Spook Country

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About

Spook Country
Gibson, William

Some might wonder why, at an essentially academic site such as the Berglund Center for Internet Studies, we choose to review a fiction work such as William Gibson’s Spook Country. [1] Gibson, however, is inextricably intertwined with the impact of the Internet. His works almost invariably rely in large part upon technology, particularly computer technology, as a critical element. He is, in fact, the creator of the term “cyberspace,” one of the important aspects of the Internet. [2] His bibliography now includes ten major fiction books and a wide variety of works in other genres.

Spook Country is well worth reading, if only because Gibson’s intellectual and artistic journey is itself so much a part of our times. But for those who view him primarily as a cyberpunk author, [3] and who hope for illuminating insights amounting to predictions of our proximate future, the work may be a disappointing one.

The story is not easily summarized because, as is usually the case with Gibson’s works, there are a number of characters, some of whose lives intersect only tangentially, nor is Gibson committed to full resolution of his many subplots. Some of the characters essentially wander off stage, though they are successful in that we certainly want to know more about them.

The protagonist is Hollis Henry, once a near-major figure in rock music whose band folded for largely unknown reasons just as it was becoming successful. After a bit of intellectual and emotional wandering, Hollis decides to become a journalist. She is hired by a shadowy figure, perhaps to write, perhaps to conduct research to further her employer’s own devious and loosely structured goals.
The other side of the story is told by Milgram, [4] a psychically, emotionally and economically down-and-outer. Milgrim lives primarily for esoteric explorations into mystic religions of the Middle Ages, and/or to ingest a rich variety of mind altering drugs. One suspects that if the author appears in this work, it is as Milgrim; not that Milgrim represents what Gibson is, which is a fully intentioned and sharply focused mind, but rather perhaps what the author fears he might have been with less talent or less luck—sort of Everyman’s chemically addled Fool.

The book is somewhat of a departure for Gibson. In his previous works, technology has been determinative. The lives of his characters have been defined by their relationship to technology. Case, the protagonist of Neuromancer, Gibson’s most influential work, is almost himself a mixture of flesh and electronic processes who sometimes seems to wish to become wholly virtual. [5]

In 1984, when Neuromancer was published, it was truly visionary. Cyberspace was not only unnamed but unrealized. The Internet itself was coming together, but yet far from popular. The vision of Neuromancer was closely tied to an increasingly computer-enabled society, and post-modern Japan was the source of important images. Whether as a result of good fortune or of Gibson’s analytical mind, Neuromancer seemed to be almost a manual for the unfolding of the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st.

In Spook Country, however, written more than 20 years after Neuromancer, it is not technology that is determinative, but rather human beings and history. The entire work turns repeatedly upon the personal characteristics of individuals. Some are “good,” some are “bad” or at least so greedy and psychotic as to be heedless of the rights or lives of others.

The book, while presenting a present in which a subculture of computer-enabled artists who are doing truly weird things, and in which very rich people live among artifacts which can only be described as precious in every sense of the word, is largely about the impact of the past. The event that shattered what Gibson perhaps once projected as the line of human development was not the invention of a new form of artificial intelligence or a new machine, but the historical event we summarize in the term “9/11″. Following 9/11, Gibson sees American life as dramatically altered (though perhaps not irretrievably so) by fear and repression. References to 9/11 are frequent, to the point where the world in which Milgrim and Hollis exist stems largely from that event.

The dominant motif of the their world is paranoia. While it is true that the paranoia is considerably enhanced by the almost total reliance of the protagonists on electronic communications (Is this line really safe? If not, who might be listening? Whose “bug” is this? Is the CIA on my side or against me?), paranoia is everyplace. Everybody’s motives are suspect, all friendships perhaps illusory. This is true to the extent that paranoia itself becomes personified and serves as one of the repeated artistic motifs of the work, the gigantic, red, terrifying, Mongolian Death Worm.

While the work marks a break of sorts in Gibson’s development, it serves our purpose to better
understand the impact of the Internet through interrogating the most recent work of a seminal influence. In this work, not much of the material culture—in truth perhaps nothing—is visionary. The Internet has had its impact, and the future is here and now.

But Gibson’s viewpoint is still in large part a dystopian one. At one point Gibson suggests that Americans are gripped by “Stockholm Syndrome” vis-à-vis their own government, which, he longingly states, was once run by adults. But this future is also one in which the protagonists can draw upon the history and the institutions they have laid down to endure, even, perhaps, to triumph. The tools with which his characters oppose evil include advanced modes of computing, art, music, drugs, whimsy, voodoo, medieval mysticism, and ultimately, good intentions and cooperative action.

Gibson’s prose is, as always, creatively playful. I myself read the book largely at airports during some eight hours of successive layovers over three days, and found both the tone of the book and its prose perfectly suited to that environment. Like Milgrim, I found my mental state so altered by bad air, bad food, bad service, and bad company that Spook Country became the perfect literary accompaniment to my journey.

And, of course, what Gibson labels the “Department of Homemade Security” was everywhere. At one point I seemed to hear the Salt Lake City Airport’s Voice From Nowhere announce, “Due to increased insecurity measures, unattended luggage is subject to confiscation and dissembling by the airport police.” A perfect Spook Country moment.

The author frequently seems angry in writing this book; angry at what has been done to his country, and angry at the crimes, deceptions, and deliberate damage done to lives and cultures by what he ultimately views as a group of greedy, confused, and adolescent thieves. But beneath that anger is a creative vision of an author who seems to be asking himself, “How then are we to live in the future which has, in fact, arrived?”

Endnotes


[4] The name is such an obvious amalgam of “milligram” and “pilgrim” that one suspects a deliberate construction.
See an excellent plot summary of Neuromancer at:
http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/science_fiction/neuromancer.html

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ONE THOUGHT ON "SPOOK COUNTRY"

Russel Niblock  
on January 30, 2014 at 6:12 PM said:

F*ckin