

The Champion of Cyberpunk: On Two Works by William Gibson

Cyberpunk is the label under which a portion of the younger science fiction writers of the eighties have been marketing their wares, and as neologisms go, it represents a fair description of their product. Cyberpunk sci-fi, in its ideal form, is compounded of (1) a re-envisioning of the consensual future in terms not of space travel and other feats of mega-engineering but of a plastic (i.e., wholly malleable) mental landscape that derives from the new possibilities of computer graphics, and (2) punk style, in clothes, hair, sexuality, and the abuse of controlled substances. Like punk rock, and like most traditional rocket-and-blaster sf, Cyberpunk caters to the wish-fulfillment requirements of male teenagers, but this is a job that can be done with varying degrees of panache, and in the whole field of sf there is presently no more accomplished caterer than William Gibson. He is the undisputed champion of Cyberpunk.

Mona Lisa Overdrive might be considered the concluding volume of a trilogy, except that the book's last chapter so patently advertises a sequel. These days nothing short of the author's death can keep a commercially successful work of sf from being cloned into sequels as long as the product moves from the shelves. A sense of closure, and so of narrative architecture, is not among the pleasures a reader should expect from *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. What Gibson offers in its place is "flash"—quick, high-intensity glimpses that linger on the retina of the imagination, like the sets (but not the narrative) of the movie *Blade Runner*, which Gibson has acknowledged as a formative influence. The new novel has plenty of flash, as in the following short travelogue from the inhabited ruins of a future Florida, seen from the point of view of the teenage hooker who is the novel's title character:

About the only thing to like about Florida was drugs, which were easy to come by and cheap and mostly industrial strength. Sometimes she imagined the bleach smell [which pervades the beaches] was the smell of a million dope labs cooking some unthinkable cocktail, all those molecules thrashing their kinky little tails, hot for destiny and the street.

She turned off the Avenue and walked down a line of unlicensed

Review of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* and *Virtual Light*, by William Gibson.

food stalls. Her stomach started growling at the smell, but she didn't trust street food, not if she didn't have to and there were licensed places in the mall that would take cash. . . . A soapbox evangelist spread his arms high, a pale fuzzy Jesus copying the gesture in the air above him. The projection rig was in the box he stood on. . . . The evangelist frowned up at Jesus, adjusted something on the belt at his waist. Jesus strobed, turned green, and vanished.

Decoded, the impacted inferences of this passage tell us that this is a world made nearly uninhabitable by industrial waste; a world under constant surveillance, in which almost all monetary transactions are controlled by computer; a world in which visual illusion is as cheap as canned sound today. Gibson excels at piling up such inferences to make a self-consistent, gritty-textured future junkheap of a world. In opposition to that world is the realm of cyberspace, into which humans who have been surgically adapted to interface with computers can go voyaging, as upon an ocean that is the confluence of all databases, a Pac-Man universe of infinite complexity.

Gibson's first novel, *Neuromancer*, offered more dazzling vistas of cyberspace than those that are to be found in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, but at the expense of requiring more developed reading skills than many sf readers could bring to bear. *Mona Lisa Overdrive* seems to be written on purpose to admit a larger readership to the marvels of cyberspace. While Case, the hero of *Neuromancer*, was a professional computer "cowboy," a Ulysses of cyberspace, the four protagonists of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* are innocents and naifs, who move through the novel with all the autonomy of passengers on a ride at Disneyland. Indeed, one of the four, a Japanese teenage girl named Kumiko, is completely extraneous to the plot, her only involvement being to take a subway ride across London in order to make a long-distance phone call to warn the book's real heroine about a danger she has already dealt with.

Only in retrospect, however, is *Mona Lisa Overdrive* a disappointment. Zing by zing, its forty-five chapters provide a sufficiency of non-nutritive fun. As with *Neuromancer* the plot is strictly from 1946, but knowingly so, like a Brian de Palma film noir. Indeed, the book virtually begs to be filmed: there is a climactic duel between police helicopters and customized robots; a juicy double role for the leading lady; lots of martial-arts hugger-mugger performed by a leather-clad Wonder Woman; everything needful except the lyrics for the title song for Madonna or Cyndi Lauper to sing as the credits roll.

William Gibson may well be the last of the great science fiction writers. During the last decade, sci-fi has been wilting on its high-tech vine just like its over-hyped offspring, the “Star Wars” Strategic Defense Initiative. With SDI already smelling of mothballs, Outer Space looks like yesterday’s future. So what future is left? The junky, postmodern urban sprawl of Cyberpunk, a territory across which William Gibson was one of the first to spray his name. He is still, on the evidence of *Virtual Light*, the fastest thinker. Other sf writers may write books that are just as good or even better, but none of them has generated a vision of the future that has spread through the whole culture like a computer virus. Gibson has made everyone else his imitator, and that is greatness in sci-fi.

This latest book shows Gibson in top form. Like his debut novel, *Neuromancer* (where he came up with the idea of cyberspace, the place where brains and software meet), *Virtual Light* is a mix of cyber and punk, where computer hackers are never nerds but get to wear the latest in low couture and designer tats. Corps of privatized cops patrol LA in tanks designed by Ralph Lauren, and clothes receive major attention. In Gibson you are what you wear:

The shirt was lemon-yellow and printed with life-size handguns, in full color, all different kinds. He wore a huge pair of navy blue shorts that came to way below his knees, Raiders socks, sneakers with little red lights embedded in the edges of soles, and a pair of round mirrored glasses with lenses the size of five-dollar coins.

As that fashion statement indicates, *Virtual Light* is not set in the far future, and it’s all the scarier for that. Here is a day after tomorrow in which, after the earthquake California’s been waiting for, the entire Golden Gate Bridge has to be closed to traffic and is then settled by hordes of squatters, who turn it into the honky-tonk at the end of time. Gibson makes it sound not only believable but worth trying. His special love is for what he calls “Thomassons,” which is what Modern becomes after it’s had a collision with Reality. More than any writer going today, he is the poet of assimilation, multiculturalism, and culture shock as good therapy.

What gives Gibson his special take on the global village is a disenchantment that is also on a global scale. He’s scrapped the old utopian agenda of sci-fi that imagined a helicopter in every suburban garage, and he also has no truck with the eco-liberal fantasies of writers like Ursula LeGuin. In a world that just keeps getting more rotten, Gibson has decided he might as well try to learn to like how it smells. And no one, these days, has a finer nose for the decay of Western Civ.