

MACHINE AGE NAVIGATOR

an interview with WILLIAM GIBSON

WILLIAM GIBSON is still feeling decidedly jet lagged as we wander the streets of Wellington looking for coffee, cigarettes and a place to talk; preferably all three in one hit. We're not having much luck. Gibson has just participated in a panel discussion on "other worlds" with two other nominally sci-fi writers. Earlier in the week he made his first appearance, "an hour with William Gibson," at the 1992 Wellington Festival of the Arts Writers and Readers Week. For those who don't know, William Gibson is an American born (Virginia), Canadian resident

Lawrence McDonald: I'll kick off by lining up a couple of comments on your work. The first is in the form of a footnote from Fred Jameson's big book on Post-modernism where he says he regrets the absence of a chapter on cyberpunk because for him it's the supreme literary creation of late multi-national capitalism.

William Gibson: (laughs) Good for him, yeah!

L.M: That's one comment. The other is in an article by Australian writer Ken Wark in which he sums up the books of the 1980s and says your trilogy (*Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986), and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988)) was the best thing done in fiction writing during that period.

W.G: Hey — well send me a copy of that.

L.M: According to Wark you are the only person to have created a credible post-pop language for a post-pop age.



(Vancouver) novelist credited with the invention of the genre of cyberpunk which he developed across a trilogy of novels (*Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) and a volume of short stories (*Burning Chrome*). He is also the co-author with Bruce Sterling of a lengthy novel set in the Victorian era, *The Difference Engine*. In other words, Gibson is equally at home within the machinations of both neo and paleo technological epochs. I interviewed William Gibson for *Illusions*, with Tony Chuah, on Saturday March 14 in Cuba Street, Wellington.

— Lawrence McDonald.

And he also said that perhaps everything else should be pulped.

W.G: The critic I've been looking for!

L.M: What he mostly talked about and liked was the non-fiction of the 1980s. In fiction he singled out your work and said it could be the linguistic blueprint for the novel of the 1990s. I would like to place that claim against the comment you made on Thursday when you implied that the trilogy was an apprenticeship which you'd got out of your system and you were now about to enter a whole new phase of a different kind of writing.

W.G: I hope so. Either that or I'm having a short career. The book that I'm working on now (*Virtual Light*) bears a lot of similarities to the trilogy but I hope in some ways it's going to be a very different sort of book. It should ideally be more self-aware. The perils of early success are that

you have to hear about your first novel for the rest of your life which isn't *bad* but I don't go back to those books and read them myself with great pleasure, particularly. They just seem like early work to me and some of the things in them I like the most are really artifacts of my lack of understanding of what I was doing.

L.M: Lack of understanding of what in particular? The craft of novel writing or the mechanics of the scenarios in the novels?

W.G: I think the craft of the novel. It's comical but it's also in a sense quite literally true that the cyberspace aspect of my work evolved from an inability to move the characters around physically in a naturalistic way. The first piece of fiction I ever wrote involved a guy sitting in a room accessing his departed girlfriend's recorded memories. I remember writing it like that because I couldn't get the guy out of the room. I didn't have the naturalistic skill required to get him down on the street so I just kept him in the room and had him plugging cassettes into...

Tony Chuah: Is this the moment when simstim was invented?

W.G: Yeah, that's where simstim came from but I don't think that lessens its impact as a metaphor. It was subsequent to inventing it that I became interested in it as a metaphor for the mediated world that we already have.

L.M: That was the very first thing you wrote? And you just registered straight away the mediated nature of current reality?

W.G: Yeah. That's a story called "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" (in my short story collection *Burning Chrome* (1986)) and it's very very short. But when I look at it now I can see so much of the later trilogy there in larval form.

T.C: In *Count Zero* you also found a metaphor for writing, in your art making machine.

W.G: Yeah, that was very conscious. I think that's my favourite of those three books. I think it comes closest to

doing what it sets out to do and does it more economically than either of the other two.

L.M: Can you point to a corresponding *Larval* short story which might have set you on course for the book you're writing now?

W.G: Yeah. There's a story which was published in *Omni* three or four months ago called "Skinner's Room" which was actually commissioned several years ago by the San

Francisco Museum of Modern Art as part of a sort of architecture show they were having where writers were paired with teams of architects to come up with visions of San Francisco. In my story, San Francisco's Oakland Bay Bridge has become unsafe owing to earthquakes some years before. But it has been taken over by homeless people from the two cities who rushed on en masse and can't be gotten off because the whole world's watching. So they've just stayed there for twenty or thirty years until they've wrapped the whole thing in this cocoon of junk and they're living in it in a really attractive way... (laughter)... There are these long arcades stretching across the bay with a sort of barrio stack of housing on the top... The structural possibilities of that are glossed over with super

materials and carbon fibre strips... So that's the key, the *kernel* of this new book.

L.M: Did you work on the story with an architect?

W.G: Yes. I worked with Craig Hodginson and Ming Fung in Los Angeles. This wonderful husband and wife team, the sort of architects who don't or aren't often actually allowed to build the things they propose.

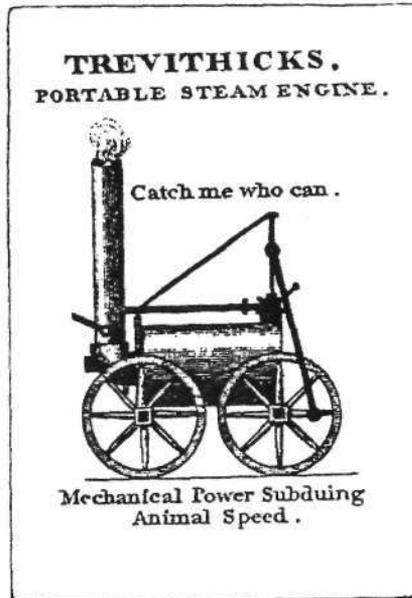
L.M: The current exhibition at the Wellington City Art Gallery features the work of another pair of paper architects — Brodsky and Utkin.

W.G: Oh, I just saw their show yesterday. If I'd been less jet lagged I'd have made a real effort to meet those guys. I think they're awesome. Good Soviet artists are amongst the heaviest people I've ever met yet. About two years ago I met a Kazakstani film director named Raschid Nugmanov who made a film called *The Needle* which I



COLUMBARIUM HABITABILE, (1989) Etching by Brodsky & Utkin.

really liked a lot. It was the first Soviet action movie. So we cooked up a plan. Raschid was the youngest ever president of the Kazakstani Film Union. This was one of the earliest things happening when the system was loosening up there. They wanted to get rid of all the old party hacks who were running the film unit; so they elected this guy who at the time was maybe twenty. He's quite brilliant and he'd been doing his academic film studies in Leningrad when the Leningrad punk scene was at its most intense; and he was going round making totally illicit documentaries some of which are starting to circulate. When he made *The Needle* he brought in a Soviet rock star named Victor Soy, an amazing guy from a band called KINO. A half Korean, half Soviet Bruce Lee, a really good martial artist and incredibly handsome. So we had a joint Soviet-American co-production thing starting to boil where we'd make a vehicle for Victor, Raschid would direct and I'd write it with an American writer named Jack Womack who lives in New York. (pause) We weren't exactly set to go... but Jack and I were set to go to Leningrad and then Victor was killed in a really tragic, stupid car accident; just like that, out of nowhere. So we lost the star and the Soviet artists we'd been working with all went into this very intense period of mourning during which none of them produced any work; basically they just sort of dragged for a year. But a year to the day of the accident they popped up again and said: "OK — life goes on, we have to do something". So Womack's going over there in a few weeks. It's been a long time since we've seen Raschid and Womack wants to talk to him about doing a movie that has something to do with Chernobyl, although we're not quite sure what... (pause) Do you know there's a structure of melted slag in one of the sub-basements of the Chernobyl reactor building which, aside from the sun, is the most radioactive known object in the universe? It's called the elephant's foot because it's shaped like one; the stalactite of this lethal mung that's boiled down. There's an amazing documentary about these suicide missions to Chernobyl where these groups of physicists — who're living at the reactor site, keeping track of it — are all going to die and they know it. There's footage of these guys in heavy radiation suits creeping through this twisted maze of pipes, dragging robots (tractor cameras) behind them to send down these hollows to where the elephant's foot is so they can get a piece of it to check just how radioactive it is. One guy went down with a telescopic sight and a AK 49 to loosen some hunks off it.



ADMISSION TICKET TO
THREVITHICK'S RAILWAY
from Pandaemonium.

And then they started sending in these remote control robots to try to pick the hunks up. But the robots would just fry. Finally one of them made it out, very jerkily, with a little piece — the most radioactive thing outside the heart of the sun. (*gasps of amazement*) Anyway, we'd like to set some sort of Science Fiction movie there.

T.C: This would be possibly your most dystopian project yet?

W.G: Well, when you're working with artists from the former Soviet Union you're in for some heavy stuff.

L.M: Do you see it as a place where you're more likely to get a film made than the U.S.A. where you haven't had much luck with various potential projects. Could you say something about these unrealized projects?

W.G: None of them are formally in turnaround at this point. They're all just jammed up. The *Neuromancer* project, which I never really had anything to do with myself, simply came to nothing and the rights reverted; so I now have them back. I did a screenplay based on the story "Burning Chrome" for Carolco and when James Cameron went there prior to making *Terminator 2*, he was under contract to do "Burning Chrome" as his first thing. It didn't work out that way, they needed the money for *Terminator 2* — they're not bankrupt but not in great shape these days. They've

also got "Johnny Mnemonic" which is actually written to be Robert Longo's first feature film. I met him a couple of years ago and he got the rights; he's had the option for about three years now. He's there now shooting a *Tales From the Crypt* episode, a necessary journeyman piece, daughter) Currently that is the one I have the most hope for artistically. Then there's "New Rose Hotel" which is with Ed Pressman's production company and that's got possibilities because he's not a formula producer by any means. He's kinda famous for his wild eclecticism.

T.C: I heard that at one stage Malcolm McLaren was also involved in "New Rose Hotel."

W.G: Yeah, it was McLaren who brought me in on it but he didn't bring me in to do "New Rose Hotel." I think he was still trying to do his surf-nazi movie and he'd met Pressman. But Pressman wouldn't go for the surf-nazi movie and so McLaren pulled me around the corner and said: "let's do something else". He told Ed to read some of the short stories; he read them but couldn't decide which one to do. I said: "why don't you do "New Rose

Hotel", it's a pretty random thing". Since then he hasn't had much to do with it but I think he'll sign a cheque somewhere.

L.M: Are there any particular directors you'd like to work with?

W.G: I'd like to work with Vincent Ward although I think he's the kind of director who ...(pause)...all the ones I'd want to work with are the ones who'd want to write their own material anyway. That's the catch.

L.M: Why would you like to work with Vincent Ward?

W.G: Because I liked *The Navigator* so much. I also liked what he was rumoured to be going to do with *Alien 3*, during his period of involvement. And in fact whatever it was that he did bring to it got them over the hump they were all running into. He didn't stay with it. I don't know how many writers were involved in it. Maybe a dozen at least.

T.C: You were involved at one point too.

W.G: I wrote the very first draft.

L.M: Are you optimistic about the future for any of your film related projects?

W.G: I maintain a mild degree of optimism. It's not something I stake a lot of my artistic identity on. I sometimes suspect that I'm not the right guy to be trying to adapt this stuff to the screen. I think there are probably many people out there who could do things that would give me more pleasure with that same material. Also the original stuff is so old for me that I'm inclined just to change it all anyway.

L.M: Can we shift now to *The Difference Engine* (1990,co-authored with Bruce Sterling)? To me it almost seems to be the kind of thing Foucault might have come up with had he written fiction.

W.G: Yeah, possibly. I think he would've gotten the joke, anyway. I'm really amazed at the positive reception it's received. When we did it I thought that it was perversely difficult and strangely structured. I just didn't think it would find much currency as a popular thing.

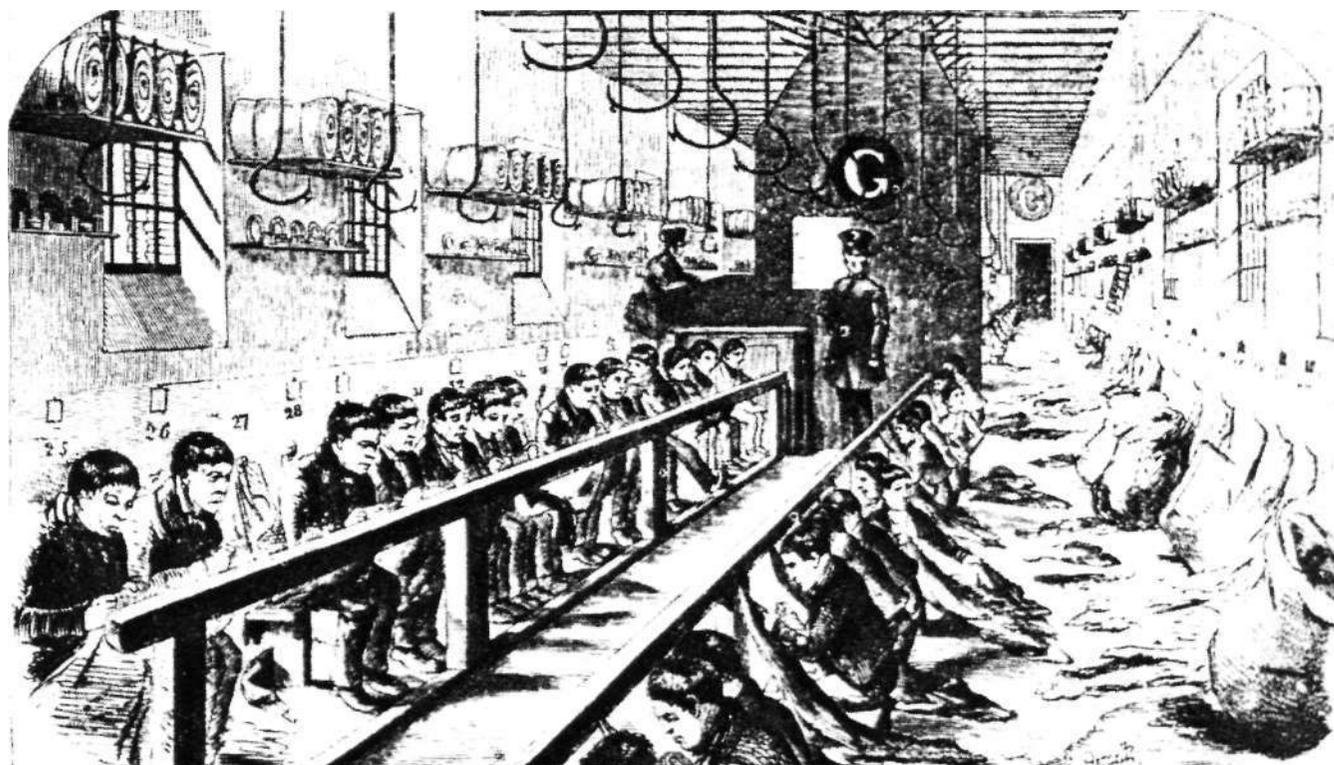
L.M: But it did get one very negative review, in the *NME* Have you seen that review?

W.G: Yeah. It's funny. They didn't get it. *NME* didn't like us that trip. It just depends on who's reviewing it. Charlie Murray reviewed my earlier novels for the *NME* and he got it; he liked them. But the two guys they sent to talk to us about *The Difference Engine* didn't get it and I suspect they just didn't know enough British history — they were rock 'n roll guys. The trouble with a book like this is that you have to know what really happened in some detail in order to appreciate how it's been changed. It's a sort of monumental piece; a great, big, dense thing, rather like that Brodsky and Utkin stuff.

L.M: It reminds me a lot of Humphrey Jennings's *Pandaemonium*.

W.G: Oh, well *Pandaemonium* was actually a key text. The whole final section of the book is modelled on it. A phenomenally weird book, man, one of the weirdest in the world. Sterling found it and said: "I don't know what to make of this". He sent me a copy and it just completely changed my whole sense of what we were doing with *The Difference Engine*.

BELOW: THE WORKSHOP UNDER THE SILENT SYSTEM AT MILLBANK PRISON, From Humphrey Jennings' *Pandaemonium*, New York Free Press,



If you made a list of all the ingredients of *The Difference Engine*, you come up with some very odd stuff: there's a lot of catastrophe theory, Jeremy Bentham, etc... I don't want to give away the plot, as it were, but it's structured as a sort of panopticon. It's like one of those prisons and the final thing you resolve is the identity of the eye, this all seeing eye that's keeping track of what's going on in the book.

L.M: Are or were you inherently fascinated by English society in the Victorian period itself?

W.G: I was always fascinated with the criminal culture of Victorian England. And in fact the criminal culture of my first three novels probably has more to do with Victorian crime than it does with modern crime. Also the 1980s and 90s have been increasingly neo-Victorian in a number of ways, too.

L.M: There was a cross-over with punk too. Several of the leading figures of British punk were likened to Victorian criminals.

W.G: Yeah. In the course of research we discovered what was probably the first pop sub-culture, the hooligan culture of Victorian England which had its own music; it even had bell bottom trousers. There's a bit of it in *The Difference Engine*. We found a wonderful book called *Hooligan* (by British sociologist Geoffrey Pearson — ed) which was a study of this and I immediately wanted to send it to Malcolm McLaren. I thought it was the most McLarenesque thing I'd ever seen.

L.M: How did you deal with the heavy load of research required for *The Difference Engine*

W.G: I sent Sterling to the University of Texas library which is the extent of our research. Fortunately he lived only a few blocks away. Evidently it's an incredible library but I've never had to go in. Bruce knows its contents intimately and burrowed ever more deeply into the vast trove of wacky Victoriana without which this book could not have been done. The extent to which it's *sampled* is one of the things that most delights me about it. There's a scene in which the character Oliphant goes to visit a

German newspaper editor who's living — as it happens although you don't know this from the text — in Karl Marx's flat in Soho. And the description of the flat (they're having a discussion about Karl Marx in the scene) is taken pretty much word for word from the secret intelligence report of a Prussian agent who was sent by the Prussian intelligence service, posing as a journalist, to interview Karl Marx. Literally every article on the table is taken from this actual account. It's too clever by half in some ways. I think *The Difference Engine* is a much more post-modern effort than my previous work

L.M: You've talked about Marx but what about Engels? Did you access his book on *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844/5)?

W.G: No. In the book Engels is an enormously wealthy textile magnate who's part of Babbage's meritocracy lordship. Another character wonders at one point how a gentleman like Engels could have any interest in these demented revolutionaries who followed Marx to New York (Manhattan has ceded from the union and it's a Marxist state). Marx was taken from a biography of his wife which is quite fascinating because you get the sense of what a pain in the butt it was to live with this guy.

L.M: Do you think you might do more collaborative work along the lines of this novel or is it very much a one-off?

W.G: No, I don't really expect to. It was designed to be as much of a one-off as it could possibly be. My only regret is that having uncovered so much, we had so many spare parts left over at the end which we just had to pack away. One of the inspiring things about working with Sterling is the vehemence with which he refuses to establish a template for what he's doing, so each time it has to be an absolute one-off.

L.M: You and Sterling share a strong interest in popular music, don't you?

W.G: He's much more systematically up on it than I am. I usually go and ask him what he's listening to. I suspect that when younger people ask Sterling what he's listening to, it's quite exciting. When they ask me I can see the disappointment in their eyes, (laughter) I no



LUDGATE HILL
from *Pandaemonium*.

longer care whether anything is current. I've reached a point in my life where all pop music is happening at the same moment; it doesn't matter when it was actually made.

L.M: You said the other day that you wondered whether the literary audience would even recognize as a culture what formed you as a writer: an immersion in Sci-Fi, rock music and comics.

W.G: Yeah. But over that I have a thin overlay of bad North American university education (Laughter). I really don't believe there is any more capital C culture. I don't think there is an official culture. I think everyone is making up their own as they go along and that's much more interesting.

T.C: That seems to be the main difference between you and J.G. Ballard. He creates this enormous dystopia where everyone is caught in the continuum. Whereas you define subcultures which find spaces for themselves to live.

W.G: Yeah. Well...I think in my early books you never get to see the dystopia, you never get to see the main part of the world. You don't know whether there really is a middle class, you never really see how ordinary people live, you hardly glimpse them because you're looking at characters who've hollowed out these little caves for themselves in the structure and all they can see is the inside of the caves. I don't know whether that's significant or simply convenient. In terms of what I have to do in my work, I suspect it's largely convenient. It's easier to keep them in the flat.

T.C: It seems like the absolutely rich and the absolutely poor still live in their caverns.

W.G: Yeah, but America feels more like that all the time. Except that the poor people don't have any caves to go into.

L.M: They're out on the street.

W.G: Yeah, they're lying around on the street. Well-off people, even middle class people in Los Angeles, live completely in private spaces. More and more people are commenting on this phenomenon in LA of the privatization of public space. Malls aren't really public spaces, malls are machines to extract your money. They're not the same as parks but there aren't any parks in LA now. They've become totally dysfunctional. You can't go into them to relax. If you're relatively affluent it would never occur to you to go there and the police won't let poor people use them either so they're just not happening anymore.

L.M: You've said that your novels don't have a pre-formulated political position. To the contrary, perhaps you write them in order to try to understand what your political position might be. Are you getting any closer to

crystallizing what those politics are?

W.G: No, I don't think I am. It isn't necessarily the kind of exploration that will lead to an answer; it's just an exploration. The other day, a journalist from one of the local newspapers asked: "what do think of free trade?" And I just thought: "My God, I don't know. In some sense I'm not even an adult, I don't even know what I think about free trade".

L.M: Do you see yourself as opening up possibilities with the trilogy and *The Difference Engine* which you can then leave to other writers to explore further?

W.G: I would doubt very much that anyone would try to take off from *The Difference Engine* to try to produce any kind of pop artifact. To the extent that I can see a Gibson influence in contemporary Science Fiction, almost invariably it's not very good, not very satisfying; although there are some exceptions to that. Maybe there hasn't been enough time for people to digest it. I mean I needed years to digest my Ballard and Burroughs. If you try to come out and sound like someone you really enjoyed too early in your career it doesn't work because it's not your voice.

L.M: Are Ballard and Burroughs the two writers you'd see as your chief influences?

W.G: Well, they were seminal influences to the extent that I had no idea what the extent was. It's just part of my culture. It's hard for me to imagine the world of literature without them. And Pynchon as well. A lot of people have assumed that I was influenced by Philip K. Dick. I was never an enthusiastic reader of Dick. I've always felt that I got my hit of Philip Dick from Thomas Pynchon because Pynchon managed to do very concisely what Dick was trying to do through this vast shelf of nearly identical novels.

L.M: You've spoken of the moment when you find the voice of the text in the fiction you're writing. Is that something you comprehended early in your writing career?

W.G: No, it's something I realized in the course of working. At first I didn't know what to call it. E.M. Forster once said that you knew it was working when the characters began to do things you hadn't anticipated. I read that as an undergraduate and took it all very much to heart. Also in *Aspects of the Novel*, I believe he argues that a genuinely good novel can't be didactic. I was taught that book by a leftist-anarchist professor who used it for his own argument that a fascist could not write a good novel. We were using fascist in a very 60s lower case way in those days; basically anyone we didn't like. That was one of the only really interesting literary discussions I ever had as an undergraduate.