

William

D O U G

W A L K E R

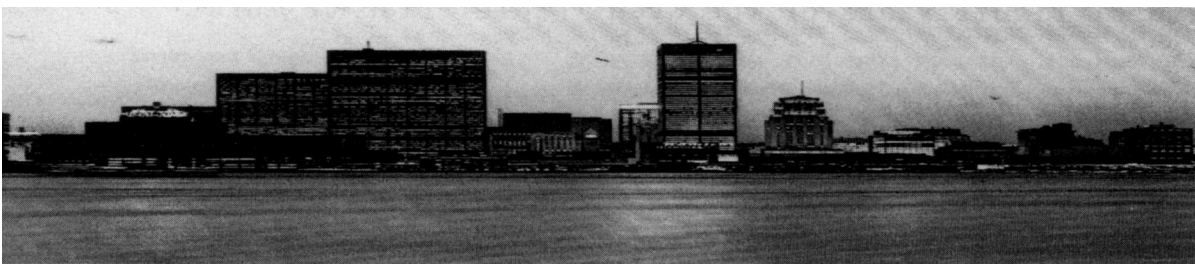
I N T E R V I E W S

S C I E N C E

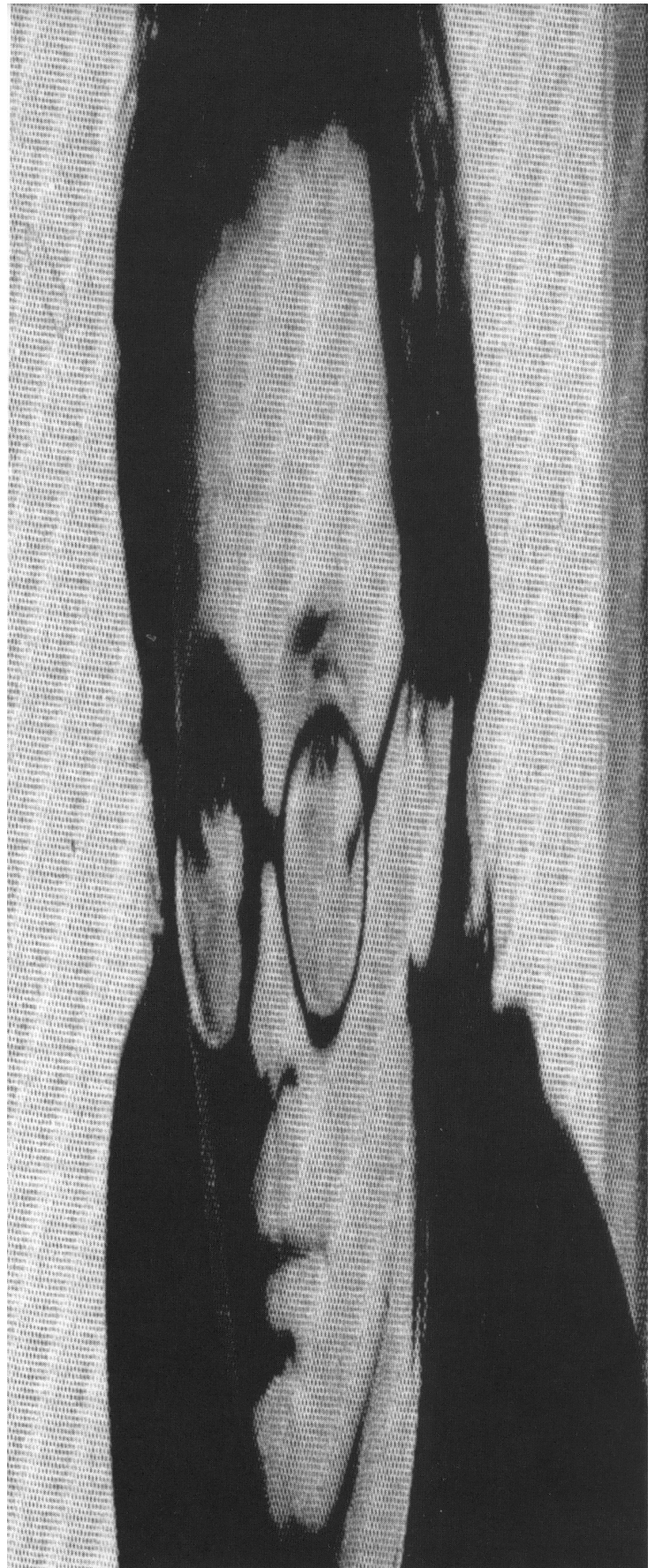
F I C T I O N

A U T H O R

Gibson



William Gibson was born in Virginia and moved to Canada in 1971. In 1985 his first novel *Neuromancer* won the Hugo, Nebula and Philip K. Dick awards. Gibson employs a taut literary technique reminiscent of roman noir style to describe a credible near future where media, technology, pop culture and market imperatives have spun out of control “like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast forward button.” Gibson’s extrapolations become high-orbit metaphors mapping the dynamics of social change of the current condition. William Gibson has published three novels: *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* and a collection of short stories *Burning Chrome*. Doug Walker conducted a written interview with Gibson at his home in Vancouver through the quaint archaic medium of the *canada post*.



DOUG WALKER: How did you get involved in writing Science Fiction? Was it a conscious decision or has it always been a fascination?

WILLIAM GIBSON: Neither, really. There was an element of real compulsion, though I didn't think writing Science Fiction was a particularly cool thing to do. Quite the opposite; it felt terminally geeky. It seemed to come from way down, though. Science Fiction pretends to be "about the future," but apprehending the present (AIDS, the greenhouse effect, bits of Chernobyl in your salad) seems to require the whole Science Fiction toolkit now.

The level of detail and technical information in the stories is extremely vivid and suggests you've done a lot of homework in this area. What were your sources? That's just an illusion I'm apparently good at generating. It basically calls for the skills a clever English major employs to write an "A" paper about a book he hasn't opened. The literary illusion of reality, technological or otherwise, is just that. I don't think of what I do as "research." We're all living in this massive flood of information... For me, it's a matter of glancing randomly at fragments in the flow. **Has your work been influenced by any specific films?**

The first ten minutes of John Carpenter's *Escape From New York* had some sort of influence on *Neuromancer*,

but Heavy Metal comics were probably a more direct "cinematic" influence. So far I haven't been able to figure out quite what screenplays are actually for. They're totemic objects of some kind. It's very mysterious. I've done one for a sequel to *Aliens*, and I'm doing another, with my friend John Shirley, loosely based on my story *New Rose Hotel* for Edward Pressman. If that one rolls, it'll be directed by Kathryn Bigelow, who we chose on the basis of her film *Near Dark*. **You focus a lot of interest on subcultures in your novels. Is there anything that you find especially interesting in the subcultures of today?** I like the idea of subcultures generally. It makes things more interesting. Marginally more interesting. Though actually hanging out with anyone whose sense of identity is primarily subcultural tends to be pretty dull. **With the concepts of downloading hardwired personality constructs into mainframes and artificial intelligence acting as deities, you give the classic theme of immortality a contemporary edge. Do you have any speculations on how our society might react or adapt if downloading were a technological possibility?** The best book on the possibilities of "downloading" is Grant Tinker's non-fiction *The Tomorrow Makers* (If you think downloading is spooky, this is the place to check out the possibilities of nanotechnology.) I'm not Isaac Asimov; I don't have ideas about things like that not on an everyday

basis. Whatever sense I have of these things emerges more or less exclusively during the narrative process. **Your description of the future has found a lot of favour with the intellectual avant garde as a metaphorical illustration of certain key ideas such as simulation and cultural implosion authored by people such as Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Frederic Jameson. Was any of this "Post structuralist" theory an influence on your work?** I haven't read them. **In our present society, the speed of information technologies seem to be eroding a sense of identity and cultural history. Do you have any opinions as to how the boosted information flow of the future will affect society and what the forms of adaptation to this condition might be like?** I think I had something like that in mind in *Count Zero* with character, like Bobby Newmark, whose sense of self, as conveyed in the narrative voice, is derived almost entirely from third rate media. Or his mother, who literally lives in an endless soap opera called *People of Importance* Jack Womack's *Ambient* is one recent novel that comes to mind as having dealt with this; his 21st century prole.;; subsist on a video diet of reruns of *Leave It To Beaver* and *I Love Lucy*, without seeming to think of this stuff as being *old*. **As a writer you have been creating interesting characters for the public to consume and now with your success the public**

wants to consume you as an interesting character. How does it feel to deal with that shift? I find that the shift frees me from feeling the need to be more interesting. **A lot of the action in *Neuromancer* takes place in a high-tech bohemia where everyone stays up late, works hard at their chosen obsession, and can then go to an all night bar and talk shop with like-minded comrades. Of you switch console cowboys with artists you've got a pretty good description of the "scene" of the recent past. Is there any connection with Case and his environment with a "scene" and your personal development as an artist?** I think the main difference between the "scene" I imagined for the console cowboys and any art scene I've known, at least in Canada is that the cowboys haven't anywhere to go for grants... I was thinking of criminals rather than artists, though "bohemia" is probably the right word here, because the "scene in *Neuromancer* is extremely romantic and hasn't much to do with real criminality at all. (I try to redress this somewhat in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.) **Has the experience of living as a Canadian in Vancouver made any difference in your writing?** Canada has always felt like an Alternate reality to me. A not quite America. The America I grew up in largely vanished in the seventies and eighties, so that I experience the contemporary realities of New York or Los Angeles as some of "future" Which of

course I find very valuable. The sight of homeless ragged people lying comatose on weedgrown traffic islands in West Hollywood still strikes me as unbelievable, something out of a cheap disaster film. ("The 1980s Considered as a Cheap Disaster film"...)

You make quite a few references to art in your novels, especially Joseph Cornell. I also understand that you are interested in the work of Mark Pauline and Survival Research Laboratories. "I don't know much about art but I know what I like..." Cornell's boxes had always intrigued me, so I went after them in *Count Zero* I try to do a similar job on Mark Pauline in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, though I'm not as satisfied with the result. Pauline's art feels to me like an extension of screwing around with dangerous things in your back yard when you're sixteen, loading empty CO2 cartridges with the heads of kitchen matches... I like that.

It seems to me that one of the reasons your work is so popular is that you have a unique talent for creating images that perfectly articulate the beauty and strangeness of technological urban life in 1988. It's like technopoetry giving a voice to a huge reservoir of mute experience. The strength of your style seems to transcend the pulp genre and become something more. Do you see your work operating in this way? How does your work relate to genre Science Fiction? Well, thanks, but you make it sound as though I just fell

out of nowhere, fully formed, with all these tricks up my sleeve whereas, if it weren't for the work of William Burroughs, J. C. Ballard, or for that matter of uncounted "genre" practitioners, I wouldn't be here. John LeCarré once credited Ian Fleming with having inadvertently created a "reverse market," with the Bond books, for LeCarré's work I think what you call "genre" Science Fiction may have done the same thing for me. **What interests are you exploring in your new work?** I'm writing a novel, in collaboration with Bruce Sterling, called *The Difference Engine*, an alternate history in which the Victorians invent steam driven computers. Cute as that might sound, it looks as though it's going to be a very dark book. **Do you have any plans to work outside a pop culture format?** I like knowing that my text will be mass produced. I like making money. I like seeing sonic crazed thing I wrote three years ago turn up in my local Safeway. It's a kick. Everything I've ever written has gone straight into print generally into mass market print. The idea of producing something in a limited edition isn't very exciting for me; might as well leave it in manuscript. I initially assumed that what I wanted to do "a outside Science Fiction's particular pop cult template... If I got to a point where I had to go elsewhere in order to feel I was "doing art," I'd be unhappy if I were still writing Science Fiction. As it is, it still feels like screwing around in the back yard, blowing things up.