Mona Lisa Overdrive Short Guide

Mona Lisa Overdrive by William Gibson

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Contents

Characters

M ona Lisa Overdrive contains a large cast of colorful characters, some of whom appeared in earlier Gibson novels. Within each of the four converging plots, one or two characters assume dominance. The first major character to be introduced is Kumiko Yanaka, the young teenage daughter of a Yakuza oyabun who sends her to London for safekeeping. Kumiko is one of the youngest major characters Gibson has created. She is initiated into the evils and deceptions of the world by Sally Shears, aka Molly, the razorgirl of Neuromancer (1984). Sally takes an almost maternal interest in Kumiko.

Sally trusts Kumiko and gives her responsibility. Kumiko matures as the novel progresses, finally coming to terms with her mother's suicide and reconciling with her father. Kumiko is an intelligent, sympathetic character who brings fresh eyes to the complexities of Gibson's world.

The central figure of the Dog Solitude plot is Slick Henry, the car thief turned recluse and artist who is surrounded by an eccentric group of characters including Kid Afrika, the Count, Cherry Chesterfield, Little Bird, and the console cowboy Gentry. All of these characters are hiding, living in a fringe zone built on a contaminated landfill powered by stolen electricity.

Slick Henry is the reluctant hero of this setting. While in jail for car theft, he was punished by having his short-term memory impaired. As therapy, he constructs gigantic remote-controlled junk sculptures of such figures as the Judge and the Witch. His sculptures become the literal line of defense against the invaders who come to retrieve the aleph, a type of advanced technology.

Even damaged as he is and needing a bath, Slick Henry becomes one of the most sympathetic characters in the novel, antidrug and pro-art, surviving as best he can in the face of a hostile and lonely world. He is rewarded at the end of the novel by getting the girl, the med-tech nurse Cherry Chesterfield, and returning with her to Cleveland.

The third central figure of the novel is simstim star Angie Mitchell, who also appears in Count Zero (1986). She has the unusual capacity — as a result of her father's implanting biochips in her brain — of being able to jack directly into the matrix. Unfortunately, however, her capability makes her more controlled than controlling. The matrix manifests itself to her in the form of the voodoo gods, or loa, who bring her fragments of data and nightmarish dreams. Angie is the reader's link to the now-dead Jane Tessier-Ashpool whose plot to retrieve the aleph drives the novel. Angie is a pawn of Sense/ Net. She doesn't know who to trust and lives a life threatened by spies and plots. She finally escapes scrutiny by "dying" with Bobby Newmark, her longtime lover, into the aleph.

The final plot revolves around the sixteen-year-old Angie look-alike, Mona. She is chosen to impersonate Angie and undergoes plastic surgery to make her nearly

identical to the simstim star. Although she has lived a tawdry life as a prostitute with her pimp Eddy, she is surprisingly naive.

She idolizes Angie but begins to have second thoughts about impersonating her, partly because she fears that she will be killed in the plot and partly because she fears losing her identify as she becomes more like Angie. Mona escapes death as a sacrificial lamb and, in an ironic twist, goes on to becomes Angie the superstar while at the same time preserving small traits that make her distinctly Mona.

Characterization plays a much more prominent role in Mona Lisa Overdrive than it did in Neuromancer. Gibson devotes more effor t to developing complex characters with complex past lives, and he also works more carefully at delineating the relationships between characters. Even the development of the relationship between Angie and her hairdresser Porphyre, a minor part of the novel, is an example of the care Gibson brings to character development.

As in Neuromancer, Gibson's characters are damaged in some way, usually not in control of their lives. Remote powers like Continuity or Sense/Net or the Yakuza or the loa manipulate the human characters. Humans are often fooled by appearances and do not know who is trustworthy. What satisfaction or even peace that can be achieved usually occurs when characters escape into anonymity as Sally does when she arranges to have her files erased or into a pseudo-eternal life in some other sphere, as Bobby and Angie do when they enter the aleph.

Social Concerns

Mona Lisa Overdrive continues Gibson's concern with the impact of technology, but the novel also pursues in more depth family and generational issues as well as romantic relationships. The novel poses fundamental questions about the ways people can cope with adversity and make choices about changing the way they live their lives. In a rather romantic way, characters pursue dreams and transform past suffering and failure into limited successes through accommodation and compromise.

Techniques

Perhaps the most noticeable innovation in Mona Lisa Overdrive is Gibson's use of four converging plots that come together primarily through the character of Sally Shears and the development of the kidnapping attempt on Angie Mitchell. Through these plots Gibson is also able to develop four distinctive settings that help highlight cultural differences. The four plots involve (1) Kumiko Yanaka's trip to the Smoke to escape the political intrigue of the Yakuza in Japan, (2) Slick Henry's Dog Solitude existence in rustbelt New Jersey, (3) Angie Mitchell's retreat to Malibu afte r drug therapy, and (4) Mona's travels in the Sprawl during her reincarnation into Angie. The plots alternate chapters until the middle of the novel when they begin to converge on the location of Dog Solitude. Kumiko is kept somewhat separate (and safe) from the kidnapping as she observes events from London.

Gibson, in a novel that takes place fourteen years after Neuromancer and seven years afte r Count Zero, appropriately updates the technology. The aleph is a breakthrough technology composed of a solid mass of biochips and capable of creating a simulation of the universe. The aleph is also independent of the matrix and thus more secure than most data. Hover cars are the primary mode of transportation, and the editor who interviews Angie has a built-in recording device. Gibson humanizes technology somewhat more in Mona Lisa Overdrive than he does in Neuromancer. Kumiko's guide to London, Colin, is a comfortable, chatty recreation of a stereotypical English boy from a hunt print. Even the security drone that guards Angie on the beach in Malibu is more like a dragonfly than an attack helicopter.

The surface texture of Mona Lisa Overdrive, although somewhat less alien and presented at a more leisurely pace than in Neuromancer, is still striking and immediate. Gibson presents detailed and effective descriptions of fashion, hairstyles, tattoos, food, and surroundings.

Mona Lisa Overdrive displays a lighter touch and more humor than Gibson's earlier novels. Porphyre, for example, is a snide and witty commentator, and Gibson takes the time to comment on the technical difficulties engineers faced in recreating an alpine scene complete with mountain goat on the side of a Manhattan hotel. Mona Lisa Overdrive is at once a more humanized and funnier novel than Neuromancer, if less startling and innovative.

Themes

In Mona Lisa Overdrive Gibson explores the transformations and accommodations that must be made to cope with a changing technology. Understanding the way in which the matrix has changed as a result of the raid on the Villa Straylight in Neuromancer is a central question for the character Gentry, the console cowboy of Mona Lisa Overdrive who is the direct spiritual descendent of earlier figures Case (in Neuromancer) and Bobby Newmark (in Count Zero). He is preoccupied with questions of When It Changed and How It Changed, questions whose answers all stem from the union of the two AI's in Neuromancer.

The union of Wintermute and Neuromancer has a significant impact on the lives of several characters in Mona Lisa Overdrive. In particular, Angie Mitchell's life is changed by the aftermath of the change in the matrix.

The unity achieved at the end of Neuromancer apparently lasts only briefly when the matrix is splintered into the "ghosts in the machine" known as the loa, reincarnations of the traditional voodoo gods. They seem to represent the closest paradigm to the new state of the matrix. Angie, with her direct biochip access to the matrix, becomes the vehicle through which these new manifestations of the matrix are embodied. The matrix continues to change in the wake of the union of the artificial intelligences, and a consuming question for Gentry is to determine the new Shape of the matrix.

Mona Lisa Overdrive also reveals Gibson's interest in the entertainment industry. Generated in part by Gibson's experiences with screen-writing, the issue of the complexity and hypocrisy of the simstim industry and its superstar Angie Mitchell takes center stage.

Like the zaibatsus of Neuromancer, the simstim enterprise Sense/Net seems to run independently of the executives who theoretically run the company.

Variously manipulated by 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool and by the artificial intelligence Continuity, but also seemingly independent of these sources, Sense/ Net controls vast resources and permeates the lives of millions of people, forming their fantasies and satisfying their needs. Sense/Net is capable of manufacturing a superstar like Angie Mitchell and, just as easily, of creating her replacement Mona. Mona (as well as Bobby and Angie) are Horatio Alger characters, coming from obscurity, and sometimes poverty, to achieve dreams of wealth and fame.

Gibson also pursues the theme of gomi (garbage). He uses the relationship with the artifacts of the past to contrast the different cultures of the Sprawl (New York), the Smoke (London), and Japan, primarily through the eyes of the Japanese girl Kumiko. London preserves and treasures its junk, New York integrates it into its everyday life, and Japan replaces and discards the rubbish of the past.

Gibson, as in Neuromancer and Count Zero, combines the image of garbage with his interest in the relationship between technology and art. One of the central figures in Mona Lisa Overdrive is Slick Henry, an ex-car thief whose short term memory has been damaged during his time in jail. He uses art therapeutically as he creates junk sculptures of the Judge, the Investigators, and the Witch. This art helps him to purge his hostilities and nightmares while at the same time, on a literal level, it defends the residents of Dog Solitude against the invading forces.

Even the central AI of Mona Lisa Overdrive, Continuity, is an artist — he is writing a book.

Perhaps more significant than any of the other themes developed in the novel is Gibson's interest in developing complex character relationships. Technology is still important, but the emphasis shifts to the effect of technology on more fully developed characters and on the relationships of these characters to one another. The technological breakthrough of the aleph, for instance, leads to the transformation and reunion of Bobby Newmark and Angie Mitchell. They use the aleph as a means to making choices about the nature of their "life" together. Kumiko's AI guide to London, Colin, helps her form a close relationship with Sally, to understand the nature of her host Swain's deception, and to come to terms with her mother's suicide.

In Neuromancer the technological changes at the end of the novel lead to the separation of the human team. In contrast, at the end of Mona Lisa Overdrive, the tendency is toward reconciliation and commitment. Slick Henry leaves with Cherry for Cleveland; Angie and Bobby are together in the aleph; and Kumiko returns to a reconciliation with her father.

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 uses the device of having four separate plots converge. Describe your reactions to this technique.

2. Does Kumiko mature as a character? Are there turning points or influences on her character?

3. Does Mona's role change as the novel progresses?

4. Kumiko observes the gomi (garbage) of London (the Smoke) and of New York (the Sprawl) and contrasts it to the Japanese attitude toward gomi.

Discuss her observations.

5. Slick Henry emerges as a central figure in the novel. What is his role?

6. Angie Mitchell "dies" at the end of the novel, but her death is more like a transformation. Discuss the nature of her death and her meeting with Bobby, the Finn, Colin, and Continuity in the Matrix.

7. What role do the voodoo gods play in the novel?

8. How is Angie Mitchell's story a commentary on today's film industry?

9. If you are familiar with either of Gibson's other two Sprawl novels, compare and contrast the works in terms of characters, technology, and technique.

10. Discuss the role of female characters in this work.

Literary Precedents

Mona Lisa Overdrive demonstrates the same postmodern and science fiction influences as did Neuromancer, this time around a kidnapping plot. Gibson's work and experiences in Los Angeles with the film industry probably influenced the development of the Angie Mitchell Sense/Net subplot.

Related Titles

Mona Lisa Overdrive completes the Sprawl (Matrix) trilogy and relates more closely to the second novel Count Zero than it does to the first, Neuromancer.

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