In 1984, during Super Bowl halftime, television watchers were treated to a commercial that initiated a conversation about technology and utopia that continues today. During that commercial, Big Brother is shown glowering down from a monumental television screen, haranguing a pathetic mass of workers. Suddenly from their ranks, a rebellious young woman emerges. Rushing forward she flings a hammer toward the screen, shattering it, freeing the enslaved masses, introducing the halftime crowd to the Apple Macintosh, and, at least symbolically, starting the computer revolution for couch potatoes and football fans all around the world.

By playing off, as it does, the themes of utopia, dystopia, and the digital culture, this commercial nicely illustrates many of the themes I take up in this essay, which will focus on a central issue being worked out not only in the selling and the marketing of the digital future but in its more, or perhaps less, imaginary moments in science fiction. Central to this debate is the question of what kind of future we are creating and whether we will have a place in it. We can learn a lot about the contours of this debate from a close reading of science fiction, especially the work of William Gibson, who, like that prescient Apple commercial, has done much to initiate and shape this debate, beginning with the publication of Neuromancer, also released in 1984, a good year for utopias and dystopias.
Allow me to begin by setting out what I will call the problem of homelessness. It is against the backdrop of this problem that we can deepen our understanding of the issue of our place in the digital cosmos and its treatment in contemporary science fiction.

In 1938, writing about man’s place in the cosmos, Martin Buber distinguished between epochs of habitation and epochs of homelessness. “In the former,” Buber writes, “man lives in the world as in a house, as in a home. In the latter, man lives in the world as in an open field and at times does not even have four pegs with which to set up a tent” (126). From Aristotle to the medieval Christians, Buber argues, human beings have lived in the world as in a home. These were periods of habitation in which the human being had a fixed place in the cosmos. The cosmos for Aristotle, and later Aquinas, was “a manifold universe, ordered as an image, in which every thing and every being has its place and the being ‘man’ feels himself at home in union with them all” (134). This cosmological unity and the certitude with which human beings considered their place in it was shattered by Copernicus. “All the walls of the house were…crumbling beneath the blows of Copernicus, the unlimited was pressing in from every side, and man was standing in a universe which in actual fact could no longer be experienced as a house” (131). Following Copernicus, the original contact between the human being and the universe is dissolved and the human being finds his or her self a stranger in the universe. With the introduction of infinite space, we are no longer able to form an image of the universe, no longer able to transform it from a cold and meaningless space into a place, a home, an abode. Our own time, Buber argues, is best characterized by its pervasive homelessness.

Some forty years later, echoing Buber, Robert McDermott observes, “The deepest contemporary ontological problem is that of homelessness. The vast, limitless, perhaps infinite universe does not award us a place. The planet earth is a node in the midst of cosmic unintelligibility” (13). Michael Jackson begins his At Home in the World with an epigraph from Susan Sontag: “most serious thought in our time struggles with the feeling of homelessness.” Taking up the theme of being-at-home, Jackson too argues that ours is a century of uprootedness. “All over the world, fewer and fewer people live out their lives in the place where they were born. Perhaps at no other time in history has the question of belonging seemed so urgent” (1). Increasingly, our attempts to fashion an abode out of the
cosmos has been frustrated. We are thought to be a rootless people. Karl Jaspers points out in “The Spiritual Crisis of our Times”: “…man today has been uprooted, having become aware that he exists in what is but a historically determined and changing situation. It is as if the foundations of being had been shattered.” William Barrett, too, sees this as a dominant fact for the modern mind. “To be homeless—how well we know it in this age of displaced persons!… Homelessness is the destiny of modern man” (133-134).

In “Without Earth There is No Heaven,” Edwin Dobb suggests that contemporary cosmologists have given up on the idea of the cosmos as a home for human beings. The result, he argues, is a sense of abiding ontological solitude. In the cosmologies produced by the likes of Stephen Hawking, Steven Weinberg, and Alan Guth, the cosmos is largely lifeless, a brilliant intellectual edifice, yet utterly vacant. And yet, Dobb contends, judging from the popularity of texts such as Hawking’s A Brief History of Time and Carl Sagan’s television series Cosmos, “we still seek from cosmology what we have always sought from it, which is to say, guidance in our attempts to construct a metaphysical map of the world, at a time when cosmology has envisioned a universe that negates such attempts…” (35) Dobb argues that a more adequate cosmology would be one which shifts emphasis from trying to discern the structure of the universe to trying to reckon our place within that structure.

As the foregoing paragraphs make clear, the problem of homelessness, of finding a place in the cosmos, certainly predates the advent of digital technologies. Today, though, it is equally clear that our own experience of the problem is shaped by and probably deepened by our increasing reliance on technology. Indeed, the issue of place has been a focus of theorists of technology beginning at least with Marshall McLuhan. In The Medium is the Massage, McLuhan captures the general nature of technology and its impact on our sense of place. He writes,

Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of “time” and “space” and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men….Its message is Total Change, ending psychic, social, economic, and political parochialism….Nothing
can be further from the spirit of the new technology than “a place for everything and everything in its place.” You can’t go home again. (16)

Building on and extending McLuhan’s insights, Joshua Meyrowitz, in No Sense of Place, notes the manner in which electronic media has been deeply implicated in the restructuring of our sense of space, time, and place. Meyrowitz contends that the formerly close connection between one’s sense of place and one’s access to information has been shattered by the electronic media. One’s place is no longer synonymous with who one is or to what information one has access. Place, he contends, has become a meaningless category due to the influence of electronic media. Due to the homogenization of place by the mass media, any place is now synonymous with every other place, and no place any longer has significance. Where I am is no longer defined by the place where my body is, but is susceptible to recoding according to the electronic media available to me. The flow of information across boundaries reduces every place to the figure of the same. As places lose their distinctive characteristics we feel increasingly rootless because our roots can no longer be defined in terms of some distinctive location. “Our world may suddenly seem senseless to many people because, for the first time in modern history, it is relatively placeless” (308) Similar arguments have been put forth by David Bolter, in his analysis of the impact of hypertext media on the shift from a hierarchical to a network culture, Kenneth Gergen, in his discussion of the role of technology in fashioning a saturated self, and in Frederic Jameson’s accounts of our feelings of alienation in postmodern hyperspace.

But while there seems to be widespread agreement on this descriptive account of our contemporary situation, there is less agreement on its significance and consequences. Especially in the last ten to fifteen years, we have witnessed a far reaching, potentially important, but polarizing debate on the role of technology in reshaping and redefining our place in the cosmos, a debate which has been recapitulated in contemporary science fiction. On one side of this issue critics of our technological age decry our growing reliance on technology, are concerned over our increasing alienation from nature, and prophesize the lost of authentic subjectivity and true community. Such dystopic visions of
the digital cosmos can be seen, for instance, in the work of Sven Birkerts, Neil Postman, and Mark Slouka. In *Technopoly*, for instance, Postman criticizes what he sees as technology’s power to bring about total change. Technology alters those deeply embedded habits of thought which give to a culture its sense of what the world is like—“a sense of what is the natural order to things, of what is reasonable, of what is inevitable, of what is real” (12). On the other side of this issue we have proponents of the digital age and their utopian vision of a more democratic, more individualistic society of progress, plenty, and peace brought to you by the folks at Intel and Microsoft. Howard Rheingold’s vision, elaborated in his *The Virtual Community*, provides a representative example of this so-called West Coast line of thinking, which includes the essays of John Perry Barlow and others associated with the founding of the Whole Earth ’Lectronic Link, an early, influential “virtual community.” Rheingold, Barlow, and others argue that technology and the world it is fashioning move us away from stifling, hierarchical premodern and modern societies and toward more democratic, open, networked societies. Technology itself may well resolve the problems of rootlessness and homelessness by bringing people together, creating new communities, and empowering democracy. As Rheingold suggests in *The Virtual Community*, “perhaps cyberspace is one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall” (26). Similar visions of what Rob Kling has called technological utopianism can be found in Nicholas Negroponte’s *Being Digital*, William Mitchell’s *City of Bits*, and Raymond Kurzweil’s *The Age of Intelligent Machines*, among other works.

This debate over the nature of the digital cosmos we are creating for ourselves and our place in it is obviously important. Yet, the polarizing and fractious nature of the debate has obscured more thoughtful and cautious positions. We might get clearer on the proper contours of the problem of homelessness and technology by looking at science fiction, where this problem is the focus of a significant body of literature, exploring the place of human beings in a technological cosmos. Contemporary science fiction has been central to shaping our vision of the digital future and cyberspace and because it foregrounds technology it provides us with a readymade laboratory for examining and testing our intuitions about technology and the human lifeworld. In his essay “Global
Ethnoscapes,” Arjun Appadurai notes that in our current period of deterritorialization, where specific territorial boundaries and identities are transcended and individuals move about the world in uprooted groups of tourists, immigrants, exiles, and guest-workers, the imagination acquires a singular new power in social life (197). “More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice; it enters, in a host of ways, into the fabrication of social lives for many people in many societies” (198). Examining contemporary science fiction might disclose a particular imaginary construction of the digital cosmos available to today’s homeless masses.

For the purposes of this essay I will concentrate on William Gibson, for several reasons. First, it is widely recognized that Gibson’s work has been influential, highly regarded, and paradigmatic of cyberpunk science fiction. Veronica Hollinger has noted that cyberpunk has been especially fascinated with technology and its effects upon human being-in-the-world (31) and Peter Fitting contends that people read cyberpunk as a “poetic evocation of life in the late eighties…a fictional evocation of the feeling or experience of technoculture in the late 1980s” (296). Claire Sponsler, too, argues that cyberpunk developed as an exploration of human experience within the context of media-dominated, postindustrial, late capitalist society (626). Gibson’s trilogy, *Neuromancer, Count Zero,* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* together with his short story collection *Burning Chrome* and the scripts to *Johnny Mnemonic* and *The X-Files* episode “Kill Switch” (co-written with Tom Maddox) provide a large body of work that ranges over several media, offering us plenty to consider.¹ *Neuromancer* is thought by many to be the quintessential cyberpunk novel (Hollinger 30). Sterling suggests that in Gibson’s sprawl stories (“Johnny Mnemonic,” “Burning Chrome,” and “New Rose Hotel,”), which form the backdrop to his cyberspace trilogy, “we see a future that is recognizably and painstakingly drawn from the modern condition” (x). Alucquere Rosanne Stone argues that Gibson’s first novel *Neuromancer* was the dividing line between epochs:

*Neuromancer* reached the hackers who had been radicalized by Lucas’ powerful cinematic evocation of humanity and technology…and it reached the
technologically literate and socially disaffected who were searching for social forms that could transform the fragmented anomie that characterized life in Silicon Valley and all electronic industrial ghettos. In a single stroke, Gibson’s powerful vision provided for them the imaginal public sphere and refigured discursive community that established the grounding for the possibility of a new kind of social interaction…*Neuromancer* is a massive intertextual presence. (95)

Equally clear is Gibson’s focus on the problem of placelessness in the digital cosmos. Most of the central characters of Gibson’s fiction seem to have no place or home, are disconnected from others, transient, and rootless. At the beginning of *Neuromancer*, Case is initially cut off from the only place he feels at home, cyberspace. We learn next to nothing of the backgrounds of any of the main protagonists of the novel. Molly, who appears in both *Neuromancer* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* as well as the short story “Johnny Mnemonic,” is muscle for hire who seems to move about the landscape from job to job, calling no place home nor staying very long in any one place. Corto/Armitage is a mere semblance of a personality, having been constructed by the AI Wintermute. The main protagonists of both *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Angie Mitchell and Bobby Newmark, are, we’re told, “well matched…born out of vacuums, Angie from the clean blank kingdom of Maas Biolabs and Bobby from the boredom of Barrytown” (MLO 22). Angie is orphaned when her father is killed during her escape from Maas Biolabs and Bobby’s home is destroyed early in *Count Zero* and he assumes that his mother is dead. Turner has fled his boyhood home and is now a mercenary who moves around a lot. “Home was the next airport Hyatt. And the next. And ever was” (CZ 2). As Turner helps Angie escape, he comments, “It’s okay…we’re half way home.’ It was a meaningless thing to say, he thought, helping her out of the seat; neither of them had homes at all” (CZ 200). At the opening of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Kumiko’s mother is dead and her father is sending her away from her homeland, Japan, to the strange country of England. Cherry Chesterfield’s life is described as surrounded by a “sad ragged scrawl,” (MLO 44) and Slick Henry has induced Korsakov’s, “something they did to your neurons so that short-term memories wouldn’t stick” (MLO 77). Mona is truly lost in place, having grown up
on the outside of most official systems (MLO 56). She is manipulated by the men in her life as she is moved from one squat to another, ultimately having her identity taken from her as she is cosmetically transformed into the twin of Angie Mitchell, never fully comprehending what’s happening to her.

While Gibson’s fiction exhibits a fascination with technology and its impact on human being-in-the-world, and while he is recognized for having created cyberspace and his dystopic novels have shaped our vision of the digital future, his work presents a very cautious and ambivalent attitude toward his creation. Gibson himself suggests his own ambivalence toward technology in an interview with Larry McCaffery. “My feelings about technology are totally ambivalent—which seems to me to be the only way to relate to what’s happening today. When I write about technology, I write about how it has already affected our lives…My aim isn’t to provide specific predictions or judgments so much as to find a suitable fictional context in which to examine the very mixed blessings of technology” (274). Gibson’s ambivalence toward technology is reflected in his approach to the question of place in the digital cosmos. It is this ambivalence that I think strikes the right chord in our own evolving relation to the digital cosmos. Allow me to bring out this ambivalent attitude by first contrasting the short story “Johnny Mnemonic” with the film by the same name and then examining cyberspace as a place for human beings in Gibson’s trilogy Neuromancer, Count Zero, and Mona Lisa Overdrive.

The short story “Johnny Mnemonic” presents us with what by now would be recognized as a standard dystopic, cyberpunk vision of our digital future, featuring criminals and gangsters, hucksters and pimps, freelance muscle and other assorted misfits and miscreants. But it is not presented as an especially bleak or forbidding future. By the time the movie is released, however, one important addition has been made: the introduction of NAS, nerve attenuation syndrome, a fatal, epidemic disease that we are told is caused by information overload: “all the electrons polluting the airwaves. Technological civilization is causing it. But we can’t live without it….” We are presented with hospitals full of victims of NAS dying rather painful deaths. The information environment has turned deadly and begun to attack its inhabitants. This notion of technology polluting the environment and sickening people is completely missing from
Gibson’s short story, and from his cyberspace trilogy. While the short story Johnny seems perfectly at home in his digital environment, Gibson’s screenplay, written some ten years after the short story, seemingly rethinks the relationship between human beings and the digital environment and presents us with a digital cosmos that has turned deadly against human life and doesn’t afford us a place or home.

This contrast is further underscored in the different treatments of the central character Johnny Mnemonic. Consider the opening scenes of the short story and the movie. The short story opens with Johnny, having surgically altered himself and adopted the name of Eddie Bax, doing the dance of biz, playing the game, boasting about being a very technical boy. The movie, however, opens with Johnny in a hotel, following a one-night stand. As a nameless woman makes for the door, she asks, “So, where is home Johnny?” to which he replies, “Home…home…would you believe I don’t even know?” Our mnemonic courier, who is paid to remember things, can’t recall his own home. It seems that in order to make room for his mnemonic implant, Johnny has excised some of his long term memory, specifically his memory of his childhood. Johnny then proceeds to get in touch with his agent and makes clear his desire to get out of the courier business, have his cranial implant removed, and his long term memory fully restored. In just one of many pointed contrasts, while our short story Johnny is engaged in doing the dance of biz, our movie version is trying to extricate himself from the biz. Throughout the rest of the movie he is subject to flashbacks of a sunny suburban life that contrasts with the dark urban decay by which he is surrounded. In recovering his long term memory it is this childhood home and suburban fantasy Johnny is attempting to recover.

Meanwhile, our short story Johnny is not plagued by childhood memories of home. Indeed, he has found his place in the digital cosmos, taking up residence in the Pit of Nighttown, remaking himself to fit in with the canine-inspired look of the Lo Teks, and conspiring with the cybernetic dolphin Jones to decode the technological data left as traces in his implant. Our cinematic Johnny, however, is a different story altogether. He wants to recover his place, his home, by way of recovering his memories. The end of the movie has Johnny hacking his own brain to release the information stored in him. This in turn releases the memories of his childhood and we see a bright, green, suburban lawn, a
birthday party with cake and candles. What Johnny is trying to recover, the place he is trying to reconstruct, if only in memory, is clearly an entirely different world than the world he must occupy. He is not at home in the real world. Indeed, he spends the entire movie trying to recover home and when he does it is clear that that home has no place in the digital environment in which he currently resides.

The character of Johnny Mnemonic returns in Neuromancer and ultimately serves as counterpoint to both cinematic Johnny and Case, the cyberspace cowboy of Neuromancer. Molly, who is working with Case in Neuromancer and also appears in “Johnny Mnemonic,” tells us that Case reminds her of Johnny. In Neuromancer she picks up the narrative where the short story ends. Molly explains that in the time following the events related in the short story, she was happy, a rare instance for any of Gibson’s characters. She wonders if Case has ever been happy. “Tight, sweet, just ticking along, we were. Like nobody could ever touch us…we were living fat, Swiss orbital accounts and a crib full of toys and furniture” (N 176-177). But before Johnny and Molly have a chance to get out of the business, a Yakuza assassin murders him. After that, Molly says she “never much found anybody I gave a damn about” (N 178). Later, in Mona Lisa Overdrive, Sally learns that Case got out of the biz some years after the Villa Straylight run and now has four kids, a point to which I will return below. Cinematic Johnny similarly opts out of the biz and achieves some kind of wholeness following the recovery of his memories at the end of the movie. In the short story, Johnny is most at home in the digital environment, and yet he is the one who ends up dead at the hands of an assassin. Both Case and cinematic Johnny leave cyberspace behind and go on to live happy lives.

In looking at these two iterations of Johnny Mnemonic, we see dramatically different views of being-at-home in the digital future. While there are roughly similar environments in both stories, the central characters have very different relationships to their environments. Where our short story Johnny finds a place in this digital world, cinematic Johnny’s place can only be guaranteed by reconstituting his memories of his childhood home. Between the short story and the screenplay, Gibson turns more ambivalent toward the digital cosmos his work has created. We have no place, he now
implicitly suggests, in an environment that pollutes and sickens us and requires we forget home.

A similar ambivalence can be seen in Gibson’s treatment of cyberspace. While Gibson is often celebrated for his portrayal of life in the consensual hallucination that is cyberspace, it’s worth noting just how ambivalently Gibson portrays his creation. Much is made, for instance, of his account of cyberspace cowboys as body-loathing, living for the disembodied exultation of jacking into cyberspace, and indeed, this is a remarkable feature of much of the digital culture. But it is a mistake to think that Neuromancer unequivocally endorses this aspect of the digital future. True, the opening of Neuromancer focuses on Case’s contempt for his body and his almost addictive need for cyberspace. Equally central, though, to understanding Case is his relationship to his girlfriend Linda Lee. That relationship is complex and I must simplify things a bit by concentrating on two particular points. First, Case’s motivation as he tries to break through the ice surrounding the AIs Wintermute and Neuromancer is a rage born when Wintermute initially presents Case with a simulation of his dead girlfriend. When Wintermute rescinds that simulation, however, Case experiences rage, a rage which impels him through the rest of the novel. Gibson writes, “He knew then: the rage had come in the arcade, when Wintermute rescinded the simstim ghost of Linda Lee, yanking away the simple animal promise of food, warmth, a place to sleep” (N 152). That animal promise, as Gibson refers to it, is what wakes Case up from the long period of numbness he had been experiencing in the first part of the novel. Case’s body is literally speaking to him: “Meat, some part of him said. It’s the meat talking, ignore it” (N 152). Later on, though, he can’t ignore it. Neuromancer offers him the chance to turn his back on the real world, on the world of flesh and meat, and take up life in cyberspace with a virtual Linda Lee. Case refuses. While Neuromancer argues that, “to live here is to live. There is no difference” (N 258), Case has come to realize there is a difference. He cannot leave his flesh behind, even if it is to be with the woman he loves. Far from being a tale about the escape from the prison-house of the flesh, Neuromancer ends with the realization that human nature is embodied and our home may not be in cyberspace. But once again Gibson’s ambivalence reveals itself. The very last scene of the novel has Case jacked into cyberspace once again when he sees “at the very edge of one of
the vast steps of data” three figures: Neuromancer, Linda Lee, and “close behind her, arm across her shoulders, was himself” (N 271). Neuromancer has apparently generated a cyberspace doppelganger of Case that remains with Linda, taking up life in cyberspace. In one further reversal, we’re told in Mona Lisa Overdrive that Case opted out of life as a cyberspace cowboy shortly after the events depicted in Neuromancer. When Sally, known as Molly in Neuromancer, looks up Finn, fourteen years after the events in Neuromancer, he tells her in response to a question about Case, “Case got out of it. Rolled up a few good scores after you split, then he kicked it in the head and quit clean….Last I heard, he had four kids” (MLO 165). Initially portrayed as the exemplar of the cyberspace cowboy, Case ends his life by building a home in the real rather than the virtual world.

While Case opts out of cyberspace, in Count Zero and Mona Lisa Overdrive Bobby Newmark and Angela Mitchell ultimately choose to leave their bodies behind and are united in a rapturous, cyberspace wedding. In Mona Lisa Overdrive, Bobby has given up on living in his body and has taken up life in the biosoft built by Lady 3Jane. He is portrayed as living the good life. His environments are castles and country estates with fresh mown grass and poolside retreats. He has turned his back on the real world and his own body. At the end of the novel, his true love, Angela has projected her disembodied consciousness into cyberspace, her and Bobby’s bodies physically die, they marry and take up residence in the simulated castle of the simstim star Tally Isham. As Gibson describes it in the last chapter of the final installment of the trilogy: “They have come to live in this house: walls of gray stone, roof of slate, in a season of early summer. The grounds are bright and wild, though the long grass does not grow and the wildflowers do not fade” (MLO 305). Following the events portrayed in Neuromancer, Gibson’s trilogy ends with cyberspace as the ideal habitable realm, the perfect home.

Once again, though, things are not so clear. Count Zero and Mona Lisa Overdrive complicate the relationship of individuals to cyberspace and question the implied claim that cyberspace constitutes a place for human beings. Consider, for instance, how the presentation of cyberspace is complicated in Mona Lisa Overdrive. By the third novel in Gibson’s cyberspace trilogy, cyberspace has seemingly been “captured” or delimited. Cyberspace is often described as an infinite nonspace. In Neuromancer Gibson describes it
as a “graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data” (N 51). When Case is finally able to jack in, he describes cyberspace as “his country, transparent three-dimensional chessboard, extending to infinity” (N 51), an “infinite blue space ranged with color-coded spheres strung on a tight grid of pale blue neon” (N 63), “the infinite neuroelectronic void of the matrix” (N 115). In “Burning Chrome,” it is described as a “3-D chessboard, infinite and perfectly transparent” (BC 168). The matrix created the “illusion of infinite space” (BC 177). Again in Mona Lisa Overdrive cyberspace is described as a nonspace: “There’s no there, there. They taught to children, explaining cyberspace….No there, there” (MLO 48) By the third novel, however, cyberspace, this infinite nonplace of the mind, is literally enframed through the device of the Aleph, a small, black slab of biosoft purchased by Lady 3Jane for the purpose of downloading personality constructs. The character of Gentry is obsessed with apprehending the overall shape of cyberspace and he believes he has found it in the Aleph, which is thought to contain the sum total of data constituting cyberspace (MLO 210). “The Aleph is an approximation of the matrix…a sort of model of cyberspace” (MLO 307). The Aleph is like a microcosm of the macrocosm, containing worlds within worlds (MLO 154). And it is in the Aleph, and not cyberspace itself, that Bobby, Angie, 3Jane and other characters come to live. By the end of the trilogy, the Aleph, described by Slick Henry as a fairy tale place (MLO 180) and by Colin as a toy universe (MLO 267), is marooned in the desolation of Dog Solitude, where not even rats dare to live. It is in this fairy tale place, in their virtual castle in the middle of Dog Solitude that Bobby, Angie and company live out their days.

Adding another layer of ambivalence to this mix, we might also take note of the story that frames Count Zero. The novel both begins and ends not with the Count but with the mercenary Turner. At the opening of the novel he is in New Delhi running for his life. We’re told later that Turner is always running, mostly away from home. It has been years since he’s been home. He’s estranged from his only brother and he couldn’t bring himself to go home when, near death, his mother called for him. Yet, by the end of the novel, he has achieved a kind of happiness by returning to his childhood home, settling down, and
raising his own son as he was raised. Indeed, the last chapter of *Count Zero* doesn’t focus on Bobby and Angela, whose story will be picked up in the subsequent novel, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. The last chapter is called “The Squirrel Wood” and focuses on Turner and his son exploring the woods in which Turner and his brother grew up. The backdrop of the chapter is one of the few if not only scenes in the trilogy of human beings interacting with animals in a natural environment. In the woods is a clearing, a “special place,” where nature asserts itself by slowly swallowing up the plane that originally brought Turner home (CZ 245). Turner has seemingly made a home for himself by following Johnny Mnemonic’s example, recovering his childhood home and reestablishing contact with nature and domesticity.

Finally we would do well to remember the large cast of characters surrounding Case and Bobby and Angela for whom cyberspace plays no integral part. Indeed, the characters most at home in cyberspace are either constructs or otherwise presented as flawed, suffering from obsessions or psychopathologies of various sorts. 3Jane is portrayed as a sad and pathetic figure for wanting to live forever in her biosoft construct. Virek mutates into a cancerous mass of flesh who obsesses over the next stage in his evolution. Gentry is obsessed with his search for the shape of cyberspace. Even Angie is portrayed as wracked with self-doubt, chemically dependent, possibly schizophrenic, the result of her father’s experiments on her brain.

While Gibson’s stories often revolve around central characters who have a vital relationship to cyberspace, the vast majority of the people populating his digital future do not. Case, for instance, is puzzled by the Zionites who live outside the official system and seemingly don’t understand cyberspace.

Case didn’t understand the Zionites…. The Zionites always touched you when they were talking, hands on your shoulders. He didn’t like that… “Try it,” Case said [holding out the electrodes of the cyberspace deck]. The Zionite Aerol took the bank, put it on, and Case adjusted the trodes. he closed his eyes. Case hit the power stud. Aerol shuddered. Case jacked him back out. “What did you see,
“Babylon,” Aerol said, sadly, handing him the trodes and kicking off down the corridor. (N 106)

Michael Heim suggests that the Zionites are the “body people” who remain rooted in the energies of the earth, a “human remnant in the environmental desolation of Neuromancer” (80). Such “remnants” appear throughout Gibson’s cyberspace trilogy. The title character of the third novel, for instance, is Mona, about whom it is never intimated that she enters cyberspace. Indeed, we are told that Angela feels a particular tenderness toward Mona because “Mona’s life has left virtually no trace on the fabric of things, and represents, in Legba’s system, the nearest thing to innocence” (MLO 285). While Bobby is looking for transcendence in cyberspace, Cherry Chesterfield, is shown as disgusted by his desire to leave his body behind: “Hear that, motherfucker?” Cherry yelled. “You’re dying! Your lungs are filling up with fluid, your kidneys aren’t working, your heart’s fucked….You make me wanna puke” (272).

Turner too has a very physical reaction to the kind of digital cosmos Gibson describes in his cyberspace trilogy. While working security for the media conglomerate Sense/Net, a media star is killed. Her eyes, which had been replaced with artificial cameras, are described by Turner as “inhumanly perfect optical instruments…worth several million New Yen” (CZ 91). Immediately following her death, those inhuman eyes are removed to be reused by the corporation. When Turner recalls this incident, some nine years later, it leads to a very physical response.

And he’d turned away, his guts knotted around eight glasses of straight Scotch, and fought the nausea. And he’d continued to fight it, held it off for nine years, until, in his flight from the Dutchman, all the memory of it had come down on him, had fallen on him in London, in Heathrow, and he’d leaned forward, without pausing in his progress down yet another corridor, and vomited into a blue plastic waste canister. (CZ 94)
Turner then drops out of the traveling life, changing his plans, and flies to Mexico. Turner literally reacts physically to the nature of the digital cosmos, where human beings have been transformed into cyborgs whose parts are owned by multinational corporations, recoverable upon death. His response is to move back to his boyhood home and recover a sense of nature.

In 1984, a series of texts were introduced that while not creating the debate over technology, place, and utopia out of whole cloth, introduced a few new wrinkles into the fabric of that debate. Apple’s Super Bowl commercial ultimately holds out a vision of technology that frees us from Orwell’s dystopic vision and promises a coming technological utopia. Gibson’s contribution to 1984 initiated a more ambivalent approach to these issues and represents an advance over this. His portrayal of the digital cosmos, of our own abode, if not now then in the future, is a richly textured vision that reveals the complex cultural and social issues tied up with technology. Central to this vision is a measure of ambivalence. It is this ambivalence that we would do well to adopt in our own increasingly technological lives. As we adopt and adapt to this technology, as it further transforms our world, we need to interrogate what it may be doing to us and to our place in the world. We can look to science fiction to offer us some guidance in this task. To the question, is technology creating a utopia or a dystopia, we should answer along with William Gibson, maybe.

Works Cited


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1 I have used a number of abbreviations throughout this essay: BC = *Burning Chrome*, CZ = *Count Zero*, MLO = *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, N = *Neuromancer*. 