

Virtual Light Short Guide

Virtual Light by William Gibson

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Contents

Virtual Light Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Key Questions.....	8
Literary Precedents.....	9
Related Titles.....	10
Copyright Information.....	11



Characters

Virtual Light develops a wide range of eccentric and interesting characters. One of the two primary figures is Berry Rydell, the ex-cop, ex-IntenSecure guard with good intentions but bad luck. He is a typical Gibson antihero except that he strives mightily always to do the right thing. He is often bumbling, however, and prone to manipulation. He is another of Gibson's unwashed, shaggy dog young men who appear inept but who, through some accident of fate, and usually through the help of a strong woman, finally succeed.

The strong woman of Virtual Light is the young bike messenger Chevette Washington. She is a spike-haired runaway waif from a city on the fringe who comes to the city to make something of herself. In this case, she finds friends such as the charismatic Sammy Sal and the fatherly Skinner who teach her the ropes and help her get started.

Sammy Sal is reminiscent of the Angie Mitchell's hairdresser/ friend Porphyre in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). Gibson flirts with killing off both Sammy Sal and Porphyre but in the end does not have the heart to kill either one. With 4480 the help of both Sammy Sal and Skinner, Chevette has learned enough to initiate Berry into the intricacies of life in NoCal and on the Bridge. She is also the one who outsmarts the assassin Loveless when he takes them hostage.

If Chevette has a sidekick in Sammy Sal, Berry has his in Joel Sublett, the IntenSecure guard with mirrored eyes and mega-allergies. Sublett comes from an intensely religious family wellversed in the mysteries of movies.

Instead of quoting Scripture, he quotes the names of the stars, the directors, the producers, and the year the film was made. His religious beliefs have taught him to find God on the screen.

The villains of Virtual Light are polymorphously perverse. In addition to the killer Loveless, Gibson populates the novel with the wily Lucius Warbaby and his technohomunculus Freddie and the amusingly sinister Russian cops, Svobodov and Orlovsky. To this he adds the punks Lowell and Codes who are blackmailed by Berry into helping him to get in touch with the underground hackers, the Republic of Desire.

As if to emphasize the element of social satire that he brings to the novel, Gibson ends with a chapter developing the thoughts of the Japanese graduate student Yamazaki, who has come to NoCal to study the culture of the Bridge. Yamazaki investigates ritual and social phenomena, and he is given a multitude of characters to study in Gibson's densely populated novel.

Social Concerns

Gibson's early Matrix novels, *Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986), and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, created a punk-inspired future world centered on the renegade underground of computer cowboys, drugs, and crime. In *Virtual Light*, Gibson chooses to enter the novel from the other side of the moral spectrum — from the perspective of characters trying to establish lives that are useful, but who are thwarted by bad luck, innocence, or the vices of others. Berry Rydell, one of the central characters of the novel, wants to be a straight arrow policeman, and Chevette Washington, the other central figure, tries to make a life for herself as a bike messenger. Both are caught up in a plot that forces them to confront their own weaknesses and to come to terms with the consequences of their actions.

Virtual Light continues to pursue the Gibson preoccupation with the impact of technology on individuals' lives and on the threatening and violent forces of the world that cause wounded and vulnerable people to come together to overcome adversity.

Techniques

Virtual Light continues to display Gibson's inventive use of surface texture to create a vivid future world.

Details of clothing, smells, colors, and textures are densely created along with the strange new customs and language of a post-earthquake California. Gibson creates new language for his new world. Perhaps the most memorable are the phrase *proj on*, a 2005 biker version of the concept of "keep on truckin,'" and the term a Thomasson to describe a "pointless but curious" and interesting phenomenon like the Bridge community. Denizens of Gibson's NoCal and SoCal frequent a bar called Cognitive Dissidents, listen to a band called Chrome Koran singing "She God's Girlfriend," and favor body piercing and tattoos.

Although Gibson writes in an impressionistic, fragmented style that has become one of his trademarks, the novel is less frenetic than *Neuromancer* and, in many ways, less unconventional. Plot development, as in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, uses multiple stories before the plot finally comes together, but again the technique is less scattered, focussing as it does primarily on the stories of two characters rather than on the four or five of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (please see separate entry).

What is most distinctive about this novel is Gibson's increased interest in satire — of religion, the police, California, television, and pop fads. The work is also funny and character-centered.

The plot is convoluted and deceptive, but the characters are foregrounded.

Something is happening to the characters, but it is Berry and Chevette's relationship and the interplay of character in an interesting and foreign setting that forms the strength of the novel.

Themes

The world of *Virtual Light* is the California of the near future — 2005.

Now the state is divided into NoCal and SoCal in what appears to be a post-cataclysmic world of the haves and the have-nots. Earthquakes and political upheaval have devastated not only California but Japan, and although some remnants of government remain, the world is controlled by powerful corporations for whom misconduct, fraud, and greed are the status quo.

Gibson pursues the concept of community in much more detail here than in previous novels. The devastation brought about by the earthquakes has, for some, forced increased separation and solitude. Wealthy inhabitants of SoCal live in bunkers protected by the security service IntenSecure or in barricaded enclaves. Late in the novel, Gibson satirizes the separatist quality of community when he describes the religious enclave of Paradise, a gated community that conducts an examination of conscience on any visitor who wants to enter. In sharp contrast to this, Gibson creates the vibrant chaos of the Bridge, a diverse, creative, organic neighborhood that has sprung up spontaneously on the remnants of the earthquake-damaged Golden Gate Bridge in what was formerly San Francisco. On the Bridge, Chevette and Skinner's home, the inhabitants care for and watch over their neighbors in the difficult times and begin to create their own rituals and culture.

The religious community of Paradise is only one part of Gibson's satire on religion in the novel. In the background, but there as a continuing motif, is the story of J. D. Shapely, a savior of sorts for this diseased world.

Shapely is idolized as the "saint" who, through the miracle of his blood which has served as the basis for a new vaccine to prevent the AIDS virus, was martyred and has thus become the center of a cult. Shapely has become a godlike sacrificial figure often compared to Jesus, subject of religious fervor and ritual. Gibson also satirizes conservative religion in the figure of the Reverend Fallon, a shyster evangelist whose cult worships old television shows and movies because they all contain the word of God. Followers of the religion lament the fact that the only thing young people want to do is enter into virtual reality, at the expense of the more wholesome and purposeful activity of watching television.

Gibson's satire does not stop at religion. He satirizes the phenomenon of instant TV fame in his introduction of the television program *Cops in Trouble*.

The program highlights police officers who have become involved in controversy, but the producers are only interested in a story until the next big story comes along. Berry, for instance, is being groomed as the next big *Cops in Trouble* star for killing a man who has supposedly taken his wife and children hostage. Berry's fifteen minutes of fame are over, however, when the Pooky Bear serial killer becomes the next media star.



Popular culture resonates as memorably in *Virtual Light* as it does in other Gibson novels. Gibson creates a visual world filled with an emphasis on the sights and sounds of 2005. Part of the advantage of having a near future world is that Gibson can reminisce on the recent past of "the black singer whose face turned white and then caved in" and can also create near-future extensions of such fads as body piercing, tattoos, a porn star named McDonna, and slang. Gibson's world is built on the debris of the past. Not only has Golden Gate Bridge been transformed, for instance, but Golden Gate Park has now been privatized and renamed Skywalker Park.

A further advantage of creating a near-future world is that Gibson can contrast the old and the new. Some of his characters can remember a time before the earthquake. Skinner collects and sells old artifacts such as hand tools and books. Ironically, the past is better than the new technology in some ways. Bike messengers, seemingly a thing of the past, are the ultimate in security in a computer-linked world where data is vulnerable to online pirates. The most secret information is sent by messenger to keep it safe from prying eyes and to make sure that it arrives. Gibson adds nostalgic touches of the past with a light touch of humor. Lucius Warbaby's ominous hightech car has a pine tree air freshener hanging from the dash.

Perhaps the Gibson theme that persists the most, however, throughout all of his novels, is the sense that no one can be trusted. The police officers Berry trusts turn out to be the bad guys, and the people Berry trusts at first, Warbaby and Eddie, become his enemies as well. Appearances are deceptive; is it a hologram or is it reality?

Entering cyberspace, as in other Gibson novels, is both exhilarating and threatening. As Berry and Chevette plot with the computer underground Republic of Desire, they encounter voices with monstrous shapes and made-up names.

In fact, these are the very tricksters who have caused Berry to lose his job with IntenSecure because of their deceptions.

As in other Gibson novels after *Neuromancer*, what salvation that exists for the central characters comes from the relationships they forge. In *Virtual Light*, Berry not only successfully thwarts the evil corporate scheme to rebuild San Francisco Japanese-style, but Berry and Chevette stay together and their story will probably be the next episode of *Cops in Trouble*.



Key Questions

Gibson's work provokes the same strong responses generated by punk music and punk fashion. His work attracts an audience beyond those who normally read science fiction because of his unique vision of computer cyberspace, a vision that has begun to become reality in the lives of many readers. Gibson has consciously tried to react against what he saw as a number of sterile conventions of science fiction.

Although Gibson does not present his near-future world as either utopic or dystopic, clearly his vision of one possible near-future invites discussion of such topics as the impact of technology and war on society, the role of multinational corporations, and the impact of living in a world where nature has receded.

1. Gibson introduces several communities in *Virtual Light* — the religious camp of Paradise, the gated homes of SoCal, the Bridge. Compare them to one another and consider how these communities reflect the realities of the future world Gibson creates.
2. Who is J. D. Shapely, and why is he an important figure in the novel?
3. What is the relationship between Chevette and Skinner? Between Yamazaki and Skinner?
4. If you are familiar with Gibson's other novels, in particular the *Sprawl* novels, discuss the differences and similarities between the visions of the future depicted in each.
5. Explain how Berry and Chevette use the Republic of Desire to carry out their plan.
6. Describe Berry. Why does he have such trouble keeping his jobs?
7. Vehicles are at the center of this novel. Survey the different types of vehicles used and explain the attachments characters form with their machines.
8. Why are the virtual light glasses that Chevette steals so important?
9. Details of popular culture form the texture of Gibson's work. What are some of the most memorable features of this world?
10. Is this novel humorous?



Literary Precedents

If *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is Gibson's heist caper, then *Virtual Light* is the cops and robbers story. It plays upon the ambiguities of whether the police are good or evil and the concomitant plot twists. In addition, *Virtual Light* borrows from the tradition of two kids on the lam, running from the villains who are threatening them because they know too much or saw too much.

Chevette steals the virtual light glasses on a whim and then finds that she has information that is crucial to the secret plan to rebuild the city. She and Berry must evade their pursuers in a scenario where they do not know who is friend and who is foe. Even the nice little old lady in the white van turns out to be a spy.

Another primary influence both on the setting and the style of *Virtual Light* is the work of Raymond Chandler.

Virtual Light is hard-boiled and knowing, but it does not take itself too seriously. Like Chandler's California, Gibson's SoCal is "full of mysteries," with "stricter regulations for who could and couldn't be a hairdresser" than for who could be a security guard.

Virtual Light is also a very mediaconscious novel. It is extremely visual as are all of Gibson's works, but this one also seems designed to be a film.

Gibson even puts in a suggestion for an actor to play Berry — at the police academy Berry learns he is a Tommy Lee Jones look-alike.

Related Titles

Virtual Light is not directly related either in setting or character to other Gibson works, but it continues to be concerned with the interaction of humans and technology and the power of corporations to manipulate society.

After Neuromancer Gibson seemed to focus more on character relationships and experimentation with plot and to move away from the conception that made him famous, cyberspace.



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