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CYBERPUNK CULTURE AND PSYCHOLOGY: SEEING THROUGH THE MIRRORSHADES (2021) BY ANNA MCFARLANE

Review by Esko Suoranta

McFarlane, Anna. *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology: Seeing Through the Mirrorshades.* **Routledge, 2021, 168 pp.**

Having reviewed several scholarly works that tackle, more or less, William Gibson's full oeuvre, let me begin by saying that Anna McFarlane's recent volume *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology: Seeing Through the Mirrorshades* (2021) is a stellar accomplishment in studies on the 'godfather' of Cyberpunk. The book emerges from McFarlane's PhD work and her continued engagement with Gibson, building toward understanding his writing, as well as cyberpunk culture more generally, as connecting visual culture and the posthuman via a gestalt approach. In so doing, McFarlane argues for a project of gestalt literary criticism as a way of understanding the tensions inherent in Gibson's fiction and Cyberpunk at large. For McFarlane, gestalt literary criticism represents "the nature of science fiction and cyberpunk as interface literatures, literatures which bridge the gap between the arts and the sciences, between the human and the non-human," coexisting facets emerging when appraised from a gestalt perspective that does not privilege one over the other (6).

Dealing mostly with Gibson's novels, with some reference to his short stories and other contributions to Science Fiction since the early 1980s, McFarlane addresses all of Gibson's solo-authored major works to date, up to and including his most recent novel *Agency* (2020). Her gestalt psychology approach to reading Gibson charts and explains central trajectories and developments through his career, such as the author's shift from the original imaginings of cyberspace that privileged the visual to his current interest in the haptic, which are convincingly laid out. Through McFarlane's account, motifs of touching and being touched upon by systems that influence our experience of the world are revealed to be central to Gibson's contemporary speculative futures.

One of the strengths that sets the book apart from some earlier forays into covering Gibson's career is McFarlane's choice of emphasis. In seven chapters and an introduction, she goes through Gibson's novels in traditional, chronological order, but dedicates only a collective chapter to both the three Sprawl novels (1984-1988) and the Bridge trilogy (1993-1999). In contrast, the novels of the Blue Ant, or Bigend, trilogy (2003-2010) are each treated in their own chapters, as are Gibson's latest two novels *The Peripheral* (2014) and *Agency*. This move sidesteps the canonicity bias which is often evident in contemporary Gibson studies. *Neuromancer* particularly keeps hogging much of the critical attention as the foundational Cyberpunk text while less in-depth analysis is reserved for

Gibson's later works. McFarlane is thus one of the few Science Fiction scholars to have engaged with the Blue Ant trilogy in its entirety and at any depth since its completion in 2010, which is especially laudable as several volumes on Gibson have been published since then – Henthorne (2011), Westfahl (2013), Miller (2016), and Murray and Nilges (2020) come readily to mind. Furthermore, one must emphasise that McFarlane is one of the first to offer an extended critical account of *Agency*, even dealing carefully with the novel's shortcomings. Highlights include McFarlane's reading of the novel's conclusion – and whether it should be read fully in earnest – as well as its representation of race and artificial intelligence.

Each chapter approaches its primary subject matter through a different concept which provides mileage for McFarlane's critical interpretations. By drawing from autopoiesis and chaos in early Gibson to psychoanalysis, the parallax view, and the haptic in his later works, McFarlane argues for a gestalt understanding of both the author and Cyberpunk in general. By seeing the different ways in which Gibson's works engender gestalt shifts for his readers, and how different interpretations become available through such perspectival changes, McFarlane centres the role of different modes of perception in Gibson's works. For example, while thought experiments on enhanced and extended perception remain central throughout his novels, the inescapable visuality of the Sprawl trilogy transforms into a focused treatment of haptics, the dimension of touch, by *The Peripheral*.

As I hope my admiration for McFarlane's work, and the pleasure I derived from reading *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology*, is now established, there is a two-pronged criticism I wish still to mount in this review. The first prong touches upon the title of the book which, to me, is somewhat misleading as both "gestalt" and "Gibson" could have warranted a place in the title (my guess being that the publisher might have had their hand in the final choice). Even when McFarlane connects her approach, and the project for gestalt literary studies, to cyberpunk at large this is still very much a book in Gibson studies. The tight focus of the chapters plays into this effect, and even if there are some comparative readings between, for example, Henry James and Gibson, the connections to the overall phenomena of Cyberpunk remain somewhat limited, mostly gestured at in the introduction and the concluding sub-chapter. It might be that the volume would have benefited from one more chapter for a more in-depth conclusion, especially as it is in no way too long. Furthermore, the choice of the stock Cyberpunk figure of mirrorshades and the metaphor of seeing through them also works against the ethos of the book. One of McFarlane's central points is the embodied nature of perception and the multisensory ventures evident in Gibson's writing. Therefore, in a sense, the title of the book both casts its scope too wide and unnecessarily narrows it at the same time.

The second prong of my criticism picks on the different conceptual frameworks McFarlane mounts to motivate her analysis of Gibson's novels. To offer full disclosure, my biased assumption is that an approach grounded in, for example, cognitive narratology or N. Katherine Hayles' recent accounts of cognitive assembling could have offered an alternative, and at times more contemporary, theoretical base for much of the readings. It is, of course, possible to disagree fruitfully on this, and it would be unfair of me to assume that my preferred theoretical background

would have been readily available for another scholar. That said, however, the concept of autopoesis deserves scrutiny as McFarlane's handles it. She sees autopoesis, or the self-generative impulse of organisms, as a concept that reveals interesting dynamics especially in Gibson's Sprawl trilogy, but also beyond. For example, the megacorporations and artificial intelligences (AI) populating the novels are seen to make themselves into being in an autopoetic fashion. In her treatment of the concept, McFarlane disregards the second condition inherent to autopoesis: that in addition to self-production by taking advantage of their environments, organisms must also realise self-distinction, that is, to resist dissolving into those same environments, maintaining boundaries against them. In so doing, McFarlane misses out on further insight into the Sprawl trilogy and some connections to Gibson's work overall. One might argue, for example, that while the corporations and AI engage in autopoetic processes to define themselves, they approach the threat of dissolution into the systems in which they are embedded very differently. In the case of the megacorporations, they maintain corporate identities marked by branding, distinguishing themselves from other similar beings and guard their integrity through elaborate legal and business arrangements. For the AI, the response is even more interesting, as Neuromancer and Wintermute ultimately give in to the drive to become one with their environment: they join together and become one with the totality of cyberspace, inseparable and unperceivable from the environment they previously roamed as individual entities – they relinquish autopoesis altogether. As McFarlane also conducts character-analysis through the concept of autopoesis, the struggles of Gibson's characters in capitalist environments bent on the dissolution of agency and difference could have been further illuminated through explicitly discussing the self-distinction condition of autopoesis throughout the volume.

Still, the strengths of McFarlane's argument especially come to the fore when she shows the robustness of her approaches, has them resonate with the work of other critics, and as she builds on the work of others who have studied Gibson. I, for one and from a very different theoretical standpoint, have made similar arguments to McFarlane's on how Gibson's characters cannot escape the systems that constitute and exploit them, but seek agency within them nonetheless. McFarlane also skilfully and concisely develops the findings of Jaak Tomberg and Neil Easterbrook, on Gibson's style registering simultaneously as science-fictional and realist as well as the seeming struggles he has in concluding his novels and trilogies, respectively.

As such, *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology* is a much-needed addition to the ongoing interrogation of Gibson as a still-publishing author whose career spans five decades. It is recommended reading both to seasoned Science Fiction studies veterans and Gibson aficionados, but also to students beginning their explorations of the author's work. McFarlane writes in a very approachable academic style and excels at critical reading that strikes a balance between attention to detail and overarching themes and conceptualisations. While it does not address Gibson's contributions to other Cyberpunk culture media (which other collections have engaged with, at least to an extent), as a study into his literary significance, style, ethos, and even shortcomings the volume promises to become a founding stone for future endeavours into his work. From McFarlane's study, Gibson emerges as both a canonical author of Cyberpunk fiction as well as a writer refining the field of science-fictional contemporary literature.

BIONOTE

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