societal development; 3) accelerating societal development; 4) describing changes in the direction of history; 5) introducing minor historical changes that really do not have great impact. Corbeil, like Alkon, also identifies a past and future type of uchronia. He defines pure uchronia ("*uchronie pure*", Corbeil, "L'uchronie", p.30) in a manner similar to a pure AH, including Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* and the ubiquitous *Man in the High Castle*. Future history is also uchronia for Corbeil since any narrative situated in the future necessarily addresses history, although authors acknowledge that link to varying degrees (pp. 31-32). He also names the parallel world and time travel forms as related to uchronia (pp. 29-30). The efforts of AH arbiters to limit the form become understandable, when we see that as we open the doors to a wider conception of uchronia it begins to seem we have opened a floodgate that might include all of sf.

55. Chamberlain, "Allohistory", p. 284.
56. See Brian Stableford, "A Note on Alternate History", *Extrapolation* 21.4 (1980), pp. 395-399 and Pinkerton "Backward Time Travel, Alternate Universes, and Edward Everett Hale", *Extrapolation* 20.2 (Summer, 1979), pp. 168-175 for discussions of these nineteenth-century works of proto-AH.
57. Eric S. Rabkin, "Genre Criticism: Science Fiction and the Fantastic", in Mark Rose, ed., *Science Fiction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), pp. 89-101, at p. 92.
58. Corbeil, "L'uchronie", p. 32
59. Canary, "Science Fiction as Fictive History", p. 81.
60. Malmgren, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 4-5
61. Malmgren, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 20-21.
62. Malmgren, *Worlds Apart*, p. 141.
63. A popularity attested by Amazon.com's declaration that October is "Alternate History Month" to market Del Rey's AH line, a three-article spread on AH in *American Heritage* in September 1999, VH-1's *The Two of Us*, an AH account of a reconciliation between John Lennon and Paul McCartney in 1976, as well as the recent Hollywood feature *Frequency*, which although perhaps not true AH does familiarise general movie audiences with the concept of altering the past.
64. Chamberlain, "Allohistory", pp. 284-85.
65. Gouanvic, in *imagine...* 14 (Fall 1982), pp. 7, 27.
66. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 27.
67. Saint-Gelais, *L'Empire du pseudo*, p. 43.
68. James, *Science Fiction*, p. 51.
69. A term which, as James explains, derives from the name of character John Barr in Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Time* (1938, rev. 1952) who, if he picks up alternately a stone or a magnet, can change the course of the universe (James, *Science Fiction*, p.113).
70. Chamberlain, "Allohistory", p. 284.
71. André Carpentier, "Aspects des genres littéraires appliqués à la science-fiction", in Michel Lord, Aurélien Boivin, Maurice Émond, eds., *Ailleurs imaginaires: Les rapports entre le fantastique et la science-fiction* (Québec: Nuit Blanche, 1993), pp. 15-37.
72. Cited by Carpentier, p. 15.
73. Several of these works are discussed at length by the present author for their political content in *Science-Fiction Studies* 27 (November 2000) and for their employment of AH techniques in *La Clepsydre* (forthcoming).

The Generative Edge

Robin Dunn

> But the dreams came on in the Japanese night like livewire voodoo, and he'd cry for it, cry in his sleep, and wake alone in the dark, curled in his capsule in some coffin hotel, his hands clawed into the bedslab, temperfoam bunched between his fingers, trying to reach the console that wasn't there (*Neuromancer*, p. 5).

Such is the predicament of Case, the rogue, self-destructive cyberspace cowboy of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*.

We can recognise him, perhaps. He looks a lot like us.

He is an indifferent man in a city of indifference, a mote in the mammoth Sprawl, the city stretching from Boston to Atlanta that it serves as the thematic and ideological heart of William Gibson's fictive cyberpunk universe.

There is a problem at work here. The Sprawl is full of symptoms of chaos, and readers are, to their delight and frustration, made intimate and willing partners in this chaos.

Chaos, as in: how can we tell what the universe of the Sprawl looks like when we don't even know many of the words of its characters? When Gibson uses neologisms to describe his dreamt universe, what presuppositions are involved?

Gibson must certainly have been aware of the linguistic quandaries such neologisms would create. Thus, in the spirit of Thomas Pynchon, Gibson infuses his neologisms with a mnemonic flair (witness the ubiquity of "cyberspace") and an ironic social awareness. Where Pynchon wrought underdwellers with caustic tongues caught in a meaningless world of snobs and mindless robots, Gibson makes underdwellers the cyberpunk social norm, bringing the paranoia and suspicion implicit in Pynchon to the surface. As Brian McHale notes,

> The presence of Pynchon's texts [...] is pervasive in cyberpunk fiction at all levels, from the minutest verbal details right up to the paranoid world-view and conspiracy theory of history characteristic of most cyberpunk fictional worlds.[1]

Gibson's neologistic allusions to Pynchon (for example, naming the global corporation Maas Biolabs after Pynchon's protagonist Oedipa Maas) acknowledge his creative debt to the man. But they also serve to infuse his narrative with a Pynchonesque ethos, where neologisms open like Chinese boxes, privy to numberless secrets within.

The Sprawl universe is full of such mysteries. To begin to unravel them, it will help to examine the implications of the neologistic worldview Gibson has created in the context of semiotics.

But first, let's take a quick look at Gibson's Sprawl universe, as a warm up:

Technology, in the many invasive forms it takes in the novels, is the catalyst for our understanding of the radically fragmented world Case inhabits. Nothing coheres there. Four primal categories of human reality – body, mind, world and self – become undone. Gibson's neologisms determine the way these categories collapse, reform, and change.

Cyberspace – the "consensual hallucination" that is Gibson's lurid and dreamlike evocation of an Internet-esque network of global data – reconstructs the mentality of Gibson's characters, especially the cowboy Case. For Case, cyberspace is a field of dreamlike dissolution, wavering mental abstraction, and drug-like intensity. Cyberspace consumes his thought. Consequently, the boundaries of his mind become blurry. As he skips across continents and topples corporate hierarchies while lying motionless in his bedroom, the physical reality of his body becomes irrelevant. It is reduced to so much meat, and is treated as such: sold, bartered, destroyed, reshaped and dissolved at will.

Simstim – the simulated stimulation of the body's nerves through artificial means as a vehicle for mass entertainment and, arguably, mass manipulation – attacks the coherence of the body. Tally Isham, a "simstim star" of the novel, has the ability to download every bodily sensation into the nerves of her fans. Millions of simstim users become addicted to Tally Isham's edited, enhanced experiences of reality, preferring her sensations to their own.

Microsofts – minute computer cards that can be slotted into the user's skull to provide encyclopedic knowledge – undermine the notion of gradually acquired human knowledge. When downloading replaces learning, personal achievement becomes a meaningless idea. Our idea of the self – so dependent upon gradual change and lifelong experience – metamorphoses into an iterable, packageable, interchangeable commodity. No one owns their selves.

And the features of the Sprawl world – Gibson's prose landscapes, from the dark sweaty alleys of the Sprawl to the orbital vistas of Freeside – reveals through neologisms like "bedslab" and "temperfoam" a universe unsettlingly strange and remote from our own.

Gibson's universe has few borders, fewer rules, and countless cybernetic enhancements. This unique universe is described using a unique, neologistic language. By looking at the language Gibson uses to describe the places and people of this world, we can begin to understand the fundamental structure of Sprawl society, as well interrogate our own reactions to it. My plan to do so is threefold.

First, I plan to examine Gibson's neologisms in the critical context of science fiction semiotics.

Second, I will introduce a concept I call the *generative edge* to explain certain liminal, category-challenging aspects of Gibson's fictive universe. As its name suggests, the generative edge concerns creation on the borderline: the dynamic force that surrounds and motivates both Gibson's unique approach to science fiction and readers' interactions with his complex texts.

Third, I will incorporate my own and others' interpretative models into a close examination of Gibson's neologisms in an attempt to answer the question of what makes Gibson's fictive universe unique. (The firmest answer is, simply put, his neologisms. They are more intriguing and more challenging than any other aspect of his narrative.)

Afterwards, I plan to explore how certain neologisms function as an aperture into a new and different world. I will examine how Gibson's cyberspace, microsofts, bedslabs and temperfoam speak to the complex relationship of writer to reader.

To contextualise Gibson's specialised language, I'd like to run through some of the major theoretical debates on sf language. In doing so, I want to emphasise the liminality and estrangement therein.

I emphasise sf's liminality because the reader, as he encounters the borderline of meaning in the sf text, must come to grips with specific sf protocols, or reasonings – he must struggle to interpret foreign data. That is, as we read the sf text, we encounter specific difficulties: words and phrases jump out as strange. Then when we ask "why is this strange?" our own social mores are positioned in stark relief, and we are impelled to interrogate both our own linguistic functions as a society and the "strange" linguistic functions of the fictive society. By learning this foreign tongue and using the neologisms of the sf text as its characters use them (or as we think they use them) we can access some of the more interesting parts of the sf narrative ethos.

I emphasise sf's estrangement because this borderline of meaning implies movement beyond normative boundaries, rhythms, cycles, customs and mental frameworks. This movement reiterates the cliché of "pushing of the envelope". We must struggle to see the implications sf writers' strategies, in order to discover just what new narrative and theoretical regions have been uncovered.

Darko Suvin, writing in 1974, situated sf as a literature of *cognitive estrangement* dependent upon a rational assessment of extrapolative thoughts and ideas. This estrangement stems from sf writers' introduction of "new technological, sociological, biological, even philosophical sets of norms ... [that estrange] the author's and the reader's own empirical environment".[2]

Here, the norms we expect from society are thrown back at us: we reassess our own normative boundaries because of the challenge of the sf text. Gibson puts forth his vision of cyberspace, and the reader is forced to ask: do we look like that? Do our cities and surfaces and technologies look like that?

Suvin insists this cognitive estrangement is grounded in an overriding historical sensibility – that the science fiction writer can never be divorced from his own time, and that the writer's work will always bear critical reference to his own time, whether he intends it to or not. No matter how fantastic or revolutionary the work, it can always be regarded as contemporary social commentary, because science-fiction is less a revolutionary new genre than a holdover from older narrative models. Sf, according to his theory, reiterates the past and present more than it posits possible futures.

Suvin later refined his theory, and, borrowing a term from Bertold Brecht, recapitulated it as the *novum*: "a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality ... by 'totalizing' I mean a novelty

entailing a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof".[3] Further, the novum allows for a "feedback oscillation" that moves from the real world to the fictive world and back again, in order to see the real world "afresh from the new perspective gained".[4] The real, present world is escaped, albeit briefly.

The novum provides us with a broader perspective on the sf text and its quandaries concerning reader reaction to novelty. If the sf text is a totalising phenomenon, how does the sf text tell us about its own totalising qualities? What key differences separate the reader's world from the fictive sf world? In texts like William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the neologistic framework totalises reader experience. The neologisms allow for a universe apart from our own to function according to its own rules, and they serve as a window for the reader into the peculiarities of this universe. When a reader encountered the word "cyberspace" for the first time in 1984, the word had no function outside the Sprawl, and hence it had to be deciphered according to Sprawl usage.

Teresa de Lauretis reveals another method for evaluating how the sf text tells us about itself, by building upon Suvin's construct. She writes that sf is dependent upon:

a partially structured movement in and out of the text, establishing temporary associations and provisional encounters of signs and meanings (sign-functions) which, by constantly shifting with the context, in the reading process, do not resolve in a totalization of meaning but in fact resist the strong pull toward narrative closure and disrupt the mechanisms of narrativity.[5]

What is inherently destabilising about the sf text? In Gibson, we have such destabilising factors as the neologism, which eludes immediate decipherment, the characters, who rarely know who they are or where they are going, and the cityscapes, whose pathways, rhythms and hierarchies are only partially revealed, even as the consequences of these rhythms and hierarchies affect every aspect of the narrative world.

These destabilising factors allow us to assess the process of reading the sf text. If the narrative flow is broken, obstructed or obscure, we can (a) force meaning upon a partially indecipherable text, (b) reject absolute meaning and look at contextual meaning only or (c) entertain the notion that all reading is indecipherable, and it is only by reading sf texts that "resist narrative closure" that we can try to uncover what the sf narrative is, and how it is. That is, we can come to premature conclusions and translate sf neologisms as we encounter them, or we can elect to treat these neologisms as a kind of mental exercise whereby our own worldview is challenged and the world of the sf text, while destabilising, is nevertheless coherent and real, containing valuable commentary upon the world we inhabit.

If we follow (c), we can use our own confusion as a *tool* – as part of this mental exercise – and try to trace such confusion to its source in our own presuppositions about the world.

Depending on how chaotic this "open" narrative is ("open" because it resists "closure"), Gibson's world-weaving can be seen as more lie than truth. The originality at the core of Gibson's provocative neologistic language ultimately strands the reader in an ocean of half-understood, misinterpreted sign-fragments. But if Gibson is lying, he is lying with passionate intent. We understand language through referent and object – as Wittgenstein says, the referent "reaches right out" to the object. Gibson not only reaches out to the object with language, he makes the object new with the word, because he is not writing about the present, about the past, or about the future. He is writing about the Sprawl, and its laws are lies: untrue to us. Gibson's passion makes the Sprawl's lies true. What I mean is: the relativity of truth insists that anything *might* be true, but we have to operate according to what we know to be true. If fiction is lies, and sf is fantastic lies, an interesting method of evaluating these lies is to ask what kind of world would be necessary for them to be true. Gibson's "open" narrative has questions that are difficult to answer, and it has beings and creatures unlike anything on earth. To decipher the narrative, we have to play the game of science fiction and suspend disbelief: believe the lies.

Sf texts may be destabilising, but they are also a structured movement into the beyond, a delicate exchange with an Other, an imaginative journey to strange worlds that reveals insightful commentary on our own – and it is this journey that needs to demarcated and recorded. Now, the question is not "how does the sf text tell us about itself?" but "what, specifically, is introduced in the sf text, unlike other texts, that makes it remarkable, and how can we *see* this newness, this remarkableness?"

For Samuel R. Delany, sf is remarkable as a journey into the *novum*/sign-field/Other realm/estranging world that creates an opportunity for *conversation*:

With each sentence we have to ask what in the world of the tale would have to be different from our world in order for such a sentence to be uttered—and thus, as the sentences build up, we build up a world in a specific dialogue with our present conception of the real.[6]

For Delany, narrativity need not be disrupted, and the *novum* need not be established as fundamentally Other. The strange new world of the sf text can be *built in conjunction* with our own, and made part of an informative dialogue of the imagination, without subjecting it to reductive, historicist interpretations. We can treat it, for the sake of argument, as a genuine alien object and entertain the fantasy that marks so many sf texts, e.g. "this document was recovered from a (white hole/pulsar/neutron star/hyperspace discontinuum) and is of unknown origin, and I the author am merely the editor of this alien text." As such, we do not need to assume that it references this world, or is connected to it. We can instead approach the sf text diplomatically and with an open mind, and assume that such a world might indeed exist. Thus, to echo Milton, "the mind is its own place", and the sf *novum* (the writer's world) can be posited as real and challenging without demanding that it be dependent upon the real (reader's) world.

Furthermore, our very notion of reality is dependent on linguistic constructs, and so our world seems more real, arguably, only because we are used to its vocabulary. As Peter Stockwell points out in *The Poetics of Science Fiction*, neologisms are sf's clearest marker of this linguistic dependence:

This issue involves the whole question of whether science really discovers anything in the world, or whether the terms in which it is framed structure our

understanding of the universe to the extent that we mistake our forms of expression for real phenomena. In other words, we understand our reality through figurative language, and the conventionalized models that result from this process act as the filter through which any new ideas must come. This means that such new ideas will tend to fit our current reality-view. [...] At this point, neologism assumes a fundamental importance as an act of creation that is not just conceptual but real.[7]

Suvin's, de Lauretis' and Delany's theories all shed light on William Gibson's use of language. His language is (a) estranging, (b) unreal, (c) resistant to totalisation and closure, and (d) an imaginative conversation. No one can read Gibson without experiencing (a), (b) and (c): feeling a bit strange, noticing how different things are, and getting a bit confused. Delany's concept of Gibson's language as an imaginative conversation strikes me as the most fertile springboard for analysis. How is the language of William Gibson an imaginative conversation? What characteristics does such a conversation have?

One characteristic is that the reader gets a more intimate sense of the nitty-gritty process of world-building in Gibson's fiction, because his neologisms serve as the foci of his fictive realm's sociological/epistemological/ontological peculiarities.

Such a conversation has a certain bite: it seduces the reader, insisting on surrender to the writer's worldview. Unless we accept that reading is little different from writing, and that every reader necessarily comes away from every text with completely different interpretations, reading must remain a somewhat passive act, a journey on a nameless road, with no sign of where it leads.

Neologisms not only engulf the reader in confusion, but suggest that the signs *do* make sense to the initiated. Thus the willing reader gambits that the only hope of comprehension is by walking in rhythm with the key protagonists to see as they see, even if their vision is initially indistinct or confusing. By surrendering control, the reader can grapple with the more provocative of Gibson's meaning-grenades, and wrestle with the neologism *qua* neologism, rather than insisting that the text be understood as a whole before its parts can be described.

Stockwell illustrates that this wrestling process of meaning is an inherent part of the sf text, for as the reader encounters neologisms, he is cognitively seduced even as he struggles to decipher meaning: "The use of the referential power of language to help create a visual reality in the mind's eye is, in science fiction, the totem use of new words to signal to the reader that something very clever, advanced, and technological is happening. It is all part of the establishment of plausibility and verisimilitude."[8]

The neologism *qua* neologism has interesting properties that allow us to use our confusion as a tool. These properties include the use of the denotative power of neologisms, the sense of a necessary initiation to the text, and the contrast between radically disorienting language and precise, tightly controlled language.

Walter Meyers, citing Poul Anderson's use of neologisms in "Lodestar", describes one such use of sf's denotative power:

While Anderson might have conveyed the same meaning by using the familiar words

clan or totem, the use of the new coinage ['choth'] stresses the alienness of the situation, and its difference from the situations that might be suggested by *clan* or *totem*. Thus Anderson bestows precisely the denotation he wants on the word, while avoiding unwanted connotations of words already in currency.[9]

Thus, craftsmanship in imaginative writing allows for intentionality and precision in world-building. No historical baggage complicates the interpretation of the text, which is delimited solely by the sf writer's imaginative construct. Like philosophical debates or legal treatises that shape boundaries of debate with precise, introductory definitions, the sf text zeroes in on the problem of interpretation by shaping a word from whole cloth. Meyers notes that this precision makes the neologism a valuable tool: "When a coined term is given without definition, it brings to the context in which is appears only the associations suggested by its form; if the wordmaker perceives those associations keenly, they can help establish the tone of the story by connotation alone."[10]

William Gibson, like Poul Anderson, perceives the connotations of neologisms keenly, and the innovative thrust of his cyberspace trilogy testifies to a staunch refusal to rely on convention. In this vein, critics such as Nicholas Ruddick, Scott Bukatman, Lance Olsen, Istvan Csiscery-Ronay, Jr. and Randy Shroeder have assessed Gibson's neologistic style, and a brief gloss of their findings will allow a tighter focus upon the implications of this style.

Bukatman claims Gibson's neologisms alienate: "Not everyone can read *Neuromancer*: its neologisms alienate the uninitiated reader – that's their function – while its unwavering intensity and the absence of traditional pacing exhaust even the dedicated."[11] Bukatman's implication of a process of *initiation* in the reader is crucial to neologistic dynamics: readers of Gibson's neologistic texts must make sense of them as they can, when they can, sometimes negotiating twenty pages or more before things start to fall into place. But fall into place they must for sf writer's strategy to succeed.

I would suggest then, that this sense of alienation/estrangement, when coupled with the reader's initiation process, generates a neologistic *meaning-space* that evolves into a *place*. It is a precisely bounded world with its own rules and customs, and it demands alert interpretation and a great deal of patience: time must pass for neologisms to acquire meaning in the reader's mind, and for the fictive universe of the text to acquire solidity and coherence. The reader must embark on a journey into the author's realm, an imagined world shaped with the utmost care.

Lance Olsen sees this journey as troublesome: "Dropped without much exposition into an alien and sometimes obscure future world, the reader is put in the uncomfortable position of having to make decisions about meaning and moral value based on very little textual evidence. If trained as a modernist, ready to search for patterns of intelligibility, the reader experiences ... a radical disorientation before a plethora of facts that might or might not connect."[12]

Randy Shroeder observes that Gibson may even exacerbate this difficulty for the reader by refusing to coin a term. In lieu of specificity, he relies on vague evocations, hinting at words that lie beyond accessibility: "In *Neuromancer* there is sustained use of

the word "something," always suggesting the difficulty of determinate reference ... The grasping language undermines the confident labeling that constitutes most of Gibson's style ... The 'something' exists, in some sneaky, nonreferential way."[13]

The opacity of Gibson's texts, viewed from this angle, makes critical investigation difficult. But it also suggests that the creative process itself is opaque – something that can be seen and felt, but not traced to its source. Gibson's language may well be elusive and "nonreferential" at times, but this may be a deliberate rejection of referentiality, in favor of a partial, more nuanced understanding of the text. If Gibson's characters have no idea of what is going on, why should we?

If we use our own confusion as tool, we can reassess the dynamic of the sf text, not as strictly denotative, but operational: sf's movement into the beyond and its creation of new zones of meaning allows us to ask not: "why is the sf text opaque and inaccessible" but "what are the consequences for us when the text is opaque and inaccessible?"

Csiscery-Ronay explores one consequence: "Unlike most of the other qualities regularly associated with the genre, the sense of wonder resists critical commentary. A "literature of ideas" as sf is often said to be, invites discussion of ideas; but the sense of wonder seems doubly to resist intellectual investigation. As a "sense," it is clearly not about ideas and indeed seems in opposition to them; *wonder* even more so, with its implications of awe that short-circuits analytic thought."[14]

A sense of wonder certainly permeates Gibson's fiction, and it can be difficult at times to reconcile Gibson's wild flights of fancy with his careful descriptions of fictive environments. In the middle of a complex Gibson metaphor, for instance –

> Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray. Expanding –
> And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity (*Neuromancer*, p. 52).

– the reader must wade through a somewhat messy conflation of solid referents and abstract illusions. (Or perhaps this conflation is simple poetic aptness that inhibits ready understanding.) But, as Nicholas Ruddick points out, Gibson also possesses a precise control over language and a confident awareness of his role as word-shaper:

> The text of *Neuromancer* is itself a lush and dense field of information. Its newness as a *novel* is not in any subversion of the grammatical or syntactical rules at the level of the individual sentence, but in a novelty at the level of the word. There seems to be a controlling awareness on the part of the author that literariness, that quality of the literary text capable of generating richness of meaning, depends paradoxically on adherence to the rules of conventional sentence formation if the neologistic urge is to be effectively expressed.[15]

To review, neologistic sf texts present several problems when assessed using semiotics.

First: because the sf text is presenting not only new words but new worlds, readers are hindered by the liminality and estrangement of the texts. But they are also challenged to step across the limen, and accept the foreign.

Second: several questions are raised about the nature of the sf text. What does the sf text tell us about itself? How does it do this? And what is remarkable about what it tells us? The last question has the simplest answer: it tells us something new. The first two questions would take more space to entertain than I have here, nor do I have adequate answers.

Third: we can use our confusion in the face of these texts as a tool. When confronted with a new word, it is easier to describe the problems of understanding it than it is to understand it. And in describing these problems, we can try to wrench our way into doorways that have been left devilishly ajar.

The Sprawl universe is an excellent example of a neologistic sf text that contains all the above mentioned problems. I want to borrow the spirit of Delany's imaginative conversation in investigating the nature of the Sprawl Universe as it revealed through Gibson's neologisms. The more accurate picture we can paint of Gibson's language, worlds and characters, the easier it will be to assess the problems that this picture poses to reader understanding.

Now I would like to reintroduce my concept of the generative edge as a tool in this attempt to decipher the methodologies, beliefs and customs of the characters, societies and ideologies that fill Gibson's trilogy.

The generative edge, as I mentioned, deals with that which is "generative" – creative, productive, birthing, fertile – and the idea of an "edge" – remote, peripheral, inaccessible, mysterious, dangerous and most importantly, liminal.

The generative edge is at once a place, a process and a way of being, and it applies to Gibson's language, characters, and readers. It is the psychological state where Gibson goes to create and where his creations live. It is how Gibson creates there, and what happens to characters there. And it is, most importantly, what Gibson *intends* there, and what meaning these intentions have for the reader. We may debate the validity of authorial intention, but it is clear that in Gibson there are definite effects of creating and living on the edge, and that Gibson had these results in mind. For the reader, this creative technique has provocative possibilities.

Imagine a scene from a popular film *The Neverending Story*, itself indebted to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The boy wanderer of this film must endure several trials to reach his goal, one of which is to step through the gate guarded by laser-eyed white Sphinxes. Each trial is more difficult than the last, and he is afflicted with mortal terror upon his confrontation with these Sphinxes. He cannot see far up the path beyond the Sphinxes, but he know that he must travel that road. Imagine then a similar scene from Kafka's *The Trial*, where Joseph K. is told the story of the guard at the Castle, who dissuades the seeker at the gate by warning him of even more fearsome guards within the castle, who would surely steal the seeker's sanity if he were to confront them.

Both scenes invoke a sense of liminality and estrangement: both the boy wanderer and Kafka's seeker are on the *border* of society and at a particular *borderline* in their journey, in the form of the Sphinxes and the gatekeeper. Readers of science fiction are confronted with a similar challenge: they have to abandon many of their preconceptions

in order to accept (for the sake of the text and narrative ethos) many of the laws and structures they have come to know and accept. This process of cognitive restructuring, combined with the world-shape of the wanderer glaring into the eye of the barrier, whether Sphinx or gatekeeper or cyberspace matrix, is what I want to invoke with the generative edge. The sf reader stands at the generative edge, which is itself a product of the sf writer's plumbing of the depths of reality for sake of envisioning it anew.

As a place, the generative edge is the gestalt of Sprawl territory – a world inhabited by hip, techno-savvy urban-dwellers who must live, move and think at a fevered pace to keep up with technology. It is also a mental "place": Gibson's creative nexus from which stem his realms of the possible.

As a process, the generative edge jars the reader out of feelings of familiarity, in order to evoke the terror, misery, transcendence and awe that composes Gibson's dystopian universe. Gibson's characters lack a centre: with nothing to depend on except street-sense and bone-will, they cannot maintain a concrete identity. Nor are they expected to, since the world's ways and signs lack cohesion. Only a chameleon can survive in the semiotic vortex of a neologistic universe.

Finally, the generative edge is a way of being – an *ethos* – that informs Gibson's narrative method and his authorial intentions. Gibson has chosen to use a neologistic text, because by changing his language he changes the perceptions of the reader. Gibson forces the reader to adapt to foreign words and customs, even as his characters must adapt daily to revolutionary, hyper-speed technological change.

To understand Gibson's generative edge, we must examine his neologisms in context, and negotiate the fuzzy connotative boundaries of these words to arrive at a coherent reading of the text. This is a difficult task precisely because these neologisms describe a world of incoherence, decentredness and dissolution.

Case is still our window. A loveless rogue, self-assured and cruel, he must be our guide in navigating the Sprawl.

Let us look now at the world he lives in, and the words that describe that world. In doing so, we will be able to see how the Sprawl and its neologisms gives us a first glimpse of how the sf text changes how readers read.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Gibson's neologisms systematically rewrite four categories of coherence: mind, body, world and self. "Cyberspace" redraws the mind, "jacking in" and "simstim" penetrate the body, "temperfoam" and "coffin hotel" reshape the world's urban and domestic landscapes, and "microsofts" reprogram the self. Each neologism introduces an element of incoherence into the narrative framework – though such things are only incoherent according to our initial understanding of them. Chaos here can be order in Gibson's world.

Cyberspace: Origins and Implications
Gibson transforms our conception of the human mind with his most memorable neologism "cyberspace". Cyberspace's free-floating forms and rules, and the fuzzy boundary separating it from the physical world wreak havoc on both our minds and sanities, and those of Gibson's characters.

First, what does "cyberspace" mean, and where does the word come from? The word's etymology is "cybernetic + space", and the word is defined as "the on-line world of computer networks".[16] Though an inelegant definition, it contains suggestive undertones: cyberspace is its own *world*, a realm of networks and mass communication, an "on-line" world with its own rules and ways of being.

The "cyber" of cyberspace comes from the Greek *kybernetes*, "pilot".[17] As Timothy Leary points out, the ancient Greek pilot had a pivotal role. He was relied upon to guide a ship safely to harbor without astrolabe or compass, using only the stars and his instincts. The *kybernetes* serves as the embodiment of rational mind, animating principle, the head of the ship-organism.[18]

The relationship between Gibson's pilots – his "cyberspace cowboys" – and the space through which they navigate is dynamic and ever changing. This relationship comprises elements of the root of "cyberspace" and of its new meanings. The cyberspace pilot/cowboy must train his mind to be trained. He must know to loosen mental ties on earth so that new ones can be formed in cyberspace.

Cyber, then, suggests both the *cybernetic* sense of automation and body-machine and the *kybernetes* sense of a rational mind, a human pilot-will with metallic strength. The full term, cyberspace, confronts us with a range of possible meanings. It is at once a space, a realm, and a way of being – a mental space where the ingenuity of the pilot must make its way through a predominately mechanised landscape.

This unpacking provides us with a background definition of the word "cyberspace". But how is "cyberspace" used in context?

If cyberspace has a direct referent, it is the network of computer systems throughout the world, analogous to the Internet. An early iteration of cyberspace came in Gibson's short story "Burning Chrome", where he used the term "matrix":

> The matrix is an abstract representation of the relationships between data systems. Legitimate programmers jack into their employer's sector of the matrix and find themselves surrounded by bright geometries representing the corporate data.
>
> Towers and fields of it ranged in the colorless non-space of the simulation matrix, the electronic consensus-hallucination that facilitates the handling and exchange of massive quantities of data. Legitimate programmers never see the walls of ice they work behind, the walls of shadow that screen their operations from others, from industrial-espionage artists and hustlers like Bobby Quine (*Burning Chrome*, pp. 169-170).

The power of the neologism is apparent here. By coining a new word, Gibson simultaneously draws upon the older meanings inherent in its constituent parts, and fabricates new meanings in his text. Cyber and space are both recognizable to readers. By combining them, Gibson takes advantage of the linguistic structures of the human mind to bring the reader to the generative edge of his fiction, the point where the old becomes overwhelmingly, maddeningly new. Though Gibson's idea of cyberspace had not yet reached its full development in "Burning Chrome", already there emerge tropes Gibson

would reuse later, like "abstract representation", "bright geometries" and "consensus hallucination".

The *kybernetes*, originally a pilot who responded to his environment to keep his ship afloat, is now an "industrial-espionage artist" who *creates* his own environment as he works. He does not move over the seas; the seas are *moved* over him. Open to possibility, cyberspace is a dream-like realm for Gibson's characters, a world whose rules and forms are in constant flux. Paradoxically, this realm is linked to the human world and finds expression in the attitudes of Gibson's characters, like the cyberspace cowboy Case.

Early in his career as a cowboy, Case stumbles on the revelation that the streets of Ninsei and the actions of its people are remarkably similar to the sweep of data in the matrix:

> Get wasted enough, find yourself in some desperate but strangely arbitrary kind of trouble, and it was possible to see Ninsei as a field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialties. Then you could throw yourself into a highspeed drift and skid, totally engaged but set apart from it all, and all around you the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market (*Neuromancer*, p. 16).

"Data made flesh", "proteins linking to distinguish cell specialties", "throw yourself into a highspeed drift and skid": all these phrases reveal the paradoxical universe Case inhabits. The world is cyberspace and cyberspace is the world – or so it seems to Case if he's taken enough drugs. Case understands himself to be a mere parenthesis in a mammoth codex, a blip on the world's radar, a body-machine vehicle stuck in miles of traffic. The abstracted distance Case maintains from his own life seems to be the norm. He is "totally engaged but set apart from it all": a state of living that serves as the heart of the callused city-dweller.

To the reader, Case looks thunderously dislocated. His sense of place and self seems to have undergone a radical transformation. Yet we cannot assume Case was ever any different. Rather, it is the reader who must transform his own imagination to understand how Sprawl denizens like Case have lost certain aspects of their humanity and sense of self. Bodies in this city are little more than "cells linking" for the brief moments that humans come together, communicate, make love, make deals, kill or die for some nameless corporate agenda. What little meaning these bodies have exists solely outside of themselves: in products, data and abstract knowledge. Like Flaubert's Madame Bovary, a woman driven to madness by the empty and arbitrary social, bodily and mental modes that structure her life, Johnny in Gibson's story "Johnny Mnemonic" (reprinted in the collection *Burning Chrome*) is caught between the inner and outer voids of existence:

> And it came to me that I had no idea at all of what was really happening, or of what was supposed to happen. And that was the nature of my game, because I'd spent most of my life as a blind receptacle to be filled with other people's knowledge and then drained, spouting synthetic languages I'd never understand (in *Burning Chrome*, p. 18).

Thus, while cyberspace can be a realm of raw imagination where the cyberspace cowboy can move the information seas at will, it can also be a dangerous realm where the self is swallowed by others' wills, others' "synthetic languages".

Cyberspace permeates the lives of Gibson's characters. In a world of abstracts, tangible, earthly meaning cannot inhere. One image fades into another endlessly, without any sense of grounding.

This groundlessness becomes more pronounced as Gibson hones his definition of cyberspace in his later novels, developing his early notions of "the matrix" into the fully-fledged idea of "cyberspace":

> Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts ... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding ... (*Neuromancer*, p. 51).

"Cyberspace" here attaches to a broader, brighter, creepier idea than did "matrix". There are differences of scale and intensity, with additions of "unthinkable", "constellations" and "billions" to suggest the vastness of this "nonspace". Suggestive too is the subtle preference for "consensual" over "consensus", connoting something vaguely sexual, rather than something businesslike that "facilitates" data handling. This new connotation impresses upon the reader the degree to which cyberspace has penetrated every aspect of life in the Sprawl. Sprawl dwellers embody Gibson's generative edge as their personalities are prefabricated, reiterated, and reconstituted to blend with the backdrop hum of "biz"; the reader comes closer to this edge as he familiarises himself with the unfamiliar, and comes to understand the place where the new capitulates to the newer, the disturbing precipice that Gibson's characters call home.

Like the operating system of a computer, Gibson's neologisms and the ideas they represent serve as the underlying structure of his narrative, the zone of the imagination where he and his readers can connect with fictive worlds. Darko Suvin pinpoints one aspect of this structure as Gibson's reshaping of technology as an intimate, motivating part of human experience:

> Gibson's first two books have refreshed the language and sensibility of sf. In fact, it is correct but not quite sufficient to praise Gibson for broadening the range of sf (or indeed of modern literature) with the new vocabulary of lyricised information interfaces. The new vocabulary is, as always, a sign for new human relationships. To say, as does the first sentence of *Neuromancer*, "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel", means to foreground electronic interfaces into a new nature, a second nature that has grown to be a first nature.[19]

Cyberspace culminates at the generative edge. The new symmetries of the Gibsonian universe insist that the reader adopt a new understanding of his own symmetries: cyberspace takes us to the imaginative space that is the generative edge. Cyberspace changes the consciousness of Gibson's characters. It also changes the consciousness of

the reader by forcing him to ally himself with foreign methodologies, foreign systems of thought. Out at the edge, inside the lies of the text, sf meaning grenades detonate whatever rules we thought cohered.

That sf can do this is its greatest boon.

"Jacking in" to the Neologism

Gibson's neologisms are not isolated events. He does not toss them in for novelty's sake and then forget about them; they inform the entire structure of his narrative. From an initial state of disorientation, the reader learns to fit these new words into the context of the Sprawl, and to interpret the Sprawl universe by using the Sprawl's language.

There are popular card games whose full enjoyment is reserved for the initiated: those veteran players who understand the rules and signs, and who toy with novices learning the games' structure. Such a milieu parallels the reader's introduction to the Sprawl. The reader, like the cowboy when he first enters cyberspace, must initially tumble about with no sense of alignment or orientation. Inge Eriksen captures this dislocative quality of Gibson's world perfectly:

> It is a futuristic Chandler-world, a cybernetic Alexanderplatz-vision seen in bird- or frog-perspective, rarely from the upright human being's position. The centre has imploded, the protagonists are punks and mercenaries of both sexes at street level and the impotently rich at the top floor, this a fashion conscious, sign-controlled maelstrom, where nobody can hide.[20]

The collective body of the Sprawl ("punks, mercenaries and the impotently rich") is undermined by the disorienting effects of technology – Gibson redefines the body not in human terms but as "meat", "software", or a "product". Gibson's characters surrender their bodies to the conveyances, drugs, shapes and methods of industry. The coherence of the body falls victim to the coherence of technology, and new rules are set in place.

One set of these rules involves the notion of "jacking in". To enter cyberspace, the cyberspace cowboy must "jack in" to the matrix. The phrase connotes at once a phone jack, and the "in" of entry into another universe. The verb's raw, edgy simplicity echoes the simplicity of Gibson's usage:

> He jacked back in.
>
> And flipped (Neuromancer, p. 181).

Insofar as "jacking in" is not unlike "jacking off", cyberspace can be seen as a form of masturbation. A fantasy world invites the creation of a fantasy self, and no self-image provides the egocentric cowboy with as much pleasure as does the image of Hacker As God, awake and in tune with his malleable, conquerable field of data. In Sharon Stockton's sexualised reading, Case is "removed entirely from problems of influence and given the status of prime mover ... of phallic projection into a feminised matrix that approximates the universe".[21] Case is the penetrator, cyberspace the penetrated.

Simstim is another approximation-universe that Gibson's characters "jack in" to. The simulated stimulation of the central nervous system by electrodes, fed by a data recorder that fills the user's mind with the sensations of the Net's newest star on the beaches of a deserted island, shopping in fashionable cities, or catching thermals on a hang glider, simstim has the power to control, and millions of fans soon prefer these edited stimuli to the sensations of their own lives.

The words "simulated stimulation" have their own suggestive power. Simulate is defined as "to give or assume the appearance or effect of, often with the intent to deceive: IMITATE; to make a simulation of (as a physical system)".[22] "Deceptive physical systems" describes simstim perfectly. Now consider the definition of "stimulate": "to excite to activity or growth or to greater activity: ANIMATE, AROUSE".[23] Deception is key here: simstim's artificial environment offers an escape from the harsh urban realities of Gibson's Dystopia, but it is also a poison that dulls all genuine, human pleasures. Simstim addicts are animated and aroused to the point of death, as they would prefer to remain in these artificial environments even as their flesh expires. The intimacy of the medium obscures its essential hollowness, an irony Bobby Newmark in Count Zero knows from first-hand experience of his mother's simstim addiction:

> The soap had been running continuously since before he was born, the plot a multiheaded narrative tapeworm that coiled back in to devour itself every few months, then sprouted new heads hungry for tension and thrust. He could see it writhing in its totality, the way Marsha could never see it, an elongated spiral of Sense/Net DNA, cheap brittle ectoplasm spun out to uncounted hungry dreamers (Count Zero, p. 51).

Case, though he dwells in the equally unreal world of cyberspace, nevertheless views simstim with contempt:

> Cowboys didn't get into simstim, he thought, because it was basically a meat toy. He knew that the trodes he used and the little plastic tiara dangling from a simstim deck were basically the same, and that the cyberspace matrix was actually a drastic simplification of the human sensorium, at least in terms of presentation, but simstim itself struck him as a gratuitous multiplication of flesh input. The commercial stuff was edited, of course, so that if Tally Isham got a headache in the course of a segment, you didn't feel it (Neuromancer, p. 55).

It is significant that a large part of Case's contempt stems from simstim's being "flesh input". To use simstim is to become subject to the synthesised, edited and amplified stimuli of someone else's body. Yet Case, by escaping into cyberspace with its raw logic and geometries, has casually amputated half his humanity. In this sense, cyberspace is the greater deception, for it makes data and logic the whole world, ignoring the body entirely. Though simstim addicts also ignore their bodies, they are at least trading their own bodies for "edited" versions of an ideal body. Their tie to the flesh – albeit a synthetic version of it – is still strong. Case has no such tie save his stomach and bladder, and even these frustrate him: "He forgot to eat ... sometimes he resented having to leave the deck to use the chemical toilet they'd set up in a corner of the loft" (Neuromancer, p. 59).

With each new neologism, Gibson draws us deeper into the doomed web of the Sprawl. This style is both a ploy to maintain suspense (as Gibson says in an interview, "Neuromancer is fueled by my terrible fear of losing the reader's attention")[24] and a

deliberate decision to weave highly distinct, meaning-packed terms into the narrative fabric. The power of these words lies in the effective planning that went into their use and reuse – the attention to the words' denotative power.

Each neologism represents a complex social phenomenon with wide-ranging implications. Gibson's neologisms reveal to us that Sprawl men and women are *accustomed* to things that for us would require careful explanations and years of "market-penetration" before they could be tossed off undefined in everyday conversation as "household words". Gibson's characters possess an innate understanding of cyberspace and simstim, for these devices are already features of their cultural landscape. The reader, meanwhile, must come to grips with his psychological reaction to the neologisms (confusion, dislike, prior associations, etc.), and learn to approach them as Gibson's characters do.

Coffin Hotels, Bedslabs and Temperfoam: The Familiar Becomes Other

While much of Gibson's imaginative universe depends on invented words that refer to entirely foreign concepts, he also relies on subtle recharacterisations of familiar words. Take the bed. Unlike cyberspace, a bed is a familiar object, a sign with which readers are comfortable. Yet in the descriptions of Case's bedroom, Gibson inserts a subtle, otherworldly sense of wrongness, otherness, the bizarre. Witness Case's sleeping habits:

> But the dreams came on in the Japanese night like livewire voodoo, and he'd cry for
> it, cry in his sleep, and wake alone in the dark, curled in his capsule in some coffin
> hotel, his hands clawed into the bedslab, temperfoam bunched between his fingers,
> trying to reach the console that wasn't there (*Neuromancer*, p. 5).

The text here is littered with invented objects and concepts: "livewire voodoo", "coffin hotel", "bedslab", "temperfoam". Each term undermines the wholeness of the body, for it describes human behaviour using inanimate, technological language. Dreams maintain their mysterious flavour with the occult resonance of "voodoo", but the adjective "livewire" metamorphoses the image into a religious/technological hodgepodge. Livewire Voodoo: is it a magical broadcast? a living metal religion? an electronic ritual? Though dreams are mysterious, it seems unlikely that any reader would conventionally understand dreaming to be any of these things. Case's understanding of dreaming differs significantly from ours. Even in the refuge of sleep, Case's persona is described in technological language, transforming him into one who lives and breathes technology – into a man composed, perhaps, of nothing else.

Case the techno-man sleeps in a coffin hotel, a residence of corpse-boxes. A vast network of stacked, plastic box-rooms, the coffin hotel symbolises the facelessness that permeates the Sprawl. (Such "cubicle" or "capsule" rentals actually exist in Tokyo.) In a city where sleep is merely a primitive need to be fulfilled as easily as plugging the right electrode into a cyberspace deck, Case survives by renting a coffin and calling it home. Though actually, he *doesn't* call it home: the coffin is his space for sleeping and for "biz", but it has no resonances of personality, no personal details to suggest anyone *lived* there. Case treats it as one more stopping-off point on his delirious tour of the street, a hollow place to pause before returning to the noise and blaze of the city. The coffin's

surroundings are even grimmer than the hotel itself:

> Now he 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 (*Neuromancer*, p. 6).

In the dark realm of the hotel, Case is a figurative corpse, a body to be coffined away at the proper, appointed time. He sleeps on a "bedslab": an object that reinforces the sepulchral imagery of morgues, tombs, and coffins. A bed is defined as "a piece of furniture on or in which to lie and sleep ; a place of sex relations"[25] and slab is "a thick plate or slice (as of stone) ; concrete pavement (as of a road)".[26] The melding of these words provides us with a deep sense of coldness, transience and hollowness. The stoniness of his bed thus mirrors the stoniness of his body and personality: he is a slab made to fit several highly specialised slots, a Case in its case. He does not question this environment. Instead of sex, he relies on dreams of his lost connection to cyberspace, and digs his fingers into "temperfoam", seeking the peace and ease that only the non-space of cyberspace can provide.

Curiously, "temperfoam" provides the only soft image in this excerpt, suggesting a degree of malleability in a room of hard objects. Gibson's use of the word is careful here. He slips it into the narrative along with his other invented words, showing the reader that Case is familiar with these things; they are part of his world. Though artificial and disconcertingly intelligent (the bed can mold itself to the person lying on it), "foam" connotes something insubstantial, evanescent – an easing of the coffin's harsh lines. "Temperfoam's" full connotative flavour, however, can only be understood through the eyes of Case: a familiar object, an artificial substance become second nature in the technofetishised universe of the Sprawl.

What is foreign to us is familiar to Case. But through the peephole of Gibson's neologisms, we become privy to the intimate, numb-metal lives of Case and his ilk, and our familiar rules metamorphose into the Sprawl's.

Melting "Me" with the "Microsoft"

Some human languages have no word for "I". Identity for such speakers may rest, arguably, in the community: in a conventional, shared network of ideas and beliefs. For Gibson's characters, identity is equally fluid. Enter the "microsoft".

A silicon chip that instantly injects huge amounts of information into the human brain, the microsoft raises questions about the value of the brain as a learning mechanism. If knowledge can be gleaned from a chip, what validity does "real" bodily experience have? If the selves of Gibson's characters are infinitely permeable/penetrable, where does their real identity lie? The word "microsoft", derived from the name of Bill Gates's company (founded 1977), reiterates these tropes of minute penetration and permeability. It is "micro": tiny, microscopic, reducible. The brains of Gibson's characters are subject to massive rewriting, not only through the diverse and chaotic experiences of the characters as they interact with artificial intelligences, artificial bodies and artificial spaces, but through direct neural intervention. The self is a text waiting to be edited. The brain is expendable, replaceable, programmable hardware – a storehouse

of data to be accessed. "Soft" connotes both softness and software: the brain as fluid, computerised entity. This fluidity applies both to the microsoft and its fluid bond with human gray matter and to its fluidity of use, which is universal, second nature, and unobtrusive. Witness one such microsoft user and the space the microsoft inhabits on and in his body:

> Larry took a flat plastic case from the pocket of his red sportshirt and flicked it open, slotting the microsoft beside a dozen others. His hand hovered, selected a black glossy chip that was slightly longer than the rest, and inserted it smoothly into his head. His eyes narrowed.

> "Molly's got a rider," he said, "and Larry doesn't like that" (*Neuromancer*, p. 57).

Larry must have a radically different understanding of his body's boundaries to be able to casually plug chips into his brain. Yet a similarity remains: we do already accommodate things not of the flesh into our conceptions of ourselves. My self can subjectively encompass, in addition to my mind and body, my clothes, my possessions, my friends. If I forget my wallet, and feel its absence from my pocket, it is as though I've forgotten to bring a small piece of myself with me. Here the microsoft occupies a similar, though vastly more intimate position. Larry also keeps it in the familiar location of his pocket. But true intimacy emerges with the verbs associated with the microsoft: it is "flicked", "slotted", and "inserted smoothly" into Larry's head. Larry's familiar handling and manipulation of the object ascends to a new and frightening level with "insert": it has become one with his brain.

Larry's reference to himself in the third person is especially interesting. If a microsoft is small and malleable enough to penetrate *any* properly outfitted brain, the knowledge contained therein does not belong to an "I": Larry is as good a receptacle as anyone else, so why should he treat himself as though he had genuine, individual identity? His personality and his language undergo radical change due to technology, and thus his knowledge and perceptions are no more "his" than they are the silicon's.

This notion of intersubjectivity between the body and its technological attachments raises a deeper question of the reader's attachment to the body of Gibson's text. In adapting to the neologistic logic of the Sprawl, the reader is exposed to some philosophical problems. Once the problem of "translation" of these new words is surpassed, the reader is intimately familiar with the generative edge of the Sprawl, with all its problematic constructs of identity. But how can the reader unfold his reality into the reality of the text, acknowledge its alienating and foreign quality, and then become accustomed to it? Surely there is more to it than just a gradual process of adjustment, as a foreign traveler may eventually call a strange and different land home.

One problem is negotiating the mindset of the Sprawl character. All the neologisms of Gibson's fiction are wild and intriguing – but they are also the bread and butter of his characters. And while I want to hope that the fictive boundary of the text can be surpassed by suspending all disbelief and accepting the reality of the text *qua* text, I fear that Suvin may be right in dismissing all novelties of sf as contemporary reflections of our own state of mind.

And yet – if you can hold yourself on the edge long enough, it may be possible to dismiss the real world concerns of the reader and embrace Sprawl logic whole – to live on the generative edge of William Gibson's fiction. I am not advocating a purely romantic flight into the realm of the novel, but rather a careful consideration of the consequences of reading a neologistic text. The more we learn of the Sprawl, and the more we begin to think like its denizens, the harder it is to remember where we have come from: we lose our way as we try to assess the categories and strategies of Sprawl thought.

The Generative Edge

Where do Gibson's neologisms leave us? What picture emerges of the Sprawl landscape from this specialised language?

Gibson has created a future world, and he has given his inhabitants idiosyncratic tongues to match their go-to-hell attitudes. By coining new words and beckoning the mind of the reader deeper into a sympathetic communion with cyberspace and its dwellers, Gibson brings us to the brink to demonstrate that his characters live and breathe *there*: on the edge. The puzzle of the Sprawl is one of dislocation, disarray and flux. How, in such madness, can we situate these residents of the Sprawl – these beings that dwell on the generative edge?

Case, reliable veteran and jaded *l'homme du monde*, has served as our guide. Now he shall serve as our mannequin. Let us dress him with:

Cyberspace. The consensual hallucination that eliminates psychological, ideological, and ontological boundaries. Selves are born in cyberspace by dying a little in this world. (Case flies high in the matrix while "the meat" rots.) Cowboys "jack in" to a dream, reshaping their minds into a series of informational blips in a network, and relegating their manhood to the status of idealised, abstracted non-phallus.

Simstim. The religion of television in its purest, most insidious form. Not just a word but a way of life. Nations of zombified addicts abandon their real bodies and drift through life, the perfect pawns for greedy multinationals.

Microsofts. Human knowledge as transferable media. Personality is temporary. You are the self you plug into the socket of your brain.

Bedslabs, coffin hotels. No place, nor space, nor rest is permanent. Trees and grass and natural horizons give way to polished, mirrored surfaces in forgettable rooms of the dispossessed. Sleep is more than the "little death" – it personifies the waking terror of the streets. Nowhere to go but the next deal, nothing to anticipate but the next score, the next fix, the next flash through the matrix. The world's smallest details have not escaped this transformation: everything from beds to sunglasses bears the mark of technological interference. Gibson's characters are awash in images of death and speed: their scattered identities cannot cohere against the frenzied backdrop of hyper-evolved, constantly mutating technologies.

I asked at the beginning what makes Gibson's prose unique. Gibson's neologisms are unique, not just by the definition of neologism, but because their use informs a system

of precise world-building. It is the semiotic nature of these neologisms that lends them uniqueness – every facet of words like simstim and cyberspace penetrate deeply into the complex mechanisms of the Sprawl Universe, and they penetrate equally deeply into the mind of the reader, who must make sense of them.

When we read, we lose a certain part of ourselves, following the writer's road, perhaps asking the occasional half-mumbled question to ourselves, letting our mind wander and roam in the narrative field. I see this loss of self paralleled in the attitudes of Gibson's characters, who at best have only a de facto understanding of their own role to play in the world. Gibson's fiction exacerbates this innate quality of reading – it alienates, it puzzles, it surges forward at a fevered pace. This intensity is the marker of the sf text, and furthermore, that intensity determines our experience of the sf text – forcing us to piece together sign fragments in a slipshod attempt at translation, often missing the narrative undercurrent.

The novum, the generative edge, and cognitive estrangement all help to unpack the meanings of Gibson's text with their precise interpretative models. But underneath the models I think we will find something more raw and dirty: the generative edge of the neologism is real. The neologistic sign-field of Gibson's text is real. And to play in that realm is not only to forget our own, but to relinquish our hold on the solid world, with its steady rhythms of 9 to 5, its certainties of death and taxes. When we read a new word, it catches our mouths, and draws us just a bit further away from sane meanings, natural horizons. We rewrite the texts of our selves.

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Elizabeth Hand: author, and reviewer for *The Magazine of F&SF*
Gary K. Wolfe (Roosevelt University, Chicago): reviewer for *Locus*

Entrants must be registered for a higher degree. Two copies should be submitted, one anonymous, of 5000-8000 words. The deadline for submission is May 31 2003
The judges reserve the right to withhold the award.

Submissions should be sent to Dr Farah Mendlesohn at farah3@mdx.ac.uk. All submissions will be considered for possible publication in *Foundation*.