

Chapter 5 — Conclusion: The Failed Fantasy of *The Difference Engine*

Overall, what Gibson and Sterling (1991) are trying to do in *The Difference Engine* is reconcile their personal ambivalence toward technology with the techophilia that permeated the Cyberpunk rhetorical vision. During the rise of the Cyberpunk vision, the overarching tincture of technophilia that permeated the culture was tempered by (1) the Promethean orientation toward technology embodied by the cultural fantasy of "the street finding its own uses for things," and (2) the cultural blindness that new technologies often bring, where the positive aspects of the new technology are emphasized and the negative, if present at all, are de-emphasized in an effort to disseminate the technology through the culture. But by 1991, those negative aspects, such as they are, were beginning to show, and the Cyberpunk culture's rhetorical vision was coming into conflict with the technology it was so intimately bound to.

Anti-technological critiques form the greatest part of the criticism found in *The Difference Engine*. Both of the main exigencies in the text – the Stink and the Modus – are anti-technological. The first concerns the "collateral damage" that new technology often brings. Gibson and Sterling devote many pages to the effects of the Stink; not only to the environmental effects which are prodigious, but to the cultural effects as well. Rioting, looting, murder and rapine – all occur within hours after the Stink settles over London. Gibson and Sterling are issuing a warning here to the Cyberpunk culture: there are no absolute goods where tech-

nology is concerned. Every new technology has its price, its side-effect.

But, if the Stink warns of the side-effects of new technology, and the blindness to then that the authors believed pervaded the Cyberpunk vision, then the Modus represented the end-effects of technology. Technological velocity, as represented by the Modus, is another warning to the Cyberpunk culture: the technology you are tied to will make aspects of the culture superfluous. This ties in, but expands upon the idea of technology's collateral damage on cultures. Themes of self- and cultural-sacrifice exemplify this in the text. Sam Houston considers Texas savage because it has no Engines; a new generation of Japanese sacrifice their language to become, like Gibson and Sterling's fictional England, highly technological. It is these things, Gibson and Sterling (1991) seem to be saying, that make up a culture; sacrificing them to incorporate technology is, in effect, sacrificing the essence of the culture itself.

This self-sacrificial tendency is especially damaging, in Gibson and Sterling's view, to the Cyberpunk culture. Remember: the Cyberpunk culture was essentially a *literary* culture. It is tied, by this textual basis, to an if not anti-technological root, then at least in part to an atehnological one. Gibson and Sterling rightly saw this sacrificial aspect of the technological Cyberpunk rhetorical vision as culturally suicidal. Eventually, the Cyberpunk vision would sacrifice its literary for a technological base, and that, Gibson and Sterling are saying, would destroy the Cyberpunk culture. Without the tempering of Art, they seem to suggest, the Science must dominate.

In addition, the Cyberpunk culture's rhetorical foundation was not in the future, but in the past. Cyberpunk itself was a syncretic and, in

many ways, recursive subgenre of science fiction. Steampunk is even more so. Gibson and Sterling (1991) are seeking also to reaffirm the Cyberpunk vision's connection with the past in *The Difference Engine*. Steampunk setting aside, Gibson and Sterling emphasize the fragility of history in a technological society. Keats becomes a kino clacker; Ada Byron becomes Queen of Engines. In Gibson and Sterling's Britain, the past is alterable. The culture is disconnected from it, and only barely connected to the present, as shown by the swiftness with which the denizens of London – indeed, Mallory himself – descend into barbarity. When Wakefield charges the Cyberpunk Oliphant with altering the past, Gibson and Sterling are charging the Cyberpunk vision with the same crimes. “Don’t take that moral tone with me, sir,” Wakefield said. “Your lot began it, Oliphant — the disappearances, the files gone missing, the names expunged, numbers lost, histories edited to suit specific ends . . . No, don’t take that tone with me.” Oliphant could think of nothing to say. He rose, leaving the pistol on the table-cloth, and left the grill-room without looking back (p. 380). Technology, Gibson and Sterling are saying, have made the past alterable, and an alterable past leaves no footholds for a culture. That Oliphant's "street" has found uses for "things" makes him Cyberpunk; but when Wakefield charges that Oliphant has obliterated the past, the Cyberpunk has no defense.

But perhaps the pointed critique leveled at the Cyberpunk rhetorical vision by Gibson and Sterling (1991) is unspoken and undescribed. But when one takes the novel in its cultural and literary context, it becomes clearer. What Gibson and Sterling are showing in *The Difference Engine* is the Cyberpunk culture *in power*. It is in viewing the Cy-

berpunk vision as a superordinate rhetorical vision where the criticisms of Cyberpunk made by Gibson and Sterling take on their true meaning.

Sterling (1988) has always claimed that the Cyberpunks were a countercultural literary movement, a movement he compared to the counterculture of the 1960s, but without the anti-technologist contradiction Sterling says was present two decades past. "The counterculture of the 1960s was rural, romanticized, anti-science, anti-tech. But there was always a lurking contradiction at its heart, symbolized by the electric guitar. Rock technology was the thin edge of the wedge" (p. xii). Sterling claimed that Cyberpunk was the integration of counterculture and technology, and the end of the contradiction.

Although Sterling's point may be debated, it is true that once any counterculture becomes superordinate, the implosion process described by Bormann (1972, 1996) takes place within the rhetorical vision of the counterculture with greater velocity. The example of the counterculture in the 1960s holds true here: once the forces that led the 1960s movement came into power, the rhetorical vision of the movement itself began to change. Consciousness-raising activities — impromptu "sit-ins," protests, large mass music concerts — soon gave way to consciousness sustaining activities, designed to ". . . pump new life into the rhetorical vision" (Bormann, 1996, p. 8). Active recruitment of new members and clustering in places mythologized by the vision (e.g., the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco) characterize this period in the life of a vision.

Eventually, the 1960s counterculture became the superordinate culture, if only by virtue of age and attrition. Like the Cyberpunks, the

1960s counterculture prized youth anti-authoritarianism, and an end to the various forms of cultural domination of the then-superordinate culture. But, as the culture aged, the fantasy types through which the culture built its rhetorical vision — “Never trust anyone over 30,” “End the war in Vietnam,” “Tune in, turn on, drop out” — became ineffective fantasies. The culture reached 30, the war in Vietnam ended, and parenthood, careers and other responsibilities prohibited “dropping out.”

By 1991, this was beginning to occur in the Cyberpunk culture and, if perhaps Gibson and Sterling were unable to describe the consequences in Bormann’s terms, they were able to comment. Cyberpunk was becoming “superordinate,” in a sense. On one hand, the same dilemmas that befell the 1960s counterculture were occurring within the Cyberpunk culture, and at a much faster rate. The culture was aging, and getting caught up in the cultural elements of aging, like added familial and financial responsibilities. Similarly, members of the Cyberpunk culture, with the increasing importance that was being placed on computer and technological expertise, found themselves in positions of power and authority. Power and authority, like parenthood, have responsibilities attached to it as well. It is easy for a culture to be anti-authoritarian when its members are disenfranchised; it is quite another to do so when its members enjoy wealth, prestige and power. In addition, the Cyberpunk vision, unlike that of the 1960s, prized novelty — newness and change. The Cyberpunk culture prided itself on being on the cutting edge of technology, and exhibited disdain for those cultures that reacted badly to the constant change that was occurring throughout Western society. This exacerbated the “aging” effects that were taking place

within the culture.

At the time *The Difference Engine* was written, the Cyberpunk rhetorical vision was already engaged in consciousness-sustaining activities. “Hacker conventions,” on-line newsgroups and websites devoted to Cyberpunk, “Cyberpunk” role-playing games and an increasing level of publicity for Cyberpunk pursuits were taking place. At the same time, increasingly cheap, available and easy-to-use computer technology was enabling larger numbers of Cyberpunk devotees to “join” the culture, which decreased the counterculture cachet that Cyberpunk previously enjoyed. It was, as Gibson pointed out, a time of “. . . Cyberpunk trousers.”

Gibson and Sterling realized this, and *The Difference Engine* was written with these warnings. The Rad Lords were representative of the Cyberpunk rhetorical vision, evolved over time, put in power. The results were the Stink and the Modus — on one side, cultural as well as environmental pollution, the breakdown of cultural mores and rules, and eventual moral decay. On the other, the dehumanization of culture in favor of technological progress. Eventually, claim Gibson and Sterling, the technology itself becomes the impetus and the result of cultural activity. The Modus, in 1991, has taken control of a London where the people “. . . are borrowed masks, and lenses for a peering Eye” (Gibson & Sterling, 1991, p. 428). Gibson and Sterling knew that Cyberpunk as a functioning rhetorical vision was doomed by the nature of its own fantasies. Its mythology prohibited lasting cultural stability. So, Gibson and Sterling attempted to alter the fantasies by showing what a Cyberpunk culture might become. And, in doing so, perhaps give new life to

the vision.

In the end, *The Difference Engine* was in many ways a failure. It was a literary failure – of Gibson and Sterling’s combined works, *The Difference Engine* is widely acknowledged as the least selling, least popular work. (Killheffer, 1992, Forman, 1993, Wenger, 1996) It was a categorical failure – although drawing attention to the Steampunk genre, it sat uneasily in it; too Cyberpunk, in many ways, to be considered true Steampunk, yet far different from any Cyberpunk novel.

It was a cultural failure, as well. *The Difference Engine* was published at the peak of popularity of Cyberpunk culture, a culture that began to change and die off even as the novel was arrived as a Cyberpunk text. The Cyberpunk culture fed on its own newness, its novelty – what culture that prizes novelty can survive for long? The *ethos* of the culture prevented it from lasting; by 1991, the Cyberpunk culture had generated popular enthusiasm for six years. The downward slide had begun; *The Difference Engine* served as a signpost for the transmogrification of Cyberpunk into . . . something else. Brooks Landon (1992) claimed that Cyberpunk was finished as a culture the year after *The Difference Engine* was published: “What integrity can Cyberpunk fiction possibly have in a Cyberpunk world?” (p. 40).

And, finally, *The Difference Engine* was a rhetorical failure. Gibson and Sterling were, literally, the progenitors of the Cyberpunk culture’s rhetorical vision; they constructed it, using elements of the traditional science fiction cultures, popular cultures, Punk culture, *film noir*, and a number of others. Close as they were to that rhetorical vision, Gibson and Sterling saw that it did not reflect their own beliefs; the reality

negotiated from the Cyberpunk fantasies was not their reality. They sought to change that, to change the Cyberpunk rhetorical vision in such a manner as to update it, bring it more into line with their own beliefs – retrofit the rhetorical vision for a 1990s milieu.

The failure of the retrofitted rhetorical vision was, I believe, two-fold; by 1991, many of those who considered themselves at one time to be Cyberpunks were abandoning the culture. Gibson's novels, though still highly stylistic, were becoming repetitive. Sterling was backing away from fiction altogether, and his works were more journalism than Cyberpunk. The term "Cyberpunk" was losing its meaning, and being attached to more and more distinctly un-Cyberpunk things. The original Cyberpunk vision was a countercultural vision; when the counterculture becomes mainstream, it stops being counterculture. The novelty of a technically based literary culture was wearing off; they had Cyberpunks in Peoria. The Cyberpunk rhetorical vision had begun, by 1991, to implode.

It was these Cyberpunks, the Peoria Cyberpunks, that continued to bear the burden of the now-imploding Cyberpunk vision. They still exist today, subscribing to *Mondo 2600* and frequenting the now-moderated "Hacker" chatrooms on America Online. They are not a counterculture, nor are they Cyberpunks. They were not to whom *The Difference Engine* rhetorical vision was aimed at, but they are who received it. Here is the second part of the failure of the altered rhetorical vision — Gibson and Sterling, separated as they were from the culture whose vision they created, had not realized that the culture they were trying to change had already changed itself; the Cyberpunks that they believed

made up their audience were not who bought their novels. The original Cyberpunks had seen the direction of the culture and left, their places taken by neophytes who, just introduced to the Cyberpunk texts, devoured them and clamored for a validation of the vision they had so recently found. *The Difference Engine* arrived, written by the twin progenitors of Cyberpunk. Here would be the reaffirmation of the Cyberpunk vision; here would be the most Cyberpunk novel ever written.

But *The Difference Engine* was not a Cyberpunk novel. It contained some elements of the original Cyberpunk rhetorical vision; it contained some criticism of that vision as well. It had computers and technology and Cyberpunk characters and some of the trappings that made the Cyberpunk genre so popular. But the critiques it levelled against the rhetorical vision, while valid, contained no solutions. That was Oliphant's Dilemma: Cyberpunk was, as a rhetorical vision, declining; it had become too technophilic, had begun making sacrifices to maintain its technological base. It had begun to alter its history, the same history it drew from to form the vision. The criticisms posed by Gibson and Sterling centered around a question: Who does the Cyberpunk serve? Oliphant believed the Cyberpunk served himself; Mallory believed the Cyberpunk served science. Swing, politics, Sybil, vengeance. In the end, none of these aspects of the Cyberpunk vision were validated, and the question remained unanswered.

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Bormann's (1972, 1973, 1982, 1996) and Cragan and Shields' (1992, 1996) strategy of fantasy theme analysis (now known as Symbolic Convergence Theory, or SCT) may not seem as particularly suited to literary

rhetorical acts as, say, Fisher's (1987) narrative style of analysis. But, as the case of *The Difference Engine* showed, literature may be analyzed effectively, and significant data found and explicated, using this technique.

One of the reasons I chose to use fantasy theme analysis to analyze Gibson and Sterling's rhetorical acts was that fantasy theme analysis is an excellent tool for determining the rhetorical aspects of *cultures*. Science fiction is in many ways singular as a literary genre in that, as Brooke-Rose (1981) and Broderick (1985) point out, it (1) has a culture grown up around it, a culture with a definable limits, traits and mores, (2) serves as a larger meta-text for later additions to its body of works, (3) is intimately bound to recent themes of technology and modernity, but remains connected to a literary and cultural past which is still active within the meta-text, and (4) is, as it matures as a serious literary endeavor, becoming more connected to mythological and fantastic themes and concepts. Other literary genres (e.g., the romance novel and the horror novel) are beginning as well to embody similar distinctions, and as elements and themes from these genres become more tied to myth and fantasy, the better fantasy theme analysis will serve the rhetorical critic as a tool for explicating these acts as they figure into cultural reality negotiations.

Similarly, a second reason I chose fantasy theme analysis was that Cyberpunk culture – the primary focus of my investigation – is, although unlike most modern cultures, based in a literary genre, it remained both a highly technological and mythological culture. I could examine the seminal texts in their pristine state, in the case of the Cy-

berpunk culture, as opposed to trying to delineate aspects of the culture's rhetorical vision from, as Bormann and Cragan and Shields are often required to, speech or group activities. The primordial cultural aspects of the culture, given the explicitly symbolic nature of textual as opposed to verbal or physical rhetoric, were available for study in this case, and in my opinion fantasy theme analysis was highly applicable.

It is my hope that fantasy theme analysis continue to be used for literary rhetorical analysis, especially with regard to the literary genres mentioned above. As cultures continue to use textual bases for growth, the efficacy of fantasy theme analysis will similarly continue to be an efficient and effective tool for analysis of these cultures' rhetorical acts.

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