Burning Chrome Short Guide

Burning Chrome by William Gibson

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Contents

Characters

The narrators are always male in Gibson's stories and usually possess some of the following traits: cynicism, less-than-average looks, shaky financial status, drug addiction, technical ability, weak physical strength, pale skin. They are the postmodern everyman, and usually their looks are not described. The women who appear in the stories are the ones who have hair and eye color, bodies and clothes to display. Some of them, like Molly Millions, possess physical strength and killer instincts, which they use to rescue the men they like. (These men are not waiting to be rescued, however; they maintain their masculinity by never asking for help.)

The women are ultimately looking out for themselves, and the male characters who forget that end up abandoned and lamenting their loss. Even Rikke, who has a small part in "Burning Chrome," finds a way (albeit an unsavory one) to earn the money she needs while Bobby Quine and Automatic Jack set up an elaborate plan to steal a fortune. Rather than celebrate the independence of these women, Gibson's jilted narrators tend to see them as mysterious and strange. "New Rose Hotel" is an extended lament for a lost woman. The unnamed narrator sits in a tiny hotel room, reminiscing about the woman who doublecrossed him: "Sandii, you left me here. You left me all your things. This gun. Your makeup, all the shadows and blushes capped in plastic. Your Cray microcomputer, a gift from Fox, with a shopping list you entered.

Sometimes I play that back, watching each item cross the silver screen " (New Rose Hotel). In spite of her treachery, he concludes, "It's all right baby. Only please come here. Hold my hand."

Social Concerns

Burning Chrome is a collection of William Gibson's science-fiction short stories.

He wrote this collection in the 1980s as the computer revolution was becoming part of popular culture, and most of the stories deal with man's relationship to technology.

Literary texts exploring this relationship have been common since the Industrial Revolution, but the sub-genre of cyberpunk to which theses stories belong arose in the 1980s. The word comes from cybernetics, which is the study of the relationship between human control systems, such as the brain and nervous system, and complex electronic systems like computers. Characters in cyberpunk stories cross the boundaries between man and machine. W. A. Senior defines cyberpunk novels as having "a rigorous intellectual base that permits hard extrapolative questions about the future of technology and its effect on man; a society/ culture permeated by various technologies so that humanity has begun to fragment as a result; a frequently grim setting where the gap between rich and poor has become unbridgeable and where the middle class seems virtually to have disappeared; and a freewheeling aesthetic vision obtained from 'punk' culture" (Senior, "Blade Runner and Cyberpunk Visions of Humanity").

In Gibson's fictional world, technology has proliferated to such an extent that one can sometimes no longer tell where man ends and machine begins. Although there are characters in Gibson's stories who use technology to make up for a personal shortcoming, such as Automatic Jack's prosthetic arm in "Burning Chrome" and Lise's exoskeleton in "The Winter Market," the majority of the characters are now using technology to improve on normal bodies.

This is most clearly explored in "Johnny Mnemonic."

As the first story in Burning Chrome, "Johnny Mnemonic" introduces the reader to Johnny's world, in which cosmetic surgery fashions change as often as fashions in clothes. The narrator is incredibly insouciant as he explains, "I checked myself out . . .

your basic sharp-faced Caucasoid with a ruff of stiff, dark hair. The girls at Under the Knife were big on Sony Mao, and it was getting harder to keep them from adding the chic suggestion of epicanthic folds."

Although Johnny never reveals what he used to look like, it is assumed that the alterations are fairly radical since he is using them as a disguise. Nor is Johnny the only character to alter his looks. Ralfi Face "[wore] the once-famous face of Christian White for twenty years," and Ralfi's bodyguards, the Magnetic Dog Sisters, "were as nearly identical as cosmetic surgery could make them." Molly Millions has her share of modifications as well. She has retractable razors under her fingernails, and what Johnny

first takes for sunglasses are in fact "surgical inlays, the silver rising smoothly from her high cheekbones, sealing her eyes in the sockets. I saw my new face twinned there."

Molly and Johnny are twins themselves; they both use body modifications that go far beyond cosmetic surgery as a way of doing business. Molly is a bodyguard to anyone who can afford to hire her, and Johnny is a courier who can store information in an implant in his brain. The advantage of a human computer courier over the more traditional kind is that Johnny stores the information on an "idiot/savant basis."

He explains, "The stored data are fed in through a modified series of microsurgical contraautism prostheses. . . Client's code is stored in a special chip; barring Squids, which we in the trade don't like to talk about, there's no way to recover your phrase.

Can't drug it out, cut it out, torture it. I don't know it, never did." Of course, the kinds of clients who employ such elaborate and expensive security are often involved in criminal deals, and now the Yakuza are after Johnny because of the stolen data in his head.

Radical body modifications are not even limited to human beings. Molly introduces Johnny to a Navy dolphin named Jones: "He was surplus from the last war. A cyborg. He rose out of the water, showing us the crusted plates along his sides, a kind of visual pun, his grace nearly lost under articulated armor, clumsy and prehistoric.

Twin deformities on either side of his skull had been engineered to house sensor units."

If Molly and Johnny can be said to represent the boundless possibilities available through genetic implants, Jones is the industry's skeleton in the closet. In order to get dolphins to work for the Navy, the Navy gets the dolphins addicted to heroin.

In "The Winter Market," Casey struggles with issues of humanity through his perceptions of Lise, a character who has lost the will to live. Lise was born unable to move due to a congenital neuromuscular defect. The technology of the future has provided her with an exoskeleton: "It was jacked straight into her brain, myoelectric interface. The fragile-looking polycarbon brace moved her arms and legs . . . a more subtle system handled her thin hands, galvanic inlays" (Winter Market). For Lise, technology is not a cool fashion accessory, it is a substitute for a lack, but like all substitutes in postmodernity, it can never truly replace the real thing. Lise can move (with a "terrible grace"), but the machinery is visible to others, it rubs sores on her skin, and it has left her with no sense of touch.

She cannot feel physical contact of any kind.

Casey's reaction to the exoskeleton is also negative; he does not see it as a part of Lise herself but as a separate thing. His descriptions of her movement always place the agency on the exoskeleton rather than Lise: she "was advanced" at him, the "exoskeleton carried her," and "it hoisted her up" and "hauled her into the kitchen for a glass of water" are Casey's descriptions of her movements. Lise will not remove her exoskeleton for any reason, however, because "she'd start to choke and die at the thought of that utter helplessness."

Lise, however, has the ability to generate dreams intentionally. When Casey discovers just how good she is at generating this raw material, the road is paved for her to become famous. The only problem is that Lise is slowly, and intentionally, dying.

And therein lies her motive for becoming a star. As Rubin later tells Casey, "She knew man. No dreams, no hope . . . And she used the money to buy herself a way out, that's all" (Winter Market). Lise uses the money from Kings of Sleep to have herself "translated . . . into a hardwired program."She leaves her defective body behind and records her consciousness in a computer. The problem Casey has is that he does not know if it is really her anymore. Can the mind be severed from the body and still survive?

Throughout the narrative of "The Winter Market," Rubin is expecting the now dead Lise to call Casey, because the construct in the computer will behave just as Lise did when she was alive. Casey asks, "Rubin, if she calls me, is it her?" But Rubin can only respond with another question, "God only knows . . . the technology is there, so who, man, really who, is to say?" Casey's discomfort at the idea is not surprising, given his views of her exoskeleton in life. His character reflects the anxiety of modern life that technology is stripping us of our humanity, that machines are taking over and that what is truly human is the body. Can the mind exist without the body?

Lise did not have the answer either, but for her the risk was worth it. Life with a defective body was just bad enough to make life without any body seem like a good way out. "I could have believed what Rubin believes, that she was so truly past it, our hitech Saint Joan burning for union with that hardwired godhead in Hollywood, that nothing mattered to her except the hour of her departure. That she threw away that poor sad body with a cry of release, free of the bonds of polycarbon and hated flesh . . . . Maybe it was that way. I'm sure that's the way she expected it to be."

The popular medium in the Sprawl series is simstim, a kind of guided virtualreality experience that is the future of Hollywood. Simstim appears in the background of most of the Sprawl stories, but it is most fully explored in "The Winter Market," set in an earlier time period than the Sprawl series. No longer are films just a series of two-dimensional images projected onto a screen. Instead, a recorded experience is transmitted directly into the brain. Because each person experiences it separately, the communal characteristics of a film society are erased. Art is more of an individual experience.

Techniques

Gibson injected new life into a sciencefiction genre that seemed tired to many in the 1980s. As Bruce Sterling accurately noted in the introduction to the Ace Books edition, the apocalypse so essential to classic 1950s-generated cold-war sci-fi is a nonconcern for Gibson: "The triumph of these pieces was their brilliant, self-consistent evocation of a credible future." In a marked departure from cold-war post-apocalyptic science fiction, life goes on in Gibson's collection.

Readers of Gibson's stories sometimes complain that the components of the worlds he creates are never explained. For example, "The Winter Market" never mentions the word simstim but does employ the same feel to the experience. The kids Casey gets to test Kings of Sleep he has "smeared saline paste on their temples, taped the trodes on" is similar enough to the description in "Burning Chrome" of Rikki wearing the "contact band across her forehead like a gray plastic tiara." Readers who seek a neat, one-to-one picture of Gibson's world will be disappointed however. In true postmodern fashion, there is no coherent world. Each character presents a different world to the reader, because for each character the world is different. Reading Gibson's stories requires a tolerance of chaos and enough imagination to fill in the gaps as best the reader can.

It is in "Burning Chrome" that simstim is explained as "simulated stimuli: the world—all the interesting parts, anyway— as perceived by Tally Isham." In "The Winter Market" it is just the world as perceived by Lise, perhaps taking place at an earlier point in time than the Sprawl stories—the story contains more references to present day places and habits: San Francisco, the Tate Gallery, drinking beer, Ikea furniture.

Burning Chrome also contains three stories Gibson co-authored with others: "The Belonging Kind" with John Shirley, "Red Star, Winter Orbit" with Bruce Sterling, and "Dogfight" with Michael Swanwick.

Gibson's range when writing solo is wide enough, however, that these pieces blend into the collection as good stories in their own right, not just filler.

Themes

Of course, radical body alterations cost a lot of money. Of the ten stories in Burning Chrome, many feature characters that could be considered to be trying to get ahead in an information-driven, class-divided society.

In "Johnny Mnemonic" the mental courier Johnny finds himself out of a job when his broker (or fence, depending on your point of view) stores Yakuza stolen data in his head. In order to avoid being killed, Johnny forms an alliance with Molly Millions, a free-agent bodyguard, and Jones, a technologically enhanced dolphin addicted to junk.

They hide from the Yakuza in Lo Tek territory: "The Lo Tek's leech their webs and huddling places to the city's fabric with thick gobs of epoxy and sleep above the abyss in mesh hammocks. Their country is so attenuated that in places it consists of little more than holds for hands and feet, sawed into geodesic struts." By drawing the Yakuza assassin into Lo Tek territory, Molly puts him at a disadvantage. Without any technology besides the weapon in his prosthetic fingertip to rely on, the single assassin is easily beaten.

The trio then goes into business together.

As a courier, Johnny stores information on an "idiot/savant basis." Jones' navy implants are able to scan the traces of the programs (the Squids), however, and the three become blackmail entrepreneurs, extracting and selling all the data ever stored in Johnny's head. The story ends with Johnny adopting both high and low tech; at the end of the story he claims both that "my new teeth have almost grown in" (the Lo Teks all have "tooth bud transplants from Dobermans") and a few paragraphs later, "I'm getting to be the most technical boy in town." In this way, Gibson addresses the fear in society that we have become too dependent on technology. Some may rely too much on technology and information, but there are always those who can mediate between high and low technology (and high and low class) and come out on top. Class in "Johnny Mnemonic" is not purely about money but also about technology—those who have it versus those who do not. Johnny reminds the reader that "We're an information economy. They teach you that in school.

What they don't tell you is that it's impossible to move, to live, to operate at any level without leaving traces, bits, seemingly meaningless fragments of personal information.

Fragments that can be retrieved, amplified. . . ." This speaks directly to common fears today of a lack of security and privacy.

Internet transactions are monitored; consumer information is bought and sold by credit card companies and other institutions. The Lo Tek heaven and Johnny and Molly's triumph over the corporate Yakuza assassin reassures the reader that even these traces can be used to one's advantage as well.

"New Rose Hotel" is a story of love and betrayal but is framed around a tale of intellectual corporate warfare. Here, the upper class owns information that has not even been created yet because it owns all of the top research scientists. The unnamed narrator and his business partner Fox initiate a deal: get top research scientist Hiroshi Yomiuri to leave one corporation, Maas Biolabs, for another, Hosaka. "The money was in corporate defectors," the narrator says, and he and Fox are after the money.

But Hiroshi is already so well paid and well treated by Maas that Hosaka cannot get him to defect by offering money. The partners discover a down-on-her-luck beauty named Sandii and use her as bait for Hiroshi.

What seemed like a simple plan quickly sours. While the narrator falls in love with Sandii, she is secretly working for Maas.

What is frightening about the new genetic engineering corporations like Maas is that they are so powerful that they make their own laws. Hosaka gathers its best research scientists in Marrakech once Hiroshi, with Sandii, has defected. Maas, through Sandii, then sabotages the project. She "reprogrammed the DNA synthesizer" to create a meningial virus that kills all of Hosaka's researchers. Hiroshi is sacrificed to the greater good of Maas, a company that is, as the narrator retrospectively states, "Small, fast, ruthless. All Edge."

Adaptations

Johnny Mnemonic. Dir. Robert Longo. Perf.

Keanu Reeves, Dina Meyer, Dolph Lungren, Takeshi Kitano, Ice-T, Henry Rollins. Screenplay by William Gibson. Tri-Star Pictures, 1995.

The premise of the film remains the same, and the ending, though noticeably different, retains the theme of the original story.

Instead of Molly, Jones, and Johnny making a private profit by outwitting the technology of the elites, the movie version of Johnny Mnemonic makes the Lo Teks a band of noble freedom fighters who broadcast pirate television messages to the downtrodden lower classes excluded from the immense wealth of the cities. The issue of class is more prominent in the film than in the short story. Gibson's original story was one of three individuals profiting by bucking the system; the film seeks revolution. The film begins with scenes of decadence: a posh hotel room, giant television screen, and an expensive call girl. As Johnny heads to a new client across town, his suit and tie and clean-cut looks contrast sharply with a mob of poorly clad and ungroomed protesters outside the hotel.

Instead of Molly Millions, Johnny is rescued by Jade, who has no mirrored implants and no fingernail razors but has been modified to jack up her reflexes. But she also suffers from a disease called Nerve Attenuation Syndrome (NAS), which causes her to have fits of uncontrollable shaking, which makes her more vulnerable than Gibson's original character. The cause of the disease is known; a benevolent mad scientist/volunteer doctor called Spider explains: "What causes it? The world causes it ...

information overload. All the electronics around you, poisoning the airwaves. . . .

But we still have all this [stuff] because we can't live without it." In a sudden twist, however, Spider reveals that he is the intended recipient of Johnny's information, and what he is carrying is information on how to cure NAS, information that the research corporations wanted to keep privately owned for profit. The corporation wants Johnny dead so the research will not get out. Spider and the Lo Teks want to extract the information and broadcast it worldwide so that the NAS plague can be stemmed for everyone, not just those rich enough to afford it. But since Johnny's password is lost, the only way to get the information out of his implant might kill him.

Johnny is faced with a moral crisis. In response to Jade's pressuring, he says, "You know, all my life I've been careful to stay in my own corner. Looking out for number one, no complications. Now, suddenly I'm responsible for the entire . . . world." Finally, Johnny is introduced to the dolphin Jones (kept in a depressingly small tank) who at the

last moment can pull the password from Johnny's brain, saving both Johnny and the world.

Although the film has some interesting montage sequences with Japanese anime images, which reflect emotional states of the characters, it is unfortunately a mediocre film at best, with some shoddy performances and patchy narrative strategies. But since Gibson himself wrote the screenplay, it is interesting as a supplement to the story.

New Rose Hotel. Dir. Abel Ferrara. Perf.

Christopher Walken, Willem DaFoe, Asia Argento. Edward R. Pressman Film Corporation/Quadra Entertainment. 1998.

Ferrara's New Rose Hotel is an incredibly rich visual rendition of the short story. It maintains the international/Japanese feel of the original by having the opening credits in both Japanese and English and voiceover narratives in Japanese at various moments throughout the film. The film is languidly introspective and captures just the right feel of the original story.

Hiroshi is never seen directly in the film but represented by second- and even thirdhand views, which maintain the distance felt in the original story, where viewers only know about Hiroshi through the narrator's memories. Fox and the narrator (X) track Hiroshi through television monitors, security cameras, and images transmitted to Palm Pilots. Fractured images, partial images, images in motion, and images with blurry reflections superimposed combine to form a post-modern world where nothing is straightforward, and just who is working for whom is always unclear. The multiple depths of film also maintain Gibson's emphasis on technology found in so much of his work. When Sandii goes into Hiroshi's world, she is represented in the same way, and by the time the narrator is in the New Rose Hotel, she is only an image of an image, no longer directly shown. She has been able to cross a line into a different world, one that Fox and X aspired to but never achieved.

X questions Fox's ambition to get involved with Hiroshi: "If this happens, will that do it for you? Will you find redemption, or will you finally have the Edge, or whatever you call that pie-shaped wedge that's missing from your psyche that doesn't allow you to feel complete?" Fox responds, "Psyches? These things are for idlers and dreamers. Introspection? Where does this come from? It does not befit—behoove—a gentleman to be introspective." X, however, is a dreamer. Fox is killed almost immediately after the betrayal, but X lives long enough to dream longingly about Sandii, his introspection becoming the narrative.

Early in the film Fox counters X's skepticism by saying, "Don't be so negative. Everything's coming up roses. This time our ship's coming in." The irony is that Fox's roses come up, but the new roses are bittersweet. The New Rose Hotel is a rack of tiny coffin-shaped rooms, one of which X retreats into to wait for Hosaka to find and kill him.

Key Questions

1. Drastic cosmetic surgery is the norm in the world of "Johnny Mnemonic" and "Burning Chrome." Johnny Mnemonic wants to keep a "Caucasoid" appearance, while the girls at Under the Knife want to give him epicanthic folds. Ralphi, like many others, it is implied, "wears" the face of his favorite celebrity. Molly Millions has her eyes sealed off with mirrored inlays—permanent sunglassses, permanent cool—and has retractable scalpels under her fingernails. Even the Lo Teks ("low technique, low technology"), supposedly protesting/resisting the high-tech popular ideology, have clearly modified their bodies to achieve their desired image: ". . . he regarded us with his one eye and slowly extruded a thick length of greyish tongue, licking huge canines. I wondered how they wrote off tooth-bud transplants as low technology." In "Burning Chrome," Rikki gets Zeiss Ikon brand eyes, which include the name written on the corneas. Given that Gibson wrote these stories in the 1980s, when the popularity (and controversy) of cosmetic surgery was on the rise, was his vision of the future accurate? Was it meant to reassure or frighten his audience?

2. Because Gibson champions the underclasses in his stories, many of the narratives are about the characters' triumphs over obstacles. Given the broadening chasm between the rich and the poor in our society (between those who can afford new technology and those who cannot), will it be possible for those born in the lower classes to catch up to those born with money, or are Gibson's stories simply idealistic fantasies?

3. It has been said that in Gibson's stories, the main action always takes place outside of the narrative. Discuss the effects of this technique in several of the stories in Burning Chrome.

Literary Precedents

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote "Artist of the Beautiful," "Rappaccini's Daughter," "The Birthmark," House of the Seven Gables.

One of Hawthorne's recurrent themes was the effect of technology on man. "The Birthmark" makes for an especially good comparison to Gibson, since Aylmer's drive to remove the hand-shaped birthmark from his wife's cheek is often read as a precursor to cosmetic surgery. Aylmer's incessant efforts are ultimately successful in removing the mark, but his wife dies as a result.

H. Bruce Franklin writes in Future Perfect that "Aylmer, who represents the Faustian, over-reaching, over-intellectualized, and overspiritualized aspect of science, sacrifices his nearly angelic but real wife Georgiana to the ideal of perfection."

The early concerns over daguerreotyping represented in The House of the Seven Gables are forerunners of Casey's discomfort over Lise's translation into a computer. Rubin points out to him that she's going to call him soon, because the computer construct will behave the same as the original Lise would have, but Casey wants to know, "is it her," questioning the authenticity of the construct. In The House of the Seven Gables, the characters have doubts as to the reliability of even the daguerreotype. This arises in part because of the physical characteristics of the plates themselves. As Phoebe Pyncheon remarks, ". . . they are so hard and stern; besides dodging away from the eye and trying to escape altogether. They are conscious of looking very unamiable, I suppose, and therefore hate to be seen."

Daguerreotypes differ from photographs because the image, although just as clear, fades in and out of view depending on the triangulation between viewer, light source, and image. Additionally, a daguerreotype is a "direct positive" image—it contains negative and positive images on top of each other.

Related Titles

Burning Chrome presents a broad spectrum of Gibson's capabilities. The Strand stories set the stage for his most acclaimed novel, Neuromancer, which in some ways is a more detailed version of the story "Burning Chrome." Molly Millions reappears in Neuromancer and near the end of the novel reveals further information about her partnership with Johnny Mnemonic. Two characters from "Burning Chrome" join Molly as well. Case, the main character and narrator, was trained as a cowboy by Bobby Quine, Jack's partner in "Burning Chrome."

Molly knows Quine too, a "real asshole," she says, which conflicts with the lovelorn version of Quine that Jack presents in "Burning Chrome." Case and Molly do not need Quine for this venture however, but the construct of Case's other teacher, McCoy Pauley. Molly then arranges to hire the Finn, "a fence, a trafficker in stolen goods, primarily software" (Neuromancer), to arrange some security measures. The hightech corporation Hosaka from "New Rose Hotel" makes the counsels of choice for Case (no mention of Maas).

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