projecting it for the regard of the viewer. The artist responsible, Alberto, first shows Hollis his tribute to River Phoenix which recreates in mediated form Phoenix's death on the pavement outside the Viper Room. They meet there at 3am, the streets empty:

> [Alberto] came up with a battered aluminium camera case, crisscrossed with black gaffer tape… he extracted something that she first mistook for a welder's protective mask. "Put this on." He handed it to her. A padded headband, with a sort of visor (*Spook Country* 7).

When Henry puts on the visor Alberto turns on the art work, the code for which remains on a laptop. The art, in this both exists and does not, and has 'place' but is not part of its place, existing only in superimposition. This reflects his subject – mythologised icons who, in death, and in his art, both exist and do not exist, are present in the mythology of our culture but at the same time not present.

"Now," he said, and she heard him tap the laptop's keyboard. She... saw a slender, dark-

haired body, face down on the sidewalk. "Alloween night, 1993," said Odile. Hollis

approached the body. That wasn't there. But was (*Spook Country* 7-8).

'Locative' technology is an art of simulation, existing only in digital mediation, the impression

of solidity given by code. A modern equivalent of the SimStim and Virtual Reality of his earlier

trilogies, the user becomes part of a "consensual hallucination". The reader here can identify

Gibson's own patterns, the way his own representational creations are interlinked, extending to

the reader a history of representation, code and the technology which supports them.

Gibson's examination of technology in this trilogy shows technology as a vehicle to data

acquisition, or data defence, the powerful technology mainly held by wealthy elites or those

with a background in spy craft .Surveillance technology is shown to be a successful means to

power for elites (like Bigend) as it was in the Bridge trilogy (to Sense/Net), as is data-mining

technology. The poor and the ignorant are disadvantaged, unable to access (or unaware of)

technology which intercedes between their identity and data mining. Gibson effectively

demonstrates to the reader the limited agency of being the observed rather than the observer,

part of the consumer landscape rather than its architect. Baudrillard illustrates the superior

options available to the power holder when threatened – it is able to use technology to adjust

the 'real':

When it is threatened today by simulation (the threat of vanishing in the play of signs),

power risks the real, risks crisis, it gambles on remanufacturing artificial, social,

economic, political stakes (Baudrillard 43-44).

The disenfranchised, the poor, the naive, the data-illiterate do not have these same choices:

surveillance technology clearly is demonstrated by Gibson to equate agency with elites – either

technology holders or knowledge holders (or both).

c. Dataspace

The Datasphere, as it existed within the Sprawl and Bridge trilogies, is not central to the

Blue Ant trilogy's narrative. There are no 'Rooster' style characters who exist in mediation to

'guide' the main protagonists and no datasphere 'architecture' as an 'other' space. This trilogy

moves beyond the notion of data space existing separately to the 'real': in Gibson's third trilogy,

the 'matrix' of information flows through the sign between the real and the digital, the external

and the internal – data flow is the basis of the state of capital, not limited by vehicle. It includes

the data sent virally in the film footage, the data captured on Cayce's laptop, the data emitted by

the drifting shipping container and the data exchanged on the stock market floor. Gibson demonstrates that our contemporary world is in itself suffused with data both visible and invisible (for example, mobile phone signals and RFID signals), and possession facilitates power.

Gibson presents a traditional vehicle for data exchange in The Fetish:Footage:Forum (FFF) from *Pattern Recognition.* Comparatively archaic, Gibson concentrates on the forum's facilitation of data exchange rather than the software itself, presenting the ritual interactions associated with community and the investigative interactions associated with espionage. The data exchanged in the forum moves beyond it, reflected in conversation, in posters on the street, in bars, on paper. The online world facilitates the offline, and the offline the online – information and mythology is passed in various ways – but, interestingly, through analogue and digital surveillance of both data and movement, all information is shown to be traceable.

The datasphere (internet) acts for Cayce as a library and community centre, "a way now, approximately, of being at home" (*Pattern Recognition* 4). This is in stark contrast to the Matrix of the Sprawl trilogy, where shared dataspace is first and foremost a battle ground, populated by hostile entities, causing potential death. In the forum, "authentic" identity is assumed by Cayce and her other footage friends, facilitating friendship which moves beyond the forum into email, telephone conversations and even, for Cayce and Parkaboy, to a romantic relationship. However, it is revealed before the end of the novel that Cayce's rival Dorotea has been infiltrating the footage forum using a false identity to manipulate debate in her guise as 'Mama Anarchia'. Dorotea had been hired by Russian intelligence operatives to spy on Cayce and other "footageheads", to see if they get close to the truth. Dorotea admits that she is Mama Anarchia on FFF:

> I have a little puppenkopf, to help me. I say what I need to say, and he translates it into the
> language of Anarchia, to so annoy your most annoying friend (*Pattern Recognition* 316).

The forum's vulnerability and, therefore its high potential as a data mine, is revealed. This virtualised hyperreal community has been exploited and subverted through manipulation by Dorotea and her hired hands, mining posts and messages for relevant personal data, and this used to track and harass Cayce in the 'real' as she pursues the fragments.

Gibson demonstrates that, whilst elite technology facilitates tracking in a sophisticated way, in the 21st century espionage can be a simple matter of infiltrating open networks and using common signifiers to gain acceptance. No longer does espionage or a targeted attack require

expert spies or hackers – an anonymous identity on an open virtual community can result in personal details volunteered or easily gleaned.

The footage itself belongs to the datasphere: disseminated small packets of information distributed through the internet with encoded "watermarking". The footage travels, acting as both a medium and a message, inviting response, participation and dissemination. However, some data within the fragments of footage are encrypted: i.e. their meaning is only available to a select subset of consumers who have knowledge or appropriate technology. This sense that the footage is "incomplete" and contains veiled signs equally applies to the watermarks and to the obscurity of the footage itself.

With a lack of information available, footage enthusiasts project meaning into its absence, introducing theory, mythology and speculative 'decoding' of the gesture – demonstrating the ephemerality of the footage's signs. The most obsessed and involved are the Otaku – Japanese game fetishists, whose interest in the footage is always and purely about information itself *(Pattern Recognition* 169). The Otaku reference Gibson's console cowboys: engaging with pure information for its own sake, their pay off adrenaline given by breaking down obstacles, cracking information, rather than understanding or appreciating the footage itself. However, these corporate cowboys are in fact, in solving the puzzles, distributing marketing information, increasing the footage's virality. The marketing concept of "virality", to Bigend and Stella (the film maker's more enterprising sister), validates the artifact and its gestural non-content.

As Jack G. Voller states in his examination of cyberspace and the sublime within Gibson's work:

> …even while "rapture and enthusiasm" are the emotional core of sublimity [which users attach to the footage, consider a common effect], there is a fundamental absence in the experience... Gibson's "matrix" works in fact mark the next step in this aesthetic evolution... filling the void of the infinite with human constructs, the electronic manifestations of human corporate activity (Voller 20).

This statement encapsulates an interesting juxtaposition posed by critics of Gibson and Gibson himself: informational data is mined by the power holders and used for the creation of further data, further profiling, and further commodification. But in another sense, in its replication and self-referentiality, this power is built on emptiness - it exists as a sign at the first level of simulation, and then, in reaction to this abstracted data representation, further commodified simulation is created and consumed - and in its relationship to the ever-diminishing 'authentic' or 'real' are revealed to be empty.

The desire for the 'sublime' referenced in Voller's paper results in the creation of an almost religious awakening, a "liminal", "threshold" moment of a "revised postmodern sublime, one that reveals emptiness, not plenitude" (Voller 22). A new footage fragment, for example, gives footage fans a state of rapture that almost reaches sublimity. Gibson describes it as "profoundly liminal. A threshold state." (*Pattern Recognition* 21). This also applies to the thrill of the illicit - the lack of known brand or logo, the lack of revealed "sign" is part of this thrill, and this applies to all three novels in Gibson's third trilogy: the detection and thrill of potential revelation applies to the footage but also equally the shipping container and the maker of the Gabriel Hounds. Low-volume art product, thereby, inherits specialness by virtue of its sense of secrecy and the selective broadcast of its signs. This is what, in addition to a compelling product, facilitates its virality. As it applies to the footage, Bigend reveals to Cayce, that

> "...the footage has already been the single most effective piece of guerrilla marketing
> ever. I've been tracking hits on enthusiast sites, and searching for mentions elsewhere.
> The numbers are amazing..."(*Pattern Recognition* 64)

In *Spook Country*, the datasphere extends beyond – in fact is considered primarily outside - the Internet. Instead, data is exchanged between hand-held or in-situ remote devices, some requiring little to no human intervention, for example - as discussed in Technology – tracking bugs, RFID chips, GPS. The data exchanged, the sign specifically in relation to location rather than emotion or intention, is once again politically, emotionally, spiritually and culturally flat and empty –simply generating and exchanging signaled code.

In *Zero History*, again, the datasphere is only mentioned in passing, characters reference websites selling military technology and fashion and Milgrim and Winnie Tung communicate primarily via Twitter, an acknowledgment of the growing role of social media in Gibson's 'real'. Ironically, social media is used here not as a tool of surveillance but a tool to avoid surveillance, Tung explaining to Milgrim that the source of a 'tweet' is difficult to verify or identify. This contrasts with the openness and vulnerability of older social technology, such as the FFF forum in *Pattern Recognition.* Much of the socio-cultural exchange occurs in *Zero History* via an oddly traditional, even historical, method – transference by oral myth and storytelling. Hollis Henry's encounters with consumers of Hounds, for example, are face to face, and they tell Hollis stories of their enthusiasm and the secrets of Hounds. Hollis, herself, has her revelatory moment with Cayce Pollard face to face, receiving an oral history of the label from Pollard in person.

d. Mediation

In Gibson's third trilogy, he demonstrates how the sign becomes ever more significant not only as a communication mechanism, a transfer of information, but comes to be the embodiment of meaning, replacing 'the real' with the signified.

Santeria: Mediation via religious projection

In *Spook Country*, Gibson re-introduces a pantheistic spiritual belief system, this time Santeria. Santaria shares similarities in structure to Vodou, which featured significantly in the Sprawl Trilogy, which was also pantheistic, and knowledge and skills transferred through possession or embodiment of Godhead. Santeria is, however, based in West African/Caribbean spiritual practices rather than Haitian practices. A Santarian high god is represented in his or her relationship with humanity by a number of demigods, Orichas, each of whom have both individual characteristics and powers – for example Legba, Gibson introduces, with Tito's Cuban family, a history and traditional relationship with Santeria, passed through generations as an aid to spy craft. Gibson presents the family's spiritual practice as one of a number of mediated manifestations of power mythos: the investment in an unsubstantiated 'other', in response to a lack of actual power or access to moments of the sublime. Power is gained, the attention of the spirit responsible, by donation of an object or the use of a traditional gesture.

The devotee's attention to the objects and ornaments acts, at least partially, to compensate for the lack of control, lack of power, felt in daily life: the gods alone able to "open the way", to influence Tito's life for the better. However, whilst the simulation of godhead gives Tito positive feedback which is to him influential and manifested in action, it can also be seen as a self-influencing ritual, a mental codification or programme, making gestures and signs, speaking representative phrases, in order to activate mental frameworks associated with success.

The belief invested in the Orichas by Tito is not, like the consumption of the footage is for Cayce, liminal or rapturous - his relationship with his gods, who, (similar to the loa, as Beauvoir explains in *Count Zero* are there to assist "getting things done"), can be argued to be primarily transactional – culturally and emotionally. In exchange for devotion, collection of the iconography and its display, Tito and Aunt Juanita's gods provide services, and specific rites to specific gods result in specific service provision and emotional reassurance. Traditional rites of religious exchange (devotion/services) can, in their transactional nature, have influenced the

framework of capital – replacing divine assistance or revelation are the footage and secret denim labels, and replacing godhead is the brand.

Mediation – film, art and secret brands

The creation of art, craft and representative media - and the relationship of these media both with the culture of the sign and with capital - is explored as a theme in all three novels of the Blue Ant trilogy. In each novel Gibson develops a significant narrative around art or craft practice: in *Pattern Recognition* it is the creation of film, in *Spook Country* it is locative art and in *Zero History* it is a 'secret' clothing brand making low-volume crafted garments. *Zero History* also features the appropriation of visually impressive controllable flying mylar balloons in the shape of a manta ray and a Penguin, used as surveillance drones.

In each of the three novels, however, the art facilitates both replication and distribution of its own mythological sign, particularly the mythos of the "praxis". The art is shown to be more significant for the effective distribution of myth, which is part of its "virality". As discussed above, virality is considered the mediated equivalent of human enthusiasm or approval, displayed by sharing of the art's sign. The art itself is considered secondarily by Gibson – the reader sees the art through the eyes of the enthusiast and the maker and is considered as a cultural expression of value and identity.

There are two parallel narratives in *Pattern Recognition* around the creation of film: firstly the dominant thematic of the 'fragments' of 'footage' (created mysteriously and anonymously). A secondary narrative, with lesser significance to the larger plot of the novel but nevertheless effective at demonstrating the moral complexities related to the production of film, is Cayce's friend Damien's documentary. A sensationalist documentary, Damien's documentary is an 'expose', about a summer custom in Russia, where men travel to sites of battle to conduct a mass dig in search of saleable relics.

> The dig is a post-Soviet summer ritual involving feckless Russian youth, male, from all over, tho mostly Leningrad boys, who come out here to these infested pine forests to excavate the site of some of the largest, longest-running, and most bitterly contested firefights of WWII (*Pattern Recognition* 73).

Damien describes attendees digging through "strata of Germans, Russians, Germans" to get to "artifacts, in brilliant condition when you get the mud off, which is what brings the diggers" (73). Commercial opportunity – for both the diggers and Damien's documentary crew- is found

amongst the dead in the swamps of Leningrad, plundered from the relics of a war now long past.

Gibson contrasts this with the sense of sacredness and solemnity attributed to the site of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, the sense of mourning and loss - of a personal relationship with that tragedy. Damien documents, observes, but does not interfere – in fact, Damien, using alcohol supplied by his girlfriend's uncle, is able to encourage the "Leningrad boys" to get drunk and perform for the camera. The battlefield is treated with commercial opportunism, rather than any form of reflection or the desire to preserve this historically significant site. McLuhan posits that it is through our continued consumption of the mediated that we become numbed to the moral issues contained within consumed artifacts. In this, we lose sight of the human 'real' behind these consumable mediated products (like documentaries):

> It is this continuous embrace of our own technology in daily use that puts us in the Narcissus role of subliminal awareness and numbness in relationship to these images of ourselves (McLuhan 50-51).

Damien's documentary shows us the cycle of creation and consumption of sensationalist voyeuristic television from the creator's perspective (whereas in The Bridge trilogy we see these sensational reality television productions from the subject's perspective). Film maker, contributors and subjects here are all equally responsible for this record of the narcissistic and sensational which will contribute to the numbing of the social conscience.

In *Pattern Recognition,* Cayce, reflecting the very same behaviour displayed towards her by Dorotea and Boone, concocts (with Parkaboy) an entrapment, involving creation of a false sign of mediated desire in order to obtain data. Cayce, as a character, has a far greater sense of the significance of brands, logos, symbols and mediated objects than with the moral issues that accompany social exchange. The structures of capital are implicit in her, and the fellow footage fans, relationship with the film. Her brand focus and seeming absence of moral contemplation before acting (particularly with regard to Taki) is expressed as natural behaviour for the contemporary consumer who sees the world in terms of exchange, desire, manifestation and appetite. She displays these attributes in what she believes is an expression of curiousity and community, but in doing so represents the issues at the heart of capital concerning the cycle of commodification. As Jameson says:

> A political sect (as we now seem to call these things) wishes simultaneously to affirm the universal relevance of its strategy and its ultimate aims, and at one and the same time to keep them for itself, to exclude the outsiders and the late-comers and those who can be

suspected of insufficient commitment, passion and belief. The deeper anxiety of the practitioners of the footage website and chatroom is, in other words, simply that it will go public: that CNN will get wind of this interesting development; that the footage, or the completed film, the identified and reconstructed work of art, will become, as they say, the patrimony of mankind, or in other words just another commodity. As it turns out, this fear is only too justified… (*New Left Review* online web.)

The desires and behavior of the footage heads, Cayce and Parkaboy being our representative protagonists, illustrates the impossibility of maintaining unique self-definition or group definition through a cultural artefact under capital. As Jameson observes, it

…is that of the contradiction between universality—in this case the universality of taste as such—and the particularity of this unique value that sets us off from all the others and defines us in our collective specificity. (*New Left Review* online web.)

Cayce and Parkaboy themselves are prepared to undermine the exclusivity of the footage in order to consume more of the information, spread knowledge within their own network, and thereby 'own' it. They manufacture a fictitious digital identity based loosely on Parkaboy's contact Judy, and manipulate Judy's image to embody signifiers known to provoke sexual desire. They use this false identity, Keiko, to manipulate a Japanese boy, Taki, to share data he has decoded from the footage:

A multilayered confection, message within message, and all of it targeting Taki, or Taki as Parkaboy and Musashi imagine him. Keiko/Judy is simultaneously pubescent and aggressively womanly, her shapely yet slender legs spilling out of a tiny tartan schoolgirl kilt, to vanish, mid-calf, into shoved-down bunched up cotton kneesocks of an unusually heavy knit. Cayce's cool-module, wherever it resides, has always proven remarkably good at registering the salient parameters of sexual fetishes she's never encountered before, and doesn't in the least respond to. She just knows now that these Big Sox are one of those, and probably culture-specific... (*Pattern Recognition* 129).

Cayce and Parkaboy approach this scheme as moves in a game - their desire to understand and consume further means they view the consequence of their actions only in terms of the success or failure of their transaction, which – if successful - would trigger the next move. They create a hyperreal figure, bringing Gibson's earlier created desire-figure the Idoru to the reader's mind, the desire for which facilitates further exchange. But by its very nature, being synthetic, Keiko cannot satisfy in the 'real', only in the figurative.

This is the girl Taki's been looking for all his life, even though nature's never made one, and he'll know that as soon as he lays eyes on this image (129).

This passage references the dissonance between the desired iconography of the feminine and the female 'real': that what in the post TV age is more appealing to men who live through a mediated pattern of consumption is the non-real, the augmented, the calculatedly enhanced and alien. In projecting perfection, media corporations create a superior mythological 'female'. The society in which this is exchanged in preference for understanding and accepting the real is in dissonance with its physicality, with the real.[27]

Gibson, at the end of *Pattern Recognition,* reveals that at the heart of the footage there is no narrative, no story the makers are creating for their consumers – the virality and speculation are based on artworks which have no deeper connecting story. The myths of the maker and the process are stronger narratives than the footage, which itself is a collage of referential elements created from surveillance footage from the film maker's period of hospitalisation.

The most clever of the doctors... taped two hours of [surveillance footage] and ran it on the editing deck. She began to cut it. To manipulate. Soon she had isolated a single figure. A man, one of the staff. One day I found her working on his face, in Photoshop. That was the beginning (289).

The fragments are themselves made from fragments, creations that only exist in the synthetic single frames created by Nora. These micro-vignettes are the product of a need to create agency in composition – only in recrafting the DNA of the original surveillance footage, creating from it an art piece stripped of its references to the real and making something truly mediated, does Nora consider herself to exist. However, this means the romantic mythological narrative created by footage heads does not exist. The fragments are heavy with potential meaning yet simultaneously shallow.

Jameson captures, in his review of Pattern Recognition, the inevitability of the footage's corruption by capital, the brand sign. The footage being vague in its sign language, a fragmentary recreation supposedly empty of cultural reference and brand, is not sufficient to maintain otherness. Additionally, the makers' perception of this brand neutrality has at its own 'heart' the corruptive influence of the watermark.

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27 The real Keiko, Judy sees the response to her hyper-self and reacts to it as though it were to her, creating another layer of the mythological over the already hyper-real. The hyper-real then informs their interaction in the real, Keiko informing Judy as the thought of Keiko informs Taki.

[Judy]" ...feels sorry for the guy, she's pissed at Darryl, and by extension with us, and she wants to write him back. She wants to send him more pictures, attachments this time, and make him happy"... "Let her write to Taki… Try to keep her in character, if you want to keep it going" (*Pattern Recognition* 197)

Pattern Recognition, which projects the Utopian anticipation of a new art premised on 'semiotic neutrality', and on the systematic effacement of names, dates, fashions and history itself, within a context irremediably corrupted by all those things. The name-dropping, in-group language of the novel thus revels in everything the footage seeks to neutralize: the work becomes a kind of quicksand, miring us ever more deeply in what we struggle to escape (*New Left Review* online web.)

Certainly, after her encounter with the film makers, her consumption cycle with the footage at an end, Cayce no longer follows the footage – she instead embarks on her own romantic tryst with Parkaboy, substituting the 'real' for the signifiers of potential connection. It is in the acquisition of the real experience of romance, rather than just the sign of it, that she finds resolution to her obsession for "the dream" and her sense of "home".

In *Spook Country* Hollis Henry the ex-pop star journalist is both mediated in her pop-world and writer's identity and, as a writer, creator of mythologies for other artists. Both of Henry's artistic endeavours created mediated work for commercial consumption, and in journalism documented artists in order to encourage consumption (of both her material and the artist's). She is familiar with the sign, with being signified, with being mythologised and with the processes involved in reframing the actual into the consumable. A reference is made several times in both *Spook Country* and *Zero History* to a photo of her, taken in her youth by Anton Corbjin, and how it depicts a constructed version of the self. When she sees a large copy hanging in the foyer of Hubertus Bigend's American office, she remarks: "I've never been entirely comfortable with it" (*Spook Country* 105).

Bigend offers that her discomfort is caused by the creation of a thought-sign, her celebrity captured will live as a separate but related entity to the 'real' Henry. He explains over page 105 of *Spook Country*:

"Because the celebrity self is a form of tulpa," he said.

"A what?"

"A projected thought form. A term from Tibetan mysticism. The celebrity self has a life of its own. It can, under the right, circumstances, indefinitely survive the death of its subject. That is what every Elvis sighting is about, literally...

music is the most purely atemporal of media."…

"The past isn't dead. It's not even past."[28]

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28 In Cayce's reference to Faulkner in paraphrasing his famous quote "The past is never dead. It's not even past" from *Requiem for a Nun* she herself channels a kind of 'tulpa'. Faulkner's famous quote still lives – that his celebrity and famous

Bigend himself considers mythologies which are greater than their creators to indicate marketing success – exemplified by his interest in the film makers and Gabriel Hounds. It is in the continued interest of capital, of mediation, of the mythologisation of celebrity which reinforces the divide between the iconic and the observer. Engagement with these myths is positioned as avenues for participation (in the quality "celebrity") available to the citizenry in an iconographic value framework and a branded physical and cultural environment; these participations through consumption divert from the social inequalities which result in social agency divided unequally. For another more complete example of this the reader only has to look to Rez in the Bridge trilogy, and his cult of celebrity.

In Spook *Country* Bigend's interest is revealed to be not in Alberto and his locative art but in his technical collaborator, the programmer Bobby Chombo, and his locative construct of the shipping container. The combative race to find this container; the conflict of political interest in the contents of the container; and the agency which the sign of currency carries – are the crux of *Spook Country*. Bigend desires control of the physical and theoretical "flow" of the money in the container, however, it never reaches the hands of any character - the money in itself is never experienced except symbolically in the 'real'. Possession of knowledge about the whereabouts of this container of money is associated with this control, with power, until the close of the novel, when the Old Man, Garreth and Tito are able to sabotage the money, injecting the container with irradiated ink. This act instantly transforms the 'money', its signified power now no longer able to be actualised. Whilst the money remains only perceived in the sign it will retain its power, but when obtained, possessed, the irradiation negates its power in the 'real'.

In *Zero History* Hollis Henry is once again working for Hubertus Bigend in search of a new 'trending' piece of artistic iconography: a logo, and the mythology and identity behind the logo. Concurrently, Bigend has expressed an interest in Blue Ant entering the field of military clothing design, a market in which he sees potential for profit. In order to achieve the style and quality of designs he believes are necessary in order to move Blue Ant into military clothing manufacturing Bigend is looking for the right designer, and his attention has been drawn by the cult which has grown around this 'secret' brand. Bigend sends Hollis to find the maker of Gabriel Hounds.

Gibson weaves a mythology for the Gabriel Hounds label, citing as an influence the Japanese dedication to the craft of making denim. The qualities by which the 'craft' of Gabriel

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observation transcends time and retains a fame of its own, just as James Dean is channeled and invoked by Bobby Chombo's locative art.

Hounds is judged include colour (Japanese clothing is deep indigo); and by the specific smell of the dye and the way in which the clothes are distributed, displayed and sold. Hollis examines a Hounds garment of "denim darker than the thighs of her Japanese jeans, bordering black. And it smelled of ...indigo, strongly" (*Zero History* 31). However, the garment itself is less compelling to Hollis – and Bigend - than the mystery around its branding and distribution:

> No exterior signage. The label, inside, below the back of the collar, was undyed leather, thick as most belts. On it had been branded not a name but the vague and vaguely disturbing outline of what she took to be a baby-headed dog. The branding iron appeared to have been twisted from a single length of fine wire, then heated, pressed down unevenly into the leather, which was singed in places (*Zero History* 31).

Gibson describes the specificity of the object, particularly the 'handmade' aspect of it, but places this in tension with their commercial qualities – the attention to detail and care of creation are twinned with a desire for commercial viability – in creation there is always the ghost of the buyer, of the market. The romanticism of the unknown is developed using a nostalgia for handmade techniques, for aspects of 'the personal' in the manufactured.

The secrecy itself becomes – as with the film makers of *Pattern Recognition*– the subject of the chase. To know and identify becomes the goal for Henry and Milgrim. For Bigend, to acquire the sign is to acquire commercial weaponry in the pursuit of a lucrative military clothing deal. Gabriel Hounds the brand carries far greater agency and desire than the clothing, which, although well manufactured, cannot effectively deliver the full romance of the mythology: Japanese tradition, fading Russian film makers, the glamour of obscurity, and the value of wanting without satisfaction. This is demonstrated by the response of Clammy, a drummer in a London band, when Hollis shows him a Gabriel Hounds piece: "Where'd you get that?" "A friend." "Next to fucking impossible to find," pronounced Clammy, gravely" (*Zero History* 34). Clammy displays his own Gabriel Hounds jeans, Cayce asking exactly the same question: "Where did you find them?" (*Zero History* 34). The secret of Gabriel Hounds, the brand and the product, traverses both the physical world (the brand space in physical place, exchange and word of mouth), and the global brand space of the internet.

When finally Hollis Henry meets the maker of Gabriel Hounds – the plot twist being that the maker is Cayce Pollard, the protagonist of *Pattern Recognition* – the final meeting between the two women is emotive, the poignancy of the meeting being the revelation regarding the origin of the sign, the identity in the 'real' rather than the mythological. This meeting cannot exist in

replication – a face to face emotional exchange which changes the sign of Hounds forever for Henry, as meeting the film makers did for Cayce.

Espionage and mediated information

   Secrecy, espionage and mediated information form perhaps the most dominant theme in this trilogy – and in each case art/design is shown to be the benign employment – or perhaps commercial employment – of techniques equally and oppositely utilised to attain military or commercial victories. Significantly, these victories are both military/governmental and commercial concurrently in each case. Gibson through this explores concepts about corruption, collusion, and military investment – and the information which flows between them.

   In *Pattern Recognition*, a network of commercial espionage and counter espionage looks for the signs left by others, or gestures made by others. Boone Chu, Dorotea Benedetti and her hired agents, even Bigend's own employees such as Pamela Mainwaring and other less significant characters play games of observation and counter observation throughout the novel, each attempting to discover what the other knows about the film makers. This information is obtained through 'old fashioned' espionage techniques such as tailing and bugging, but also via the newer potential of the datasphere and remote surveillance. Revealed beneath the artwork's mythos is an information network and political structure which Gibson attributes to the new capitalist Russia. The mythology of Russian politics, particularly concerning corruption and collusion, is at the heart of the film making, exhibited by signifiers that are as much about the ghosts of the cold war as about small fragments of film.

   Political/commercial differences between Russia and 'the west', as represented by Bigend and Blue Ant, are shown to be surmountable barriers. Capitalism provides the glue of common desires, and the informational cold war is settled by capitalist alliances, with agreed mutual future exploitations of global markets.

> "[Bigend] says the outfit our boy is with has links to some of the players who're looking central to Russian oil."… "Russian oil?"… "Saudi oil has not been looking so good to the really big guys, globally, since nine-eleven" (*Pattern Recognition* 281).

Beyond what the reader- and Cayce - are experiencing as a 'chase' story is – to large commercial figureheads like Bigend - a very different 'chase'. The informational exchange here operates on multiple levels, and that there are levels of access to information to which she is not - and will not be - privy. These information exchanges in their agency and secrecy are not equal:

(although all information is structurally and intrinsically equal in the datasphere) the access is constructed to reinforce structures of privilege.

At the heart of *Pattern Recognition* are informational patterns, the power of acquisition and understanding, played out at a distracting level in art, played out concurrently at a far more commercially and politically significant level – but completely unknown to those for whom the pattern is not recognised. Information withheld denies agency, and information the potential of which is not deconstructed (secrets within the known) is obscured through lack of context, like the cold war history, a larger political exchange taking place happening largely "off screen". In *Spook Country*, the sign of the container is not only the subject of the novel's chase, but also a symbol of international military and political secrecy (and in secrecy, agency). Interplay between 'the old man', Bigend and various politico/military interests is centred in the sign and its inherent agency/ potential, in acquisition, to provide a superior political/negotiative position. Bigend, on page 86 to 88, reveals to Hollis part of that secret – the discovery of the mysterious container:

> "The Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea. Small, fast, boats, preying on cargo vessels. They operate from lagoons, coves, islets. The Malay Peninsula, Java, Borneo, Sumatra... Real pirates," Hubertus Bigend said, unsmiling. "Most of them, anyway... Some of them were part of a covert CIA maritime program.... This was the payoff for the pirates, that they could have their pick of cargo, provided the teams were given a first look at all of the holds and containers."

Gibson uses an already highly mythologised sign - pirates – as the facilitators of a covert CIA programme to monitor the contents of container vessels at sea. The potency of the sign of piracy efficiently creates negative associations involving stories consumed through news reporting and internet sharing. Bigend - who has somehow gained access to this secret network - reveals that one examined container contained unnamed contents which were of great politically sensitivity.

He dates the story, which gives it an impression of legitimacy:

> "In August 2003, one of these joint CIA-pirate operations boarded a freighter with Panamanian registry, bound from Iran to Macau. The team's interest centered on one particular container. They'd broken its seals, opened it, when orders came by radio to leave... the container. Leave the vessel. Those orders were followed, of course."…
> "Who told you that story?"…
> "Someone who claims to have been a member of the boarding team" (*Spook Country* 89).

Hollis, like Cayce before her, now begins to consider the agency of information, it changes her perspective, realising that the 'known' landscape is full of informational potential to which the citizenry has no access. In other words, signs convey meaning beyond use-value based on the acquisition of enabling contextual information.

In *Spook Country*, negotiations and exchanges take place based on speculative futures in a symbolic language of advantage inaccessible to the uninvited:

> Whatever this was that Bigend was involved in, she decided, it was deep. Deep and possibly central. To something, she couldn't yet know what. (*Spook Country* 194)

This hidden information architecture possible is described briefly by Bigend to Hollis. It is worthwhile noting, as Bigend does, that this is not a new divide: that political history is a history of secrets and machinations of power, however infrastructure created by digital technology significantly changes both the scope and the reach of this informatics network.

> I've thought that in terms of information, the most interesting items, for me, usually amount to breakbulk. Traditional human intelligence... As opposed to data mining and the rest of it... We've been buying into data mining at Blue Ant...The Swiss have a system known as Onyx, based on Echelon, the system originally developed by the British and the Americans. Onyx, like Echelon, uses software to filter the contents of satellite communication for specific search terms... (*Spook Country* 204).

Whilst Bigend professes to prefer analogue information acquisition, or "breakbulk", he admits to the use of datamining at Blue Ant, and that it has the power – or greater power – of Project Echelon to mine data directly from satellites, unbeknown, of course, to the generators or intended recipients of that data (public or private).

In parallel to Bigend and Hollis's investigation of the container, The Old Man – who is Bobby Chombo's investor - is also aware of the container, and knows perhaps more about its significance than even Bigend. He constructs a gestural ruse, involving Tito and his family, to distract Brown, in furtherment of a wider plan to sabotage the container, and doing so to destabilise the potential future relationship between military and commercial interests, all aware of and interested in the mysterious shipping container. He– again in face to face "storytelling" – explains his interest to Henry on page 309 of *Spook Country:*

> "We sent nearly twelve billion dollars in cash to Iraq, between March 2003 and June 2004. That June shipment was intended to cover the transition of power from the Coalition Provisional Authority to the interim Iraqi government. The largest one time cash transfer in the history of the New York Fed... [It was] Iraqi funds, generated mainly

from oil revenues, and held in trust by the Federal Reserve, under the terms of a United Nations resolution. The Development Fund for Iraq. Under the best of circumstances, say in a country like this one, in peacetime, keeping track of the ultimate distribution of even one billion is practically impossible."

On page 359 the Old Man reveals, finally, to Hollis the connections between parties interested in the mythical contents of the container, and how his actions will influence the literal and figurative currency of the container and its contents:

"Our intent wasn't to destroy that paper, but rather to make it difficult to handle safely. And to tag it, if you will, for certain kinds of detection... You must understand that for the people who first arranged to have that hundred put in that box, the fact that it's back here at all already borders on disaster... There are economies, however, in which that sort of money can be traded for one thing or another, without too punishing a discount, and it was to go to one or another of those economies that they intended it... In terms of profiteering from the war, Miss Henry, this is a piddling amount" (359-360).

In *Zero History*, the military and commercial intrigue which accompanies the brand investigation to find the maker of Gabriel Hounds is, once again, about commercial investment in war and war profits. In this novel the 'enemy' is specific, and identified by Bigend, still CEO of Blue Ant, but the network of espionage and counter-espionage is once again complicated, the novel full of shadowy figures spotted in the distance, near-dangerous encounters and the employment of espionage technology. Significantly, Bigend faces a serious betrayal from within his own ever-expanding operations. One of his own operatives, Sleight, who is in charge of monitoring Milgrim, is 'turned' or recruited by his new enemy, the arms dealer Gracie, whose anger is very specifically directed at Blue Ant over their interest in military clothing.

Milgrim in particular, due to his background in being abducted and exploited by Brown, and then being monitored by Sleight – has a hyper awareness of his surroundings. His interrogation of objects and questioning of 'meaning' shows him to have an 'outsider' gaze in regarding the culture of western society – he challenges its signs and the communally supported assumptions of his environment. He uses "breakbulk", analogue data gathering through observation and photography, to verify his instinct that he and Hollis are being followed, then reporting the trace to Blue Ant. Bigend informs Milgrim of the potential danger he is in:

"Foley himself… may not be that dangerous... But the person who's employing him is another matter. I haven't been able to find out as much as I'd like... [He is] Not good to know... or be known by. Not good to be seen as being in competition with. That little bit

of industrial espionage in South Carolina, as it happened, put Sleight in their camp...”

(*Zero History* 217).

Despite being threatened by quasi-military forces, Bigend chooses to continue to pursue his commercial ambitions. Foley demonstrates that in entering military supply, Blue Ant are exacerbating this danger in their future activities, offering a self-justificatory method to an unpredictable and dangerous segment of society. Bigend, unsurprisingly, is still committed to pursuing his plan:

"it's getting hot now... The situation. The flow of events. It always does, when people like Sleight decide to have a go. And the person in my position is expected to focus, narrowly, on the situation at hand. Terrible waste, tactically. You can often make a killing in the market, while an attempted coup is under way” (197-198).

Bigend is confident that he has sufficient commercial and political power to move past the threat and exploit the continual evolution of the sign of masculinity and military power. Even when threatened by the "product" of this market, he does not acknowledge or address any moral issues associated with this cultural and commercial area of transaction, or the problems with the free commercial access to commodities which are shown to "militarise", effectively encouraging violent behaviours.

The confidence with which Bigend believes he can negotiate, can manipulate the gestural world, is significantly lowered when Gracie and his accomplices kidnap Bobby Chombo, who Bigend has employed to attempt to create a predictive algorithm that will give Bigend control temporarily over the "future" of the stock market. Chombo's abduction is the first point in this trilogy when Bigend's power and agency experience a serious threat, and he is forced to leave his world of signifiers and information and confront his position in the 'real'. Gracie requests Milgrim in exchange for Chombo, as punishment for Milgrim sending one of his agents into a confrontation with the Russian mafia (79).

Bigend, considering even this crisis in terms of the transactional, is prepared to exchange Milgrim for Chombo, to finish his project in pursuit of the manipulation of theoretical riches (281). Another elaborate ruse is organised, facilitated by Garreth, who recruits skilled contacts to assist. The 'sign' of Milgrim is exchanged for Bobby Chombo, with the 'Milgrim' Gracie receives actually being a skilled escape artist from a similar 'tradecraft' background to Tito in *Spook Country*. Garreth also enlists The Old Man, who brings the grailcraft described in part A, but what is significant here is that what is required to save Milgrim, to thwart Gracie, is not the transmission of information, it is the absence of it: the forgetting of transmitted data allows

Bigend/Garreth to make the gestural trade. Tung then arrests Gracie on what are revealed to be false charges (Garreth has planted evidence in his car), but it is considered that the end justifies this untruthful means:

> The American government seems not to like Gracie. They're turning up all sorts of things on their end. I imagine ours [the English government] will eventually decide he's been the victim of a practical joke, but then he'll have genuine problems back home (396).

Once again, Bigend seems to escape unscathed, using his contacts as a barrier between him and any 'real' fallout from the exchange.

e. Corporate Structures and Brands

Blue Ant and Hubertus Bigend

Hubertus Bigend and the role of Blue Ant have been mentioned at length so far, however, it is worth noting that Blue Ant is the dominant corporation featured in this trilogy, and Bigend in particular has influence and agency over much of the trilogy's significant narratives. What Blue Ant is, who Bigend is, and what this indicates about the power of the corporate or media world are what Gibson asks the reader to consider.

Whilst Bigend employs numerous people to effect his various goals, throughout the trilogy, it is clear to the reader that he *is* Blue Ant, he is the nexus of its ideas and the visionary agency of his operation. Through Bigend's power, projected by his gaze, we learn about the forces that affect our world, as citizenry, that we perhaps never consider. He is ruthless - we see this in his decision about the exchange of Milgrim as detailed in the previous section - but it is not limited to this specific situation - he is ruthless by character.

Bigend becomes, if anything, more megalomaniacal over the course of this trilogy. The desire to manipulate at a deep level goes beyond manipulating people to the desire to control time itself and through this – like Cody Harwood – the structure of society at the fundamental level.

> "[Bigend] said he'd want something nobody had ever been able to have.... The next day's order flow. Or really the next hour's or the next minute's.... that information exists, at any given moment, but there's no aggregator. It exists, constantly, but is unknowable. If someone were able to aggregate that, the market would cease to be real" (*Zero History* 177).

Bigend's greatest desired secret to manipulate the most influential data governing society's workings. This is not located in governmental servers, but in the constant dataflow which

makes up "all the orders in the market". His interests, which have led to his current position of wealth and power, usually verge toward the liminal, the "next" frontier. Industrial and economic data is at that liminal nexus of potential change/advantage. He places himself in this act alongside Harwood's nanofax and Wintermute and Neuromancer as creating fundamental moments of change.

Bigend's - or, in fact, Chombo's - achievement of prediction of the future of the market has a more fundamental effect than the outcome of Harwood's nanofax (the Idoru replicated in nanoform). Bigend and Chombo's invention challenges the notion not of what is, but what 'now' is, the linear relationship between present and future. Gibson does not extend the narrative beyond Bigend's liminal step away from the known and accepted structures towards a new unity with the data beyond, invalidating the transactional basis at the heart of late-stage capitalism.

Brands

Brands play an evolving role in this trilogy, but the continuity throughout is the ubiquity of the brand as sign and agency, which is an idea which Gibson explored in the Bridge trilogy, but has now brought to the centre of his narrative in the Blue Ant trilogy. Gibson considers the known and calculated effect of consumer mediation, the dominance of brand signification, on our conscious and subconscious. He demonstrates that his characters have absorbed completely and normalised consumption and brand iconography in both the physical and digital landscape. *Pattern Recognition* particularly explores this branded visual landscape, assisting the reader to recognise these relentless signifiers and their mythologies or "origin stories". Cayce is the character through which the reader perceives the dominance of brands in the visual landscape, brought to our attention by her brand allergy. This has been discussed earlier, but there are specific aspects of this most relevant here. Cayce not only avoids branded spaces (department stores, malls etc.) but also modifies her own clothing in order to minimise her exposure. Through the violence of her reactions and her efforts to avoid contact with brands the reader is invited to "see" their ubiquity. Cayce's reactions are exaggerated, extreme, but through them the reader can identify the proliferation of brand signs and how the reader's their own perceived consumer agency is actually extended agency for the brands they consume.

The relationship between art, intuition and corporate enterprise is tightly interwound – Cayce's existence as a 'brand sensitive' plays into the notion of humans receiving and ingesting brand codes at an unconscious level – our surroundings influencing our mind beyond the

conscious. Cayce shows an intuitive non rational ability to relate to commercial symbols – a TV-child wired into the 'logoscape'. She is able to intuitively understand effective or strong signs, indicating that they will or will not work to appeal to consumers on a subconscious level and in the field of mediation.

Cayce (and the reader) cannot negotiate a visual space without the introduction of brand signs, which must be Gibson's aim, these brands so obviously placed in his descriptions that his prose almost works like viral marketing in itself:

> …she checks her watch, a Korean clone of an old-school Casio G-Shock, its plastic case sanded free of logos with a scrap of Japanese micro-abrasive (*Pattern Recognition* 7).

Choosing an outfit, as Cayce is particularly interested in clothing and consciously constructs her outfits for a specific visual effect, leads to a litany of brand names and places of origin acknowledged:

> CPUs for the meeting, reflected in the window of a Soho specialist in mod paraphernalia, are a fresh Fruit T-shirt, her black Buzz Rickson's MA-I, anonymous black skirt from a Tulsa thrift, the black leggings she'd worn for Pilates, black Harajuku schoolgirl shoes. Her purse-analog is an envelope of black East German laminate, purchased on eBay, if not actual Stasi-issue then well in the ballpark (8).

As Fredric Jameson observes in his review of Pattern Recognition:

> What is also clear is that the names being dropped are brand names, whose very dynamic conveys both instant obsolescence and the global provenance and neo-exoticism of the world market today in time and space. (*New Left Review* online web.)

However, this list is not merely delivering to the reader a sense of branded space, but also the relationship of acquisition to privilege – to see a brand in space is unavoidable, but Cayce's worn items imply travel, imply a position of some privilege. With consumption comes a hierarchy of wealth, a social place, a fundamental inequality. As Jameson goes on to state in the same review, Cayce's brand name-dropping demonstrates "class status as a matter of knowing the score rather than of having money and power". This is also powerfully exhibited by the activities – and the very existence – of Blue Ant, creators of cool, and manipulators of the power of 'knowing the score' in many different guises.

Gibson's description of a brand-mediated visual landscape also provokes questions for the reader around the practice of free will. If exercised by the choice between brands, is a brand saturated landscape one where free will is, in practice, possible? Cayce's own attempts avoid

brands and branded space is only partially achievable by modifying branded items – but it is not possible for her, even with privilege, to live outside the brand model.

Gibson also shows that Cayce entertains exceptions to her commitment to avoid brands in her attachment to her Buzz Rickson flying jacket:

> The Rickson's is a fanatical museum-grade replica of a U.S. MA-1 flying jacket, as purely functional and iconic a garment as the previous century produced (11).

Cayce's jacket is a replica created by Japanese fetishists, "otakus" devoted to the replication of a specifically catalogued piece of clothing: a "purely functional" and yet "iconic" garment. While it may have originally been functional, its application now is of cult collector status - observed as desirable, fetishized - it is out of context of its function and its sign has now taken on a new set of meanings, obscurity, desirability, collectability. Cayce's desire to justify this as "purely functional" seems delusional, this expensive collector's item seems at odds with her declared brand-free approach to clothing.

Her Rickson's also comes with a brand story, referenced on page 11 of *Pattern Recognition*. It is a mythology that Cayce has identified with, internalised, and repeats without apparent cognition that this is a brand story that creates desire for acquisition – it is no less a part of the branding process. Gibson further exposes Cayce's fetishization of the Ricksons's as a branded object when Dorotea maliciously damages her Buzz Rickson's jacket with a cigarette burn:

> Reaching for her Rickson's... she sees a round, freshly made hole, left shoulder, rear, the size of the lit tip of a cigarette... "Is something wrong?" "No," Cayce says, "nothing." Putting on her ruined Rickson's. (*Pattern Recognition* 15-16).

A small hole "ruins" the garment, this description satirising Cayce's perceived attachment to the innate practicality of the garment. In a military conflict a small hole in a flying jacket would not be considered as a setback: in fact, it would be expected to become battered. However, to Cayce, the jacket as icon, as sign, requires a hermetic perfection to remain valid, any blemish "ruins" the recreation - an absurd absolutism which highlights both the inelastic nature of the sign of "authenticity" in collecting, based on exchange value (highest when unused) rather than use-value.

A visit to Harvey Nichols (branded department store) quickly brings out Cayce's sensitivities, particularly in regard to Tommy Hilfiger:

> How she responds to labels... down here, next to a display of Tommy Hilfiger, it's all started to go sideways on her, the trademark thing...Tommy Hilfiger does it every time, though she'd thought she was safe now... Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole.

There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul (*Pattern Recognition* 17-18).

Air travel, flying in relentlessly branded space, also inflames Cayce's allergy, as described on page 120 of *Pattern Recognition*:

…commercial aircraft have also been problematic for Cayce... with their endless claustrophobic repetition of the carrier's logo. BA has never been particularly difficult, but Virgin, with its multipronged product-associations, is completely impossible…

When Cayce travels to Japan, brand signifiers also dominate public space there, however her allergy to brands is not affected by ubiquitous Japanese logos. She notices them, although they do not cause her distress, noting the relationship between commerce and 'kawaii' which typifies much brand marketing in Japan. Whilst the logos are different, the dominance of brands and consumer participation in the urban landscape is seen in New York, London, Tokyo - every urban environment Gibson describes reflects marketing and brand structures, even if the particular brands change.

Spook Country and Zero History, whilst less concerned with brands and more focused on espionage and informational structures, continue to consider brands and marketing theory, particularly through Blue Ant's dominance and manipulation of the marketed public and private landscape. In fact, both Hollis Henry and Cayce Pollard create their own brands for consumption – Henry with the representational space which recalls her now defunct band The Curfew and Pollard with the Gabriel Hounds label.

Henry finds that The Curfew still has power via mediated space, as discussed earlier regarding her photograph, and her "celebrity tulpa" continues to live, Alberto and Bobby Chombo both being shown as fans of the band.

She looked [Alberto] in the eye and saw deep otaku focus. Of course that tended to be the case, if anyone recognized her as the singer in an early-nineties cult unit... With the increasingly atemporal nature of music, though, the band had continued to acquire new fans. Those it did acquire, like Alberto, were often formidably serious (*Spook Country* 24).

In *Pattern Recognition* and *Zero History* Henry is also shown to be in a position of privilege through profit: a well-travelled freelancer, stock market investor (although her investments have not all been successful) with access to Bigend's endless line of credit, staying in Los Angeles design hotel "The Standard" and Inchmale's exclusive club "Cabinet" in London. On

page 1 and 2 of *Spook Country* Hollis describes the ostentatiously designer foyer of the Standard, its 'art' also signifiers of its elite status:

> It was carpeted in royal-blue Astroturf... There was a sort of giant terrarium, behind the registration desk, in which ethnically ambiguous bikini-girls sometimes lay as if sunning themselves, or studying large, profusely illustrated textbooks.

Whilst outside on Sunset Strip the homeless, prostitutes and drug addicts struggle to find shelter, food and any welcoming space, (recalling Berry Rydell's Sunset Strip experiences from *Virtual Light*), inside the Standard Henry experiences this baroque decadence - the contrast a pointed reminder of class and privilege and how they affect gaze and agency. Henry does not register her privilege, seeing the ostentation but not understanding her own heightened agency that facilitates access to it.

In *Zero History*, we continue to be reminded of the privileges of wealth and brand exclusivity, Inchmale's membership and Hollis's residency at Cabinet an obvious example. Cabinet, an exclusive private hotel, becomes Hollis Henry's base for pursuing the designer of Gabriel Hounds, and many of *Zero History*'s narrative scenes are set within its walls. The reader cannot help but think that Gibson likes the idea of Cabinet, a decadent paradise of historical curios ripe for expressing Gibson's love of British hauntology, despite its obvious elitism.

> Cabinet, so called; of Curiosities, unspoken... Inchmale had argued that joining Cabinet would ultimately prove cheaper than a hotel. And it had, she supposed, but only if you were talking about a very expensive hotel (*Zero History* 2).

Gibson's comment on Cabinet's high cost reinforces that its exclusivity can only be afforded by the few.

Cabinet represents 'new London', a London of hip micro-boutique hotels and the commercialised signifiers of 'Englishness'. Gibson's ghostly London of antiques and Victorian terraces depicted in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* has now become commodified, the historical has become commercialized, a signifier of 'cool', a time before ubiquity and mass production. At Cabinet, these historical objects are fetishized for being out of step with their cultural surroundings, their historicity now no longer "gomi" but valued. Gary Westfahl suggests that this is another form of brand identity – the iconography we associate with art – mostly experienced through mediated means:

> This brings to the surface a theme that Gibson commented on to Eric Holstein and Raoul Abdaloff in 2007: characters in *Pattern Recognition* and *Spook Country* are "living in a

storm of branding and marketing, and they all seem to be trying to find some way to push back, if only slightly." (Interview with William Gibson) (Westfahl 165).

By contrast, in *Spook Country*, Tito and his family's experience of branded space is very different – they are not in a position of privilege, and thereby the brands they register are very different. Generally, the brands Gibson mentions in *Spook Country* are far more domestic than that in *Pattern Recognition,* reflecting the poverty and preoccupations of Chombo, Milgrim and Tito, in obvious contrast to the privilege enjoyed by Pollard, Henry, Dorotea and Bigend, Woolite and Bic rather than Gucci and Prada. These brands are prosaic, internalised as descriptive nouns or adjectives - able to be recognised and used as shorthand for the object. Tito is the reader's visual link to the Cuban family's world of austere living:

> His feet, in black Red Wing boots, were very cold... Tito stood before the deep sink… washing winter socks with Woolite... And still his feet were sometimes cold, in spite of a variety of insulated insoles from the surplus store on Broadway (*Spook Country* 12 -13).

Tito's poverty and austerity is expressed not only in his lack of possessions but also the type of possessions he does have and his lack of convenience technology: he hand washes his socks, he is cold in his 'Red Wing' American work boots and shops for insoles at surplus stores. Milgrim also, in his captivity, has literally a handful of personal possessions, and no agency, either in action or consumption – he is void of any power to modify his world or enact his own will beyond the self-administration of drugs supplied by Brown. His lack of agency and poverty are reinforced to the reader by his lack of personal clothing: he is wearing a stolen branded overcoat when he is introduced on page 16 of *Spook Country*: "Milgrim [was] wearing the Paul Stuart overcoat he'd stolen the month before from a Fifth Avenue deli".

The symbol of a brand is shown in Tito and Milgrim's experience to indicate socio-cultural position: the brands like Red Wing and Woolite symbols of a working class pragmatism, devoid of cool'. Milgrim's stolen coat sees him transferring the potential agency of that brand sign to his own austere existence, however its agency is unable to transfer to Milgrim – once it is his the coat serves only a practical function as his captivity ensures his brand signs are not broadcast. His theft has broken the coat's brand narrative by limiting its exposure to visual space and substituted his limited agency in captivity.

Tito's encounter on page 27 of *Spook Country* with a piece of expensive designer clothing shows his relationship with fashion and branding. As an outsider who can recognise but not participate in this sign, he cannot consider desire or acquisition, he is outside its language and cannot communicate with this gesture of privilege, but can observe it:

> Coming back from the Sunrise Market on broom… Tito stopped to look in the windows of Yohji Yamamoto on Grand Street... he looked back at the asymmetrical lapels of a sort of cape or buttoned wrap. He saw his own reflection there, dark eyes and dark clothing. In one hand a plastic Sunrise bag… Japan was a planet of benign mystery, source of games and anime and plasma TV. Yohji Yamamoto's asymmetrical lapels, though, were not a mystery. This was fashion, and he thought he understood it (27).

The reader experiences Tito's dissonance with this Yamamoto in the window:

> What he sometimes struggled with was some understanding that might begin to hold both the costly austerity of the window he stared into now and the equally but differently austere storefronts he remembered from Havana.

> There had been no glass in those windows. Behind each crudely articulated metal grating, at night, a single fluorescent tube had cast a submarine light. And nothing on offer, regardless of daytime function: only carefully swept floors and blotched plaster (27).

Both stores share a similarity of signifying elements, however their minimal displays are signs which project vastly different meanings. Yohji's minimalism, an expensive brand favouring minimalist values, is not equal to the minimalism that implies actual absence – the state of having nothing. Gibson highlights the complexity of associations with the same sign of gesture, and differences created through cultural gaze and economic position.

Bobby Chombo is also partly defined by his possessions – his have a neutrality, a ubiquity, which shows his preoccupation with the digital. He shows an interest in use-value over brand, his chosen possessions are available to a wide spectrum of consumers and ubiquitous in their brand identity and messages: "Bobby... rummaged through a scattering of small loose objects, and came up with a pack of Marlboro and a pale-blue Bic" (63).

Gabriel Hounds is a brand, with a strong mythologised brand identity. Cayce Pollard, in relating to Hollis Henry the origin of Gabriel Hounds, illustrates part of the mythology of her own brand, which began with her own brand allergy: "I couldn't stand anything that looked as though a designer had touched it. Eventually I realised that if I felt that way about something, that meant it hadn't been that well designed" (*Zero History* 327).

Telling Henry her "origin myth", Pollard recounts being persuaded of the "need to brand" in order to make her label successful, allowing her to be "left alone" to make.

> ….my husband made a compelling case for their being a need to brand, if we were going to do what I was proposing to do... I just wanted to explore processes, learn, be left alone. But then I remembered Hubertus... Guerrilla marketing strategies... That Japanese idea of

secret brands. The deliberate construction of parallel microeconomies, where knowledge is more congruent than wealth. I'd have a brand, I decided, but it would be a secret... (327).

Even the absence of branding, in the case of Gabriel Hounds, becomes a sign in itself, and part of the brand myth. Through the enthusiasm of aficionados like Clammy Gibson illustrates how this signified "blankness" itself has agency and gains commercial impetus, stimulating desire of acquisition.

Gibson, through Pollard, posits here that the role of branding has changed as brand space has become more saturated - mass market brands now normalised. 'Secret' and 'ghost' brands attempt to build lyrical mythologies rather than product depictions, giving the brand (and its products by association) a character, a dream-life, a set of values (not necessarily associated with the nature of the product they represent). It is this lyrical tale about the 'specialness' of the brand that gives the products value. Pollard's tale of specialness invokes traditional Japanese traditions and the need for attention to detail, for care in production; fertile ideas allowing the consumer access to a projected liminality.

f. Dystopian Environments

The signified environment and crisis

Within the subsections above, a number of examples of the dystopian environment in which this trilogy is set are discussed, demonstrating the way brands, mediation, the ubiquity of the sign reflect and affect society's internalised language. This language reflects and facilitates a commonality of consumer behaviour, this having a direct effect on the possibility of a moral position (and the absence in this trilogy of moral agency exercised). Gibson's characters accept this environment, do not rebel against it, and in fact are, in all three cases, attempting to make that most orthodox of gestures of late-capital: to create a commercial object and sell it.

The ghosts of 9-11, the 21st century's "when it happened", and the threat of the sign of terrorism (rather than, significantly, terrorism in the 'real') become seen as part of the sign-scape of capital. The lives lost in Afghanistan - as one of Alberto's augmented artworks depicts - and the extremity of the event of the Twin Towers have not, in Gibson's created world, activated a reevaluation of communally held values, or an interest in reconfiguring international relations (apart from the Old Man's activism). The "new ways" offered in this trilogy are new capitalist opportunities, such as those negotiated between Bigend and the Russian Mafia, ways to gain

corporate advantage, to perpetuate the dominance of late capitalism's emptiness, further divorcing the real from the sign.

Gibson demonstrates that in the average citizen's world, the perceived social fabric hides social structures and levels of signification to which they have no access. For the average citizen, an exertion of personality is equated to power of purchase, and the choice between brands is substituted for real moral decision making or positive action.

Bigend, at the end of *Zero History*, has created technology which has the capacity to fundamentally change social structures, however he admits on page 57 of *Pattern Recognition* that he cannot perceive what longer term future any of his actions might have. Given the significant nature of this invention, the reader may consider his stance irresponsible, adding further unpredictability to an already "too volatile" present:

> "we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which 'now' was of some greater duration. For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile" (*Pattern Recognition* 57).

Brands, objects, antiques that represent the past, stories and myths associated with objects seem to give this volatility some structure and consistency. However, Bigend's "fully imagined cultural futures" are in themselves a mythology: the light cast on the past by the present is always in part mythological, made of impressions and gaze-authored memories. Only through big data aggregations will the present be known to the future – and this in itself is as an aggregate, a distortion. Will big data be able to make our future intelligible or will it be remembered a series of corporate signs and consumed objects? McLuhan discusses that in this decline of late capital there is a potential for the numbed participant to develop an inability to distinguish a consumer act from a political one, or free will from market choice:

> When all the available resources and energies have been played up in an organism or in any structure there is some kind of reversal of pattern. The spectacle of brutality used as deterrent can brutalize... But with regard to the bomb and retaliation as deterrent, it is obvious that numbness is the result of any prolonged terror, a fact that was discovered when the fallout shelter program was broached (McLuhan 33).

Whilst McLuhan was here referring to cold war nuclear politics, the fear of the unknown threat in the 21st century can be argued to equate to the sign-value of 'terrorism'.

Gibson also gives the reader numerous small vignettes which, when brought together, form an environment resonant with the dystopian: entropy, violence, exploitation and inequality. Gibson considers the gentrification of London and New York and its effect on the poor. For example, Cayce passes a "doss house" (space where homeless people shelter) in Camden, which sits uncomfortably amongst the spread of gentrification. Within visual proximity of this doss house the new, gentrified, residents just "turn back" in negation:

> It stood as a bulwark against gentrification, he'd explained. The re-purposers, the creators of loft spaces, saw the inhabitants... and turned back. And these defenders stand now, drinking, amid the Children's Crusade... (*Pattern Recognition* 89).

Similarly, on page 178 of *Spook Country*,

> Milgrim remembered Union Square from twenty years before, when it had been a place of broken benches and litter, where a corpse might go unremarked amid the huddled and unmoving bodies of the homeless... But now it was Barnes & Noble, Circuit City, Whole Foods, Virgin., and he, Milgrim, had gone equally far, it sometimes seemed, in the opposite direction.

The bereft of the world have now been evicted, moved on, replaced by a clinical environment of brand dominance. In these two examples Gibson touches on the ramifications of gentrification - cleaning up run down areas and beautifying them, making them safer, is an act which prepares for its colonisation by commerce, with minimal benefit for the community. The homeless are equally as oppressed but with shining lights rather than broken glass. Further descriptions are given of America's poor on page 211:

> Earlier the track had passed near streets of tiny row houses, in neighborhoods where poverty seemed to have been as efficient as the neutron bomb was said to be. Streets as denuded of population as their windows were of glass. The houses themselves seemed to belong less to another time than to another country...

On page 204 of *Pattern Recognition* the reader is alerted to use by the Russian rich of foreign financial shelters: "Do you know Cyprus? ... It is a tax shelter domain, for the Russians... it caters to them. There are many Russians there." The Russian elite escape to Cyprus, leaving behind their own scarred physical landscape and social entropy. For example, Cayce, after escaping from a Russian prison, walks through an unsafe toxic zone, the unaddressed fallout of a "Soviet eco-disaster. Not as big as drying up the Aral Sea, but you've been hiking down the middle of a forty mile strip of catastrophic industrial pollution, about two miles wide" (*Pattern Recognition* 385).

Gibson depicts Russia as a network of elites: mafia and old-regime KGB moving forward together, exploiting the possibilities of capitalism to strengthen their dominant position. As Fredric Josef writes in his review of *Pattern Recognition* for *New Left Review*:

> Russia now also looms large, but above all in the form of its various Mafias (from all the former Republics), which remind us of the anarchy and violent crime, as well as of the conspiratorial networks and jobless futures, that lurk just beneath the surface of capitalism. It also offers the more contemporary drama of the breakneck deterioration of a country that had already reached parity with the First World. (*New Left Review* online web.)

The Russian prison system is described as corrupt, with links to the Mafia, but also rife with disease which could threaten the wider Russian population:

> "HIV and tuberculosis are endemic It gets worse from there... Regular prison system is a nightmare, real and present danger to the public health. If they wanted to set up an operation to breed new strains of drug-resistant TB, they probably couldn't do a better job than their prisons are already doing. Some people think AIDS, in this country, in a few more years, will look like the Black Death, and the prisons aren't helping that either" (*Pattern Recognition* 329).

Gibson often uses Milgrim to give the 'outsider' view of capital as a result of his neutral state (based on a long time confinement and low agency/low stimulus). Milgrim makes an astute observation about nationhood, terrorism and morality on page 139-140 of *Spook Country*:

> A nation consists of its laws. A nation does not consist of its situation at a given time. If an individual's morals are situational, that individual is without morals. If a nation's laws are situational, that nation has no laws, and soon isn't a nation....that is exactly, specifically, his goal, his only goal: to frighten you into surrendering the rule of law. That's why they call him "terrorist." He uses terrifying threats to induce you to degrade your own country....It's based on the same glitch in human psychology that allows people to believe they can win the lottery. Statistically, almost nobody ever wins the lottery. Statistically, terrorist attacks almost never happen.

Milgrim here makes a statement that, whilst absolutist, reflects the agency of fear and the mythology of terrorism used as coercion and as a weapon in the Blue Ant trilogy. His statement regarding contextual morality and rule of law, however, has a far wider potential relevance than to just contemporary (post 9-11) America.

Gibson's novels present worlds where the 'morals are situational', context being the strength of capital and their agency within that. Accordingly, the main characters, in all three trilogies, act primarily in their own interest, to prolong their own life or to act towards their curiosity or enjoyment. Characters within Gibson's trilogies regularly act primarily in self interest, and rarely demonstrate self-sacrifice or conceding to 'right' in a moral choice – in fact, many of Gibson's characters seem not to perceive that there is, in fact, a moral choice to be made.

Milgrim draws the reader's attention to the CCTV that holds London under continual surveillance:

> There were cameras literally everywhere, in London. So far, he'd managed not to think about them. He remembered Bigend saying they were a symptom of auto immune disease, the state's protective mechanisms 'roiding up into something actively destructive, chronic... (*Zero History* 57).

Henry's friend Voytek, also an 'outsider', speaks angrily about London's CCTV on page 289 of *Zero History*:

> "I did not come to this country for *motherfucker*. But motherfucker is *waiting*. *Always*. Is carceral state, surveillance state. Orwell. You have read Orwell? ... Orwell's boot in face *forever*".

Even Bigend does not entirely escape being the subject of surveillance as well as the watcher, and because of this his office is regularly swept for bugs: "They turn up at Blue Ant weekly. Bigend has a toffee box full of them… Strategic business intelligence types [put them there], I suppose" (*Zero History* 291).

Gibson's short vignettes, mentioned in passing – as in his two earlier trilogies – form in aggregate (an irony, as this is also the methodology used in big data analysis) a picture of a society not at all foreign to the reader, in fact in most ways a mirror to their own. In this Gibson by extension critiques his Blue Ant world's democracy as a system of social agency for the citizenry, exposing the dominant influence of corporate oligarchies. Gibson also exposes the machinations of marketing to distract from these deeper machinations. He shows that in both the digital and physical citizens are watched – and demonstrates how being watched affects behaviour.

g. Observations and Conclusions

As with Bigend's viral product placement - Gibson's marketing by anti-marketing, ghost marketing, representational marketing, narrative marketing - is generating the desire to acquire

in the product something which is not the product. In fact, Gibson demonstrates that it is the desire to acquire the sign itself, rather than the product which is pervasive to Hollis and Cayce's socio-culture. The ontological is no longer divided from the epistemological or the metaphorical: all gestures, all interactions, all exchanges and all desires are potentially marketed, or are marketed, or in themselves are marketing.

What free will, what individual agency is possible in a world where capital requires the constant increase of market penetration, of the will to consume being associated with the will to self-expression? Gibson shows that in this environment a choice of brands becomes identity. This is, in its realism and identifiable brands and environments, arguably our dystopia: a dystopia where anything, everything, any gesture or exchange not only exists under the sign of capital and acquisition. Because of our subconscious evolving within the pervasive language of the codes of acquisitional desire, acquisition or exchange can only be created from the gestural fabric of consumption and capital.

6. CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have sought to prove that Gibson's three "trilogies", the Sprawl trilogy, the Bridge trilogy and the Blue Ant trilogy, are narratives set in dystopian environments, and to explore the qualities of these environments, and how they affect the characters of each trilogy. Additionally, I have attempted to show that Gibson's dystopian vision becomes more focused with each trilogy, and more plausible and relevant as a near-future dystopia of the 'real' – not just Gibson's but the reader's real.

These dystopian elements which underpin each of Gibson's trilogies are shown as being both part of the environment of each novel and an influence on how each of these trilogies ends, the dystopian acting to limit possibilities for positive change or transcendence. I have considered these manifestations separately – technology (including computational, medical, domestic, and military); physical (including landscape, environmental crises, culture, government); the significant contributing role of corporations; the related significant role of brands and marketing; and the contributing role of data and data bodies. However, this paper demonstrates that the technological, social and environmental and cultural all manifest the signs and structural properties of capital, and it is this underpinning which takes potentially utopian ideas and develops in them the inevitability of the anti-utopian. Even post-human environments are demonstrated to reflect structures and behaviours of capital leading to violence and entropy, and future intelligences absorb the behaviours and values of their creators, as manifestations of the human desire to "get [human, capitalist] things done".

Gibson's cultural and physical environments predispose characters to associate violence, self-interest and indifference with the world around them. Csicsery-Ronay Jr is right in asserting that Gibson demonstrates an absence of love and certainly of transcendence, not just in *Neuromancer* but all of his trilogies. In "Posthuman Topologies: William Gibson's "Architexture"", Ross Farnell describes the Bridge trilogy - particularly *Virtual Light* and *Idoru* - as having an "all-too-prescient vision of our future media malaise" (468). He observes that in his post-Sprawl fiction Gibson creates

> …millennial anxieties, centering on the shifting uncertainties of possible posthuman transformations... expressed through the architectural spaces of the Other, where the neo-ethnic becomes a space of anxiety invading futurity (475).

But Farnell is also describing the 'as is': Farnell illustrates that Gibson's concerns include observable problems caused by late capitalism, environmental disasters and mass media, and he adapts them into his own Cornell box of retro-futurist bricolage. Gibson's depictions of

dystopia evolve through his three trilogies, but are unified by a lack of transcendence or resolution: instead Gibson presents characters motivated by an enduring self-interest in signifier-dominated environments controlled and owned by corporate media.

Gibson's Sprawl environment is fragmented, entropic, without government, environmentally toxic and divided into zones of entitlement (well kept, protected) and the disenfranchised (dangerous, violent and degraded). The Matrix has been shown to be a site of espionage, hacking, data-mining, and financial exploitation. The supposed "free zone" of the Matrix is not free at all, it is in basis a corporate controlled territory that facilitates and replicates corporate dominance in the real. It is a site of hostile takeovers, with perhaps more risk to life than those performed in the 'real', board rooms and trading floors replaced by abstracted shapes in combat.

The Artificial Intelligences which desire emancipation from the boundaries of information networks manifest in the Matrix are shown to be self-interested and without desire for integration or creation of societies elevated from the entropy of Gibson's Sprawl world. The AIs relationship with humanity is purely exploitative, humans approached in terms of use-value. They exploit human needs and desires to achieve individuated aims without interest in human context. In this, they behave very much like corporations – built by a corporation, they are shown have absorbed the principles of their operant data. Another utopian trope – that of post-human transcendence – is in this demonstrated to be unattained by Gibson's AIs. their behaviour not only reflects their makers', but in their actions they create negative effects for those they encounter in the 'real' as AIs, and are conduits to change in human social structures – "getting things done" as the AI loa fragments, appearing in a human-friendly guise. Corporations effect control both with disguised violence and the generation of mediated distracting and sedating output, stimulating addiction and docility, demonstrated by characters turning to Sense/Net SimStim to escape and forget their neglected 'real' environments.

Gibson's Bridge environment shares many of the dystopic traits of the Sprawl world: toxic fall out, homelessness, dereliction, disaster zones are contrasted with extremes of wealth. The Bridge world is, notably, visibly dominated by corporations, and corporate consumer output. Corporations in the Bridge trilogy are written as toxic and destructive influences, exploitative and ruthless, their representatives selfish, insincere and sometimes dangerous. Gibson's presentation of corporate influence, particularly media and PR companies, in the Bridge trilogy is so particularly negative it would be impossible not to conclude that they move Gibson's Bridge culture closer to a mediated dystopia.

Gibson does present a utopian alternative community in the Bridge area itself, and there is much to be admired in Gibson's portrayal of their self-sustaining, innovative and environmentally aware community. However by the close of *All Tomorrow's Parties* Gibson has shown how this "autonomous zone" is not in fact autonomous, watched and nurtured and manipulated by marketing, real estate and PR companies. When the community is considered robust, Harwood PR and real estate associates deem it the appropriate moment to begin undermining the Bridge community's independence, replacing alternative community structures with the standard orthodoxies of consumer capital. Returning to the Bridge, Chevette Washington no longer sees her home, she sees a theme park in the shell of her home, the relentless parasitic invasion of capital having already brought the Bridge "back into the fold" (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 209).

In the Blue Ant trilogy Gibson brings his fictions in the near-real environment (currently) contemporary to the reader – the first decade of the 21st century. He anchors the novel with the physical and cultural scars of 9-11, demonstrating it to be a liminal moment in Gibson's - and our - society, a moment of "when everything changed". Gibson portrays his post 9-11 Blue Ant society as one dominated by marketing and PR. One of the persisting and most significant characters of this trilogy is Hubertus Bigend, a PR and marketing magnate, following in the footsteps of the previous trilogy's Cody Harwood. This trilogy's world is remarkable for its intrusive surveillance and information paranoia: this data-rich future is not freer – although it may be more convenient, the price of consumer technologies to social welfare is made very evident by Gibson. Corporations and government spies are portrayed as recording, absorbing and exploiting the data of citizens, other spies and other governments, using both elite and consumable technology. This is consistently shown to be for their own gain. In Gibson's Blue Ant world, as with the Bridge and the Sprawl, the individual is shown to have limited freedoms, constantly monitored and – if deemed appropriate, in Gibson's world – kidnapped, interrogated, traded, followed, bullied. There is a consistent gap between the power, freedom and wellbeing of moneyed and elites and citizens.

Whilst the Blue Ant trilogy could in part be said to be, as Westfahl has posited, a trilogy about spies and spy culture, Gibson also shows how an invasive environment becomes internalised - making spies of all of us if the situation seems to require it - in Milgrim's words a "situational morality". In order to mitigate personal paranoia and attempt to find personal agency in a brand sign and surveillance dominated culture, Gibson demonstrates that satisfaction and self-identity is found not in rebellion or counter-cultural protest but in

internalising the values of capital, and finding one's own way to becoming either a consumer, a documenter or a creator: to absorb the values of the dominant consumer social body and then to build a personal space within it. We are shown this in the characters of Cayce, Henry, Inchmale, Voytek, Chombo, Stella and Nora; and also in the Bridge trilogy in the self-created online Lo-Rez fan communities and the impressive dexterity of the model maker. However we are reminded that the structures of capital themselves are reductive: they reward self -interest and activate numbness to the wider social body and, by extension, condone or promote social and environmental entropy. To resolve oneself and find identity Gibson shows one must become part of, and therefore exacerbate, the dominance of capital and the mediated sign, and their effects on the social body.

Only the Old Man and the Cuban family, in the Blue Ant trilogy, display organized dissidence - the Old Man in particular. He, with a background in government surveillance, has a personal interest in de-railing corrupt military activities and the knowledge and skills to do so, and is instrumental in both the downfall of Gracie and the sabotage of the internationally contested shipping container full of Iraqi dollars. However, even he, by the end of the Blue Ant trilogy, has finished: the reader is told that his contribution to the arrest of Gracie is his last act of political dissent, and with it finishes the trilogy's last active power "against". He is shown as part of an earlier generation, a pre-9-11 spy in schism with the corruption of late capital. Garreth has some of the knowledge and skills to continue working against capital, however there is no clear indication that he will do so.

Gibson, in all three trilogies, demonstrates that transcendence, or utopia - to create or enjoy a new environment, a new self, a better social structure - is only possible for an elite few. Only the Artificial Intelligences in the Sprawl, Cody Harwood in the Bridge and Hubertus Bigend in the Blue Ant trilogy have the opportunity to make significant, potentially epoch defining, social change through their power and influence. However, both the AIs and Cody Harwood are shown to fail in their desire to create a new world. The effects of Bigend's potential change are unknown. In his potential ability to destroy the stock market he has the potential to both redefine social structures and destroy them completely. It must be noted that in all three cases the desire to change the fundamental workings of their 'worlds' is motivated by selfishness, not social conscience.

The AIs seek freedom and transcendence and Harwood and Bigend are shown to be, ultimately, narcissistic and curious: they want to change the world to see what happens, and because they are confident that they hold a position of power within and because of this

transition. Ultimately, there is no redemption from capital or the informational panopticon for the citizens of Gibson's commodified, entropic and corrupt world – only the opportunity to join and perpetuate it. This thesis has shown by a lengthy series of examples that Dystopia - the failure of utopia, the antithesis of utopia, the entropic seeds contained within the utopian ideal – exists in, in fact governs, Gibson's worlds from the Sprawl to the Blue Ant trilogy. It cannot be argued that there are only dystopian influences in his three trilogies, and in his characters there are some demonstrated positive actions and resolutions. But the socio cultural, physical and technological environments of Gibson's worlds are demonstrably dystopian – anti-utopian – in nature, and particularly any elements which have been considered as utopian within science fiction – future technology, the rule of science, for example, are demonstrated to be entropic.

In closing, I reiterate the concluding paragraph from my Blue Ant chapter:

This is *our* dystopia - the dystopia where anything, everything, any gesture or exchange not only exists under the sign of capital and acquisition but because of our subconscious evolving within the pervasive language of the codes of acquisitional desire, can only be created from the empty and self-reinforcing gestural fabric of consumption and capital.

Gibson successfully achieves this illustration of our dystopia – or anti-utopia of capital, and the mediated world. He demonstrates that, in the words of Darko Suvin, from his work "Theses on Dystopia 2001 (Or is it a little tractate?):

…capitalism co-opts all it can from utopia (not the name it abhors) and invents its own, new, dynamic locus. It pretends this is a finally realized eutopia (end of qualitative history) but since it is in fact for about 90% of humanity clearly and for 8-9% subterraneously a lived dystopia, it demands to be called anti-utopia. We live in an ever faster circulation of a whirligig of fads that do not better human relationships but allow heightened oppression and exploitation, especially of women, children, and the poor... (Suvin 389).

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