

The Cinematicity of Literary Cyberpunk

on the Example of *Neuromancer*
by William Gibson

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The world in some near future, ruled by supranational corporations. Overpopulated megacities, where ultramodern skyscrapers stand next to slums. Filthy streets, bathed in neon lights, outdoor screens, and holograms. Dynamically developing new technologies paired with pauperization and an advancing breakdown of social ties. Electronics and bioengineering influencing the body and mind, leading to a blurring of the line between humans and machines. Cyberspace as a fighting pit, in which rebellious individuals fight with the oppressive system. Such a set of plot and iconographic motifs appears in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). Thanks to that novel, cyberpunk, a sub-genre of science fiction, found its place on the literary map, and also started to influence other forms of art, such as painting, functional graphics, rock music, and especially film.

Gibson's prose has been filmed three times: *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995) by Robert Longo and *Hotel New Rose* (*New Rose Hotel*, 1998) by Abel Ferrara are adaptations of his early short stories (from 1981 and 1984, respectively), similarly to the short-feature film by Tim Leandro *Tomorrow Calling* (1993), based on *The Gernsback Continuum* (1981). A literary vision of a world both modernized and degraded by technology, characteristic for Gibson, also found its less clear reflection in films which were not adaptations of his works, such as: *RoboCop* (1987) by Paul Verhoeven, *Tetsuo* (1989) by Shin'ya Tsukamoto, *Ganheddo* (1989) by Masato Harada, *Hardware* (1990) by Richard Stanley, *Nemesis* (1992) by Alber Pyuna, *Strange Days* (1995) by Kathryn Bigelow, *The Demolitionist* (1995) by Robert Kurtzman, *Ghost in the Shell/ Kokaku Kidotai* (1995) and *Avalon* (2000) by Mamoru Oshii, *Nirvana* (1997) by Gabriele Salvatores, *One Point O* (2003) by Jeff Renfroe and Martein Thorssona or *Anon* (2017) by Andrew Niccol. The box office success of *The Matrix* (1999) by the Wachowski sisters can be treated as the culmination of the assimilation of cyberpunk by the cultural mainstream.

Although Gibson's work had a strong influence on science fiction cinema, the cinema's role (both direct and indirect) in the shaping of the aesthetics of cyberpunk prose should also be stressed. Talking about his inspirations, Gibson admitted that he did not separate literature from other forms of art: "[...] I don't separate literature from other arts. Fiction, television, music, film – all provide material in the form of images and phrases and codes that creep into my writing in ways both deliberate and unconscious"¹. The category of picture seems to be the most important in his prose. Descriptions often do not play the role of illustrations here, ancillary to the plot; Gibson seems to subordinate the plot to the dynamics of moving pictures: pictures created with words.

In 1981, having published *Johnny Mnemonic*, Gibson was working on his next short story, entitled *Burning Chrome* (1982). The plot of both is set in a futuristic scenery of highly urbanized, technicized, and at the same time, depressingly filthy and overpopulated metropolises, such as Chiba City in Japan or the megalopolis commonly known as Sprawl, which extends along the whole US East Coast². At roughly the same time, Gibson watched *Escape from New York* (1981) by John Carpenter. Soon after that he would return to his debut novel, *Neuromancer*, for which Carpenter's film would become an important source of inspiration³.

As Ronald Reagan was taking office as president, Carpenter was presenting his own dystopian, largely satirical vision of America in the near future as an authoritarian police state (additionally entangled in a pointless conflict with the USSR). As a result of a staggering increase in crime the whole of Manhattan is transformed into a huge prison, where prisoners serving life sentences live according to their own, cruel rules. After a terrorist attack in which a plane with the president on board crashes on the island, Snake Plissken (Kurt Russel), an outlawed war hero, is tricked into rescuing the puppet head of state from the Manhattan prisoners.

¹ Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with William Gibson", *Mississippi Review* 16, No 2-3 (1988): 219.

² In Gibson's nomenclature, Sprawl is an informal, slang expression for an agglomeration Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis. *Neuromancer* is the first instalment of what is commonly known as the *Sprawl trilogy*, followed by *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). The plot of each of those loosely connected novels is set in the same urban reality.

³ McCaffery, "An Interview with William Gibson": 219.

Gibson later recalled that he was particularly intrigued by a scene in which the commander of the operation, Hauk (Lee Van Cleef), turns to Snake with a rhetorical question regarding his war past: “You flew the Gullfire over Leningrad, didn’t you?”). Although from the perspective of the plot this sentence is rather irrelevant to the rest of the film, Gibson saw in it some of “the best SF, where a casual reference can imply a lot”⁴. In *Neuromancer* Armitage, a former Special Force officer who hires the protagonist, a hacker named Case, to take part in a criminal action whose final takes place in the virtual reality, is a veteran of a similar American-Soviet conflict. One can see a more intellectual counterpart of Snake in Case, a “cyber-space cowboy”⁵, whereas Armitage is a combination of both Hauk and Plissken. There are more examples of this kind of reference, typically strongly paraphrased and camouflaged in *Neuromancer*. The most important implications of the mention of the flight over Leningrad refer not so much to the plot, but rather to the status of the represented world – a world deprived of balance. In both cases, a pessimistic vision of the future is revealed within the space of the megacity.

In the initial sequence of *Escape from New York* we see the night panorama of a metropolis, which would normally be shining with lights – however, in the film it is dark, with a faint, cold, death-like glow. A police helicopter is patrolling the area against such a background. According to Andrzej Kołodyński, the landscape of this city-prison is revealed gradually, mostly via the protagonist⁶, although not always from an objective perspective. The narration here often has an objective character: especially in the first half of the film, the camera frequently follows Snake from some distance, showing his actions in a behavioristic way, as he is moving through the littered, devastated metropolis. Weird and dangerous individuals, some resembling punks, others more like ragged, wild barbarians, lurk in the shadows. The using of rather dim lighting gives the night scenery an atmosphere of alienation and danger, reinforced through the soundtrack based on cool, synthesized sounds.

Perhaps this vision of New York had an influence on how Gibson described Night City – a zone populated mostly by outcasts, rebels belonging to a subculture, as well as dangerous criminals, such as Yakuza members:

[Now he [Case] slept in the cheapest coffins, the ones nearest the port, beneath the quartz-halogen floods that lit the docks all night like vast stages; where you couldn’t see the lights of Tokyo for the glare of the television sky, not even the towering hologram logo of the Fuji Electric Company, and Tokyo Bay was a black expanse where gulls wheeled above drifting shoals of white styrofoam. Behind the port lay the city, factory domes dominated by the vast cubes of corporate arcologies. Port and city were divided by a narrow borderland of older streets, an area with no official name. Night City, with Ninsei its heart. By day, the bars down Ninsei were shuttered and featureless, the neon dead, the holograms inert, waiting, under the poisoned silver sky⁷.

⁴ McCaffery.

⁵ William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, translated into Polish by Piotr W. Cholewa (Warszawa: Zysk i S-ka, 1996), 5 [all quoted passages are taken from the original, English version]

⁶ Andrzej Kołodyński, *Dziedzictwo wyobraźni. Historia filmu SF [A legacy of imagination. History of SF film]* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa „Alfa”, 1989), 82.

⁷ Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 7.

Carpenter's film grab's one's attention with the way it operates the contrast between light and shadow, and in Gibson – descriptions accentuating the role of light and its sources in the creation of the picture of the urbanized space. In both cases, light separates the decomposing skyline from the darkness, with one difference: in *Escape from New York* this skyline takes the form of a conventional, intentionally exaggerated fantasy, which belongs to the aesthetics of the early 1980s post-Apocalyptic trend – like the urban equivalent of the desert scenery of George Miller's *Mad Max 2* (1981).

The skyline of Gibson's megalopolis also mirrors the condition of a post-apocalyptic world (or perhaps a world during an apocalypse), but it is about a situation understood in the post-modern context, about hyperreality based on *simulacras* and simulation replacing traditionally understood reality. Each of Gibson's huge metropolises is a desolation deprived of what is real⁸ (if we use Jeana Baudrillard's theories, of which Gibson was supposedly unaware, at least while working on *Neuromancer*⁹).

Agnieszka Ćwikiel has stated that in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) the theme of the film is not the apocalypse of the real world – instead, an important change takes place in front of our eyes, for we are dealing with the apocalypse of the image¹⁰:

Copying and imitating, i.e. the role and functioning of an image, are central problems for Scott. Initially, right after the panorama of the imagined 2019 Los Angeles, the screen is filled with a huge, motionless eye, mirroring a world of complete destruction. This obsession and need to see is constantly reinforced by the juxtaposition of the eye with a photograph, video screens, shop windows, mirrors, electronic monitors. The real world is replaced with a simulated image, and man can be replaced with his perfect copy, surpassing the original¹¹.

In *Blade Runner* audiovisual media messages become part of the futuristic architectural landscape thanks to large screens that take up entire walls of gargantuan skyscrapers – the face of a young geisha advertising some medical product is the leitmotif of the film. Because of its simulation-like character, this moving picture seems to be mirroring the nature of the represented world in the film, illustrating Baudrillard's thesis that simulation treats the whole show like one big *simulacrum*¹².

Artificially generated pictures, often of some media provenance (such as the “towering hologram logo of the Fuji Electronic Company”) which in a way “consume” this literary equivalent of the space of a frame, i.e. the already quoted description of Night City. The opening line: “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel”, is of key im-

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and simulation”, translated into Polish by Tadeusz Komendant, in *Postmodernizm. Antologia przekładów* [Postmodernism. An anthology of translations], edited by R. Nycz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Baran i Suszczyński, 1998), 176.

⁹ Doug Walker, “Doug Walker Interviews Science Fiction Author William Gibson”, *Impulse*, 15.1. (1988): 38.

¹⁰ Agnieszka Ćwikiel, “Wessani w cyberprzestrzeń” [Sucked into cyberspace], *Film*, No 1 (2000): 116. The screenplay of *Blade runner* was based on the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by Philip K. Dick, who is considered to be one of the precursors of cyberpunk.

¹¹ Ćwikiel.

¹² Baudrillard, “Precesja symulakrów”, 181.

portance here, for it indicates the extent to which Gibson's universe has been dominated by the electronically reproduced visuality, which in a way permeates reality understood in the material sense, swallowing everything, including people. This process is perfectly illustrated by a scene in which Case meets his old love, Linda Lee, in an arcade:

Under bright ghosts burning through a blue haze of cigarette smoke, holograms of Wizard's Castle, Tank War Europa, the New York skyline... And now he remembered her that way, her face bathed in restless laser light, features reduced to a code: her cheekbones flaring scarlet as Wizard's Castle burned, forehead drenched with azure when Munich fell to the Tank War, mouth touched with hot gold as a gliding cursor struck sparks from the wall of a skyscraper canyon¹³.

Out of all the narrative arts, cinema probably remains the most adequate for talking about the culture of the image, which has dominated new media in the postmodern era. There is a strong relation between Gibson's literary and Scott's film vision, which begs the question of whether the writer was in fact inspired by *Blade Runner*. Gibson was afraid of such "accusations", when – thirty minutes into the film – he realized that what he sees on the screen is to a large extent identical with his own idea (he claimed that at the time of the film's premiere, he had already written a substantial part of *Neuromancer*)¹⁴. Perhaps in this case the aesthetic and topical similarity resulted from common artistic inspirations: suggestive artistic images of megacities from the science fiction comic books published in the French "Métal Hurlant" magazine and its American version, "Heavy Metal" (especially *The Long Tomorrow* [1976], by the team of screenwriter Dan O'Bannon and artist Moebius [Jean Giraud])¹⁵. Gibson actually stressed that those picture stories were an especially "cinematic" source of inspiration for him¹⁶, at the same time indicating the specific parafilm character of comic books as sequences of "frames", separated from one another according to a rule akin to that guiding how pieces of film tape are edited, so that together they can create a narrative based on a screenplay.

The influence of film on Gibson understood in such a way, mediated via the art of comic books (related to film, in a sense) resulted both in the static "panoramas" of metropolises, and in cinematized descriptions of protagonists' actions in that environment. In the reception of the book such scenes can be "visualized" in the form of images of a purely cinematic character. If we were to translate the following passage into the language of film, the length of each film shot would reflect one sentence, and the full stop would reflect a montage cut:

¹³Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 8.

¹⁴William Gibson, "Oh Well, While I'm Here", https://web.archive.org/web/20070926221513/http://www.williamgibsonbooks.com/blog/2003_01_01_archive.asp#90199532 [date of access: 14.01.2021].

¹⁵Colin Marshall, "The Long Tomorrow. Discover Moebius' Hard-Boiled Detective Comic that Inspired *Blade Runner*", <https://www.openculture.com/2018/09/long-tomorrow-discover-moebius-hard-boiled-detective-comic-inspired-blade-runner-1975.html>; see also: Gibson, „Oh Well...”.

¹⁶Walker, "Doug Walker Interviews Science Fiction Author William Gibson", 37. The aesthetic and topical relations between *Neuromancer* with the "technicized-mystical" Japanese comic books, especially *Akira* (1982-1990) by Katsuhira Otomo (the author also realized its *anime* film adaptation under the same title in 1988). See Adam Mazurkiewicz, *Z problematyki cyberpunku. Literatura – sztuka – kultura* [Cyberpunk issues. Literature – art – culture (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2014), 191-193. It should also be noted that the first two instalments of the cycle were released two years before Gibson's novel was published, showing a similar vision of the Far East big city agglomeration.

He bolted across Ninsei, scattering a pack of strolling sailors. One of them screamed after him in Spanish. Then he was through the entrance, the sound crashing over him like surf, subsonics throbbing in the pit of his stomach. Someone scored a ten-megaton hit on Tank War Europa, a simulated air burst drowning the arcade in white sound as a lurid hologram fireball mushroomed overhead. He cut to the right and loped up a flight of unpainted chip board stairs. He'd come here once with Wage, to discuss a deal in proscribed hormonal triggers with a man called Matsuga. He remembered the hallway, its stained matting, the row of identical doors leading to tiny office cubicles. One door was open now. A Japanese girl in a sleeveless black t-shirt glanced up from a white terminal, behind her head a travel poster of Greece, Aegian blue splashed with streamlined ideograms¹⁷.

This passage is characterized by a similar kind of “cinematicity” to the series of “frames” in the already mentioned comic books by O'Bannon and Moebius, in a slightly parodic way referring to the poetics of film *noir*¹⁸. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) by John Huston, an adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's novel of the same title (1930), should be considered one of the first artistically perfect manifestations of that tendency in cinema.

Gibson listed *noir* crime stories by Hammett among the books he had read in his youth that impressed him greatly – in the case of Hammett, he was especially intrigued by his specific method of describing the represented world in a way similar to the traditions of the American naturalism, and at the same time honed and intensified to such an extent that as a result even common elements of the described environment gained a genuinely surreal character. In one place Gibson referred to one of the opening scenes of *The Maltese Falcon*, probably the most famous novel by Hammett¹⁹:

The tappity-tap-tap and the thin bell and muffled whir of Effie Perine's typewriting came through the closed door. Somewhere in a neighboring office a power-driven machine vibrated dully. On Spade's desk a limp cigarette smoldered in a brass tray filled with the remains of limp cigarettes. Ragged grey flakes of cigarette-ash dotted the yellow top of the desk and the green blotter and the papers that were there. A buff-curtained window, eight or ten inches open, let in from the court a current of air faintly scented with ammonia. The ashes on the desk twitched and crawled in the current.

Miss Wonderly watched the grey flakes twitch and crawl. Her eyes were uneasy. She sat on the very edge of the chair. Her feet were flat on the floor, as if she were about to rise. Her hands in dark gloves clasped a flat dark handbag in her lap.

Spade rocked back in his chair and asked: “Now what can I do for you, Miss Wonderly?”²⁰

¹⁷Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 17.

¹⁸Mazurkiewicz, *Z problematyki cyberpunku. Literatura – sztuka – kultura*, 273.

¹⁹McCaffery, „An Interview with William Gibson”: 221.

²⁰Dashiell Hammett, *Sokół maltański*, tłum. Waclaw Niepokólczycki (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo “Iskry”, 1988), 6-7.

Hammett here achieves an effect typical of the “cinematic” visuality of his descriptions, which he constructs from simple, concise, typically rather short sentences in an unusually precise way, put together like a sequence of shots registered on a tape, and then edited into a meaningful whole. As observed by Marco Bellardi, the narrator concludes a “paracinematic narrative contract with the reader”, as a result of which the reader is in a sense obliged to visualize not only the characteristics, gestures, behaviors, or appearance of the protagonists, but also all of their actions within the scenery, which is presented through the prism of significant details, objects, colors or decorations rather than precise, elaborate descriptions²¹.

Deriving inspiration from Hammett, Gibson stressed the superspecificity of his language. He also pointed to the fact that this is what is missing from descriptions in popular science fiction literature, the majority of which limit themselves to simplifications and generalizations – for example, when a protagonist lands on some distant planet, completely different from Earth, his account of the new land would resemble a sentence like “I looked out the window and saw the air plant”). The author does not seem to care that the reader has no idea what the plant looks like or what it actually is. Thanks to Hammett, Gibson discovered that even in popular literature it is possible to write differently²². For instance in the description characterizing Molly, the most important female character in *Neuromancer*, whose appearance inspires associations with characters from *The Maltese Falcon*, such as detective Sam Spade and *femme fatale* Miss Wonderly, as if she was a futuristic hybrid of characters archetypically associated with *noir* aesthetics:

He realized that the glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag. The fingers curled around the fletcher were slender, white, tipped with polished burgundy. The nails looked artificial.

[...]

She wore tight black glove leather jeans and a bulky black jacket cut from some matte fabric that seemed to absorb light.

“If I put this dart gun away, will you be easy, Case? You look like you like to take stupid chances.”

“Hey, I’m very easy. I’m a pushover, no problem.”

“That’s fine, man.” The fletcher vanished into the black jacket.

“Because you try to fuck around with me, you’ll be taking one of the stupidest chances of your whole life.”

She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails. She smiled. The blades slowly withdrew²³.

²¹Marco Bellardi, *The Cinematic Mode in Twentieth-Century Fiction. A Comparative Approach*, (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2017), 164.

²²McCaffery, “An Interview with William Gibson”: 221.

²³Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 24.

The Maltese Falcon is sometimes classified as so-called *cinematic fiction*²⁴, although it is hard to say to what extent the author was actually inspired by the cinema (although we do know that he was a fan of contemporary cinema, and later often worked with Hollywood screenwriters). However, it is undeniable that in terms of style and narration his novel displays a strong relationship with the techniques and means of expression that film had at its disposal already in the late 1920s and early 1930s. At the same time, Gibson anticipated the birth of *noir* poetics, which dominated American cinematography in the 1940s and 1950s, only to return in a “revitalized” form as *neo noir*, sometimes combined with science fiction as *tech noir*²⁵ in the 1980s. This latter tendency can also be seen in *Escape from New York*, and especially in *Blade Runner*, where the expressionist poetics of monochrome pictures, characteristic of *film noir*, was translated into the equally cold shades of blue, juxtaposed with a colorful effusion of neons. The specific visual side of Gibson’s prose reveals a deep relationship between literary cyberpunk and the film style of *tech noir*, for instance in the description of the Jarre de Thé teahouse, “walled with mirrors, each panel framed in red neon”²⁶.

The protagonist wants to escape from the overwhelming big city space and set himself free from the weight of his own body, which he sees only as “meat”, lives only for “the bodiless exultation of cyberspace”²⁷, where “lines of light” run though “ranged in the nonspace. Like city lights, receding...”²⁸. For him this “consensual hallucination” seems like an “unthinkable complexity”²⁹, although in descriptions it becomes more concrete mostly in the form of clear graphic equivalents of the urban topography:

A gray disk, the color of Chiba sky was] beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray. Expanding – And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distance less home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach³⁰.

While reading Gibson’s novel (especially years after it was first published) it is hard not to have an impression that the iconography of the virtual reality that he presented in a way sums up previous imaginings regarding potential technical possibilities of creating worlds that would be an alternative to the “mundane” earthly life. His vision brings associations with the “neon” animations in *TRON* by (1982) Steven Lisberger, about a programmer put

²⁴This expression functions in reference to a certain category of works of literature, whose authors to a lesser or greater extent try to use techniques and means of expression characteristic for the cinema, looking for the equivalents of the film language in the written language.

²⁵The term *tech noir* derives from the name of a night club bathed in an effusion of neon lights, where the titular cyborg (Arnold Schwarzenegger) from James Cameron’s *The Terminator* (1984) tries to kill Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton), the mother of the future leader of a rebellion against machines exterminating humanity.

²⁶W. Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 7.

²⁷Gibson, 6.

²⁸Gibson, 46.

²⁹Gibson.

³⁰Gibson.

inside a computer, as well as with the psychedelic visualizations of the functioning of the AI in *Demon Seed* (1977) by Donald Cammell, and electronically-generated models of 3D objects in *Escape from New York*.

The association between cyberspace and the film medium was actually suggested by the author – at the beginning of one of his virtual trips, Case sees “hypnagonic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames”³¹. By connecting the computer network directly to his own brain, he becomes a “modernized” equivalent of a viewer, who in the darkness of a screening room detaches themselves from the simply understood reality in order to delve in the space of the film dream.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

³¹Gibson.

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

Neuromancer (1984) by William Gibson is considered the first novel representing cyberpunk, a sub-genre of science fiction literature. A vision of a world from some near future, modernized, and at the same time degraded by technology, has been reflected in numerous films. The importance of the role that the cinema itself played in the shaping of the aesthetics of the cyberpunk prose should also be remembered. The example of *Neuromancer* shows that this influence was not limited to inspirations with plots of such films as *Escape from New York* (1981) by John Carpenter, but that – most importantly – it manifested itself in the specifically “cinematic” visuality of Gibson’s literary language.

science fiction film

SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE

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