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The Dream of a Cyberpunk Future? Entelechy, Dialectical Tension, and the Comic Corrective in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*

Valerie R. Renegar & George N. Dionisopoulos

We argue the comic frame, as described by Kenneth Burke, can serve as a vehicle for critical self-reflection and social critique. William Gibson's Neuromancer *is a work of cyberpunk science fiction that details a future that closely resembles the present. The book exemplifies this process of encouraging self-reflection because it calls the trends of the present into question by imagining what kind of future they will construct. Gibson's future is simultaneously exciting and devastating. The dialectical tension between these oppositional ideas opens up a discursive space for audiences to begin the process of critical self-reflection about the technological trends of contemporary society. Gibson rhetorically constructs this tension through incongruity, irony, and casuistic stretching, thus fostering a corrective perspective.*

In William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the audience participates in the imagination of a world that is dark, cold, and filled with technological tools. In this world, cyberspace has become a place that can seem more real than the world of the body, some humans have been turned into weaponized cyborgs, and the idea of nature is often limited to preserved relics of a different time. This world bears unmistakable resemblance to the reality that we currently inhabit but has been evolved in dramatic and

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startling ways. Although science fiction has long been a staple of popular culture, cyberpunk is one of the most recent and exciting twists in the landscape of speculative fiction. Cyberpunk has distinguished itself as avant-garde, the newest and hardest wave of science fiction writing since the 1960s (Easterbrook, 1992). Unlike other future-oriented science-fiction genres, cyberpunk is marked by its portrayal of the near future of our society rather than a world hundreds of years from now or on some distant planet. The technology and artifacts of the present are evolved and imagined as part of the future, resulting in a world that is simultaneously familiar and strange. In other words, cyberpunk "combines high technology with a noirish punk-rock, fight-the-system ideology and has inspired countless authors, magazine publishers, and filmmakers" (Robischon, 1999, p. 58).

While the cutting-edge content of the cyberpunk genre is intriguing to popular audiences, this type of speculative fiction may be especially intriguing to social critics. In this essay, we examine the cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, written by William Gibson in 1984, as a case study of a popular work that may serve to cultivate and encourage what Kenneth Burke (1959) calls the comic frame of acceptance. Specifically, we argue that this novel, and other work like it, can serve as a vehicle for self-reflection and social criticism. We suggest that the genre's fictional constructions of "realities in the not-too-distant future" can function to stimulate critical examination of contemporary society by revealing the potentially disturbing trajectories of certain cultural practices that have become so embedded that they have become essentially invisible. Specifically, we suggest that Burke's comic frame can lend insight into how the entelechy inherent in cyberpunk fiction creates an underlying dialectical tension that encourages audiences toward critical self-reflection in which individuals are awakened to the potential implications of contemporary social trends.

We will illustrate this argument through an examination of *Neuromancer*, one of the earliest works of cyberpunk science fiction. Gibson's book has been labeled "the most vaunted book in the genre" (Robischon, 1999, p. 58) and can serve as an exemplar (Davidson, 1996; LeBlanc, 1997; Taylor, 1998). By rooting the future in the present, *Neuromancer* calls the practices of the status quo into question. Although the book is over 20 years old, the self-reflective social criticism it can generate is arguably still important today when many of his futuristic visions have become reality. In a world where plastic surgery has become routine, wireless Internet "hot spots" fill the air in our cities, urban sprawl continues to eat up wilderness, corporations are assuming global dimensions, and the lines between humans and machines are increasingly blurry, it is worthwhile to consider a work that predated, predicted, and commented upon where these trends came from and where they might lead us. In calling into question those practices that have become taken-for-granted in our culture, *Neuromancer* can encourage critical self-reflection and social critique by suggesting the potential implications of many of these trends and the problematic arc of their trajectory. In so doing, the novel acts as a source of dialectical tension, which is the product of the contradiction that emerges when oppositional ideas are forced together. Often these ideas do not seem incongruous or strange in isolation, but when they are paired with unlikely partners, new features of the ideas

are brought to the forefront while previously prominent features may recede into the background. Such incongruities or contradictions can highlight social trends that may have been previously unexamined or accepted without question.

The ways in which dialectical tension invites social criticism can be better understood with the help of Kenneth Burke's theory of the comic corrective. Critical applications of Burke's concept of the comedic have tended to treat it as a strategy of correction, one of two symbolic forms that people use to "deal with wrongdoing and thus to repair a hierarchy" (Bineham, 2005, p. 89; Brummett, 1984; Carlson, 1986). The comic frame has frequently been applied as a lens for understanding large-scale social movements (Carlson, 1986, 1988, Christiansen & Hanson, 1996; Demo, 2000; Powell, 1995) and has been used to help understand insights into our culture produced by popular media such as television series, movies, and plays (T. V. Lewis, 2002; Palmer-Mehta, 2006; Reser, 2005). There is also research that looks at the ways that overtly comedic artifacts poke fun at society in order to encourage a comic posture in the audience (Waisanen, 2009). Less explored, however, is how a comic posture might function as a mechanism promoting critical self-reflection.

Burke (1959) indicates that a comic posture creates a sense of "maximum consciousness" by allowing "people to be observers of themselves while acting" (p. 171). However, he does not explain or illustrate the ways in which this consciousness might be achieved. Our analysis of *Neuromancer* suggests one method by which people can achieve that maximum consciousness by illustrating how entelechy can be used as an intentional intervention within the comic frame to promote self-reflection and assessment through the creative application of dialectical tension. We seek to illustrate how the comic frame can highlight the extent to which *Neuromancer* might serve as vehicle for self-examination, prompting individuals to become observers of themselves and encouraging them to recognize the possibility that unexamined routine habits and trends could lead to a disastrous future.

We further suggest that this essay can contribute to a new understanding of the comic corrective by revealing some of its limitations as a tool of social criticism. Burke (1959) maintained that the goal of this perspective was to become aware of tragic tendencies and to effect positive life changes. Thus, he seems to have assumed that individuals utilizing a comic frame share the same basic ideas about what is positive. However, our analysis calls that assumption into question by exploring some of the ways in which self-reflection can lead to wildly different perceptions of problems and their solutions. In clarifying how the comic frame can promote self-examination, our study also highlights the possibility that comic rhetoric prompting self-reflection can lead audiences toward conclusions other than that intended by the rhetor. As we illustrate, Gibson offered *Neuromancer* as a warning about a future he hoped to avoid, but there are many who embrace the future he described and are actively working to bring it to fruition ("Cyberpunk as a subculture," 2004). That these disparate conclusions all stem from the self-consciousness created by the dialectical tension in the novel suggests that while the comic frame can foster self-awareness, this awareness may not lead to the conclusions that the rhetor intended. We begin with an examination of the concept of a comic posture, followed by a brief examination of

Neuromancer and its author, and then we illustrate how entelechy is employed to create the dialectical tension indicative of a comic posture. Lastly, we explore the implications of this analysis focusing on the use of entelechy as a strategy to encourage the social self-reflection and criticism associated with the comic frame.

The Comic Perspective, Entelechy, and Dialectical Tension

The comic perspective on the world and human relationships promotes self-reflection and critical thinking. It allows individuals to see beyond their current path and to examine themselves, their situations, and their motives from different angles. This multiplicity of perspectives can serve to reveal the constructed nature of their decisions, allowing them to step back and potentially to alter their current trajectory. As Burke (1959) explains, "In sum, the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*" in which one would "'transcend' himself by noting his own foibles" (p. 171, italics in original work). From a comic perspective people would be prompted to see the artificial nature of the limitations on their behavior or thinking, and this would constitute a first step toward recognizing these limitations as merely entrenched conventions that might be redefined, reimagined, or transcended.

While the tragic "frame of acceptance admonished one to 'resign' himself to his sense of limitations" (Burke, 1959, p. 39), the comic perspective can allow individuals to recognize that the path that they are following may lead to a devastating end, thus encouraging them to shake off their tragic tendencies and actively seek new alternatives. "By astutely gauging situations and personal resources, [the comic frame] promotes the realistic sense of one's limitations . . . yet the acceptance is not passive" (Burke, 1959, p. 107). Burke notes further that the frame "is charitable, but at the same time is not gullible" (p. 107), allowing individuals to recognize and learn from their tragic tendencies. The comic frame, in making people observers of themselves, makes it possible "to 'transcend' occasions when he has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragement in his "'assets' column, under the head of 'experience'" (Burke, 1959, p. 171). In other words, a comic perspective fosters an attitude where individuals reflect on themselves, learn from their experiences and recognize the limitations they have constructed.

Burke recognized the possibility that critical self-reflection can lead to larger cultural critique. He maintained that the "comic frame of reference also opens up a whole new field for social criticism" because self-reflection can generate avenues of thought and action that reveal processes to which we have become "unintentionally blinded" (1959, p. 167). The comic perspective encourages social critique because it fosters an awareness of the self-in-action where individuals are able to comment on themselves and their practices at the same time that they are experiencing them. As Burke (1959) explains, "the comic frame of acceptance but carries to completion the translative act. It considers human life as a project in 'composition,' where the poet works with the materials of social relationships. Composition, translation, also

'revision,' hence offering maximum opportunity for the resources of *criticism*'' (p. 173, italics in original work).

The social critique that results from the comic frame has a transformative power that seeks to reveal the artificial nature of problematic paths. ''A comic frame of motives avoids these difficulties, showing us how an act can 'dialectally' contain both transcendental and material ingredients, both imagination and bureaucratic embodiment, both 'service' and 'spoils' '' (Burke, 1959, pp. 166–167). Thus, a comic perspective could reveal the potentially tragic nature of current trends in technology and could encourage the audience to construct new trajectories for our society. Burke (1954) has recognized that there is a unique power inherent in imagining the future, and that it necessarily requires a new orientation toward the world. He argues that as we act to revise our systems of meaning and ''bring them more into accord with new meanings (rejecting old means and selecting new means as a better solution for the problem now rephrased), we shall bring ourselves and our group nearer to the good life'' (pp. 80–81).

Entelechy is the Aristotelian ''notion that each being aims at the perfection natural to its kind'' (Burke, 1966, p. 17). Burke (1989) takes this to mean that beings, or concepts, are always in the process of attempting to attain perfection. He explains, ''the principle of perfection (the 'entelechial' principle) figures in other notable ways as regards the genius of symbolism. A given terminology contains various *implications*, and there is a corresponding 'perfectionist' tendency for men to attempt carrying out those implications (Burke, 1966, p. 19). In other words, humans have the tragic tendency to push toward perfection regardless of the consequences. In order to foster a comic perspective that can correct for this kind of tendency, Burke (1966) argues that ''we need simply widen the concept of perfection to the point where we can also use the term *ironically*, as when we speak of the 'perfect fool' or a 'perfect villain' '' (p. 18). The tendency that we have toward entelechial extension leads Burke to characterize humans as rotten with perfection, an ironic phrase to explain the idea that ''there is a principle of perfection implicit in the nature of symbol systems, and in keeping with his nature as symbol-using animal, man is moved by this principle'' (1966, pp. 16–17). Humans, by virtue of their tendency toward tragic perspectives, are always in the process of pushing symbols to a perfectly rotten end.

One vehicle for this kind of entelechial extension is casuistic stretching, by which ''one introduces new principles while theoretically remaining faithful to old principles'' (Burke, 1959, p. 229). For example, ''all 'metaphorical extension' is an aspect of casuistic stretching'' (Burke, 1959, p. 230). The tragic frame is marked by individuals committed to pushing their ideas to a rotten end in their acceptance of the nature of hierarchy. A comedic perspective can serve as a corrective for this drive by embracing the dialectical tension created by pitting these future trends against the current trends from which they stem. This tension calls the trends of our current society into question by revealing their rotten conclusions.

When viewed from a comic perspective, *Neuromancer* can be seen as Gibson's attempt to foster dialectical tensions that arise from viewing the present through the prism of its entelechial future. The perspective provided by viewing a world that

is simultaneously present and future, both thrilling and repulsive, allows one to be attracted to the edginess of the future world portrayed, while simultaneously recognizing that that future is not a foregone conclusion, and can be revised by human action. Furthermore, ''the comic analysis of exploitation prompts us to be on the lookout also for the subtler ways in which the private appropriations of the public domain continues'' (Burke, 1959, p. 169). Thus the self-reflection that is encouraged may also foster a larger social critique.

Cyberpunk fiction is known for taking ''the accelerated socio-technical change of the industrial revolution to 'warp-speed' levels'' (Taylor, 2001 p. 78). Pushing the trends of our current society to an entelechial end at this warp speed exposes their assumptions and implications. When everyday practices are highlighted in this way, they lose their taken-for-granted status and may then be critically evaluated anew. An image of a future rotten with the perfection of the present fosters a comic posture that may lead to critical reflection about the implications of trends that have become commonplace by virtue of their omnipresence in our culture. Thus, *Neuromancer*, as an important example of cyberpunk rhetoric, can be understood as an exercise in comic framing, seeking to disrupt the trends of the status quo and inviting critical self-reflection.

William Gibson and *Neuromancer*

In *Neuromancer,* William Gibson created a lens for examining what he understood as the increasingly important role that information technology plays in the lives of humans. He argues that ''information is the dominant metaphor of our age, so we need to face it, to try to understand what it means'' (quoted in Csicsery-Ronay, 1995, p. 63). The future world of the book is not crafted entirely from Gibson's imagination, but rather is an extension of the world that we currently inhabit and technology that we were in the process of developing (Bredehoft, 1995). This novel generated a great deal of excitement within the science fiction community and was the first novel to win the science fiction triple crown: the Hugo, Nebula, and Phillip K. Dick awards (McCaffery, 1988). Lauded as his ''blockbuster first novel; hell-bent, aggressive, techno-cosmic apocalyptic, with a hook on every page'' (Csicsery-Ronay, 1995, p. 63), *Neuromancer* was one of the first works of cyberpunk, breathed new life into science fiction, and sparked a wave of followers and imitators. Although Gibson constructs a future that is saturated by, dependent on, and enamored with technology, he has little use for it in his own life. In fact, he claims that he has little specific knowledge of technology (Easterbrook, 1992). Gibson explains that even though he was intrigued by innovative uses for it, ''I was never a technical guy and never will be. I'm a writer, and poetry and pop culture are the two things that fascinate me most. I'm not deeply excited by high-tech'' (Einstein, 1996, p. B1). His aim as a writer is not so much to provide specific predictions about the future but rather to find a rhetorical context suitable to examine the role of technology in our society (McCaffery, 1988). That Gibson viewed himself as wary of technology provides an interesting perspective from which to tease out the dialectal tension that emerges

in the novel. His stance as a social critic suggests that the elements of his story that exist as dialectical tensions are likely intended to be intentional inserts of discursive space. Gibson's comments indicate that he is not a high-tech guy excited about the possibility of a technologically saturated future but is rather a cultural critic who hopes that his audience will critically examine the world around them.

In the years that have passed since the publication of *Neuromancer*, Gibson's view of the future was proven to be somewhat visionary in its scope. He accurately anticipated the emergence of cyberspace and foretold a future of powerful international conglomerates, global computer networks, hackers, computer viruses, pirated software, and electronic money that have since become a reality (P. H. Lewis, 1995). Several aspects of *Neuromancer* have previously been examined by science fiction and literary scholars (Bredehoft, 1995; Cadora, 1995; Csicery-Ronay, 1995; Davidson, 1995; Grant, 1990; Hardin, 2000; Latham, 1993; McGuirk, 1993; Nixon, 1992; Siivonen, 1996; Whalen, 1992). However, it has received less attention in the field of communication (Beard, 1999; Concannon, 1998; LeBlanc, 1997; Taylor; 1998, 2001). As we see this novel's "fiction" increasingly become our lived reality, it is important to examine the ways in which the dialectical tension within this text, and others like it, can function as a vehicle for social criticism by prompting readers to reflect on the ways in which its future is deeply rooted in the present. As Shaviro observes, "both science-fiction writers and cultural theorists are starting with present-day conditions and extrapolating from them in certain ways. They are creating concepts that might help us to come to terms with or understand our current conditions" (quoted in Monaghan, 2004, p. A14). These extrapolations, then, serve as a vehicle to help foster a comic perspective on the present.

The plot of *Neuromancer* revolves around Case, a washed-up Internet cowboy who, by virtue of a cruel punishment, can no longer physically jack into the computer matrix that connects global computer systems. Molly, a bodyguard hired by a man called Armitage, is sent to find Case and escort him from Chiba City to the Sprawl (one large city stretching from Boston to Atlanta). Armitage promises to restore Case's ability to run the matrix in return for his help in accomplishing a secret mission. Case and Molly soon discover that an artificial intelligence by the name of Wintermute is orchestrating the mission. After traveling to an elite space colony known as Straylight, Molly, Case, and the other members of the team are instructed to perform a number of tasks that culminate in the successful merging of Wintermute with Neuromancer, another artificial intelligence owned by the same powerful corporation that created Wintermute. When the novel ends, the two computer entities have fused into one and Case has returned to life inside the information matrix.

Enacting the Comic Frame in *Neuromancer*

In *Neuromancer*, Gibson takes various items of the current society and evolves them by stretching them casuistically to create his future world. Consequently, the world that he constructs is a recognizable time not so far from the present day. When Gibson pushes the present to its most absurd, or perfectly realized limits, the cultural

implications of the current trends of technology become obvious. The entelechial extension in *Neuromancer* illustrates how the world might be if the present unchecked fascination with information technology continues to flourish unabated. These illustrations of the trajectory of contemporary society may then foster a process of critical introspection by the audience. Readers presented with Gibson's future may ask themselves if this is the future that they want to inhabit. One of the common avenues of entelechial extension in *Neuromancer* is centered on the practice of technological enhancement. Drawing on the possibilities of plastic surgery in contemporary society, Gibson constructs futuristic technology that has purely aesthetic uses. One of the ways that Gibson explores these kinds of enhancements is through the description of subcultures. "Fads swept the youth of the Sprawl at the speed of light, entire subcultures could rise overnight, thrive for a dozen weeks, and then vanish utterly" (Gibson, 1984, p. 58). The Panther Moderns, a group of young tech punks described as "mercenaries, practical jokers, nihilistic technofetishists" (Gibson, 1984, p. 59), help Molly and Case steal some important software. One member, Angelo, delivers material to Case. He is described in the following detail:

> His face was a simple graft grown on collagen and shark cartilage polysaccharides, smooth and hideous. It was one of the nastiest pieces of elective surgery Case had ever seen. When Angelo smiled, revealing the razor-sharp canines of some large animal, Case was actually relieved. Tooth bud transplants. He's seen that before. "You can't let the little pricks generation gap-you," Molly said. (Gibson, 1984, p. 59)

Similarly, the leader of the Panther Moderns, Lupus Yonderboy, wears a suit that broadcasts different, changing background images. Gibson goes on to describe him, "His hair was pink. A rainbow of microsofts bristled behind his left ear, the ear was pointed, tufted with more pink hair. His pupils had been modified to catch the lights like a cat's" (Gibson, 1984, p. 67). Thus, the subcultures of today, stretched to their logical end, are no longer satisfied with piercings, plastic surgery, or wildly colored hair but have moved on to more invasive and alarming aesthetic changes. These illustrations encourage the audience to think more critically about contemporary practices such as plastic surgery, tattooing, and other body modifications.

The casuistic stretching in *Neuromancer* is also used to examine the degree to which humans can become part of technology. Case jacks into the matrix using specialized computer equipment where his mind becomes disconnected from his body and melds with the technological superstructure of digitized information. Case doesn't just interact with his computer; rather, he becomes part of the computer network itself. He has no use for his body when he is in cyberspace. In the same vein, the prevalence of cyborgs, individuals who are both human and machine, creates dialectical tension by blurring the lines between humans and technology. For instance, in Gibson's future world software has become something that is loaded directly into a human head rather than a computer. The young clientele of a software rental store are described as having "carbon sockets planted behind the left ear" where they can insert "angular fragments of colored silicon" (Gibson, 1984, p. 57). These silicon rods carry information and give the user access to incredible amounts of information.

In Gibson's future, these enhancements are not limited to the young or rebellious. An art dealer is described as "the first person the Finn has known who had 'gone silicon'—the phrase had an old fashioned ring to Case—and the microsofts he purchased were art history programs and tables of gallery sales. With half a dozen chips in his new socket, Smith's knowledge of the art business was formidable" (Gibson, 1984, p. 73). In Gibson's future world the brain becomes not just a biological entity but also a central processing unit for a human computer that can easily be manipulated and altered by invasive, artificial means. The Bluetooth mobile phone earpiece of today, viewed against Gibson's vision of sockets in the skull where software can be jacked in, seems to be a significant step in the direction of the kinds of technological enhancements that are present in the book.

Molly serves as an example of a human pushed to an entelechial end; she is the perfect bodyguard. She is trained in martial arts and has a great deal of street smarts, but in Gibson's dark vision of the future, training and ability are not adequate qualifications and must be accompanied by technological augmentation. Molly has "glasses [that] were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones" (Gibson, 1984, p. 25). Molly is more than a samurai or a bodyguard, she is a weapon. "She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with an audible click, ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails. She smiled. The blades slowly withdrew" (Gibson, 1984, p. 25). Molly began her career as a prostitute. "Meat puppets" are prostitutes who have had a chip implanted to bypass their neural pathways so their bodies can be used by paying customers without the prostitute being aware of what is happening to them. Molly explains, "'once they plant the cut-out chip, it seems like free money. Wake up sore sometimes, but that's it. Renting the goods, is all. You aren't in when it is all happening. House has software for whatever a customer wants to pay for'" (Gibson, 1984, p. 147). In other words, technology in Gibson's future is not used only to enhance people artificially but can also aid them in degrading themselves. Molly's push to perfection demonstrates that the future will demand more from employees than just time, energy, and loyalty. Future careers may well demand, or at least drastically redefine, the sum of existence as humans. The technology, body modification, and the push to perfection encapsulated in her character encourage the audience to question the ever-hazy line between personhood and the requirements of a career.

In Gibson's construction of the future, narcotics are both incredibly powerful and easily accessible, a black market for information flourishes, cities have rotting cores inhabited by mutants and technologically enhanced punks, weapons have been made more cruel and devastating, privacy must be purchased, and the computer constructed world of cyberspace is more real and vibrant than the human world. For example, Freeside is a tourist destination in space. "Freeside is many things, not all of them evident to the tourists who shuttle up and down the well. Freeside is brothel and banking nexus, pleasure dome and free port, border town and spa. Freeside is Las Vegas and the hanging garden of Babylon, an orbital Geneva" (Gibson, 1984, p. 101). However, there is no mention of art, culture, or open spaces anywhere

in Gibson's future. The closest that one can get to nature is its artificial representation on Freeside. "The trees were small, gnarled, impossibly old, the result of genetic engineering and chemical manipulation . . . . Between the trees, on gentle and too cleverly irregular slopes of sweet green grass, the bright umbrellas shaded the hotel's guests" (Gibson, 1984, p. 128).

Obviously, with the loss of nature, there is also the loss of natural products. At a dinner Molly chastises Case for not eating his steak, " 'You know what this costs?' She took his plate. 'They gotta raise a whole animal for years and then they kill it. This isn't vat stuff' " (Gibson, 1984, p. 138). In one of the most disturbing examples of the death of nature, the audience learns that horses have become extinct in this future. When Case and the Finn are at an outdoor market in Turkey they encounter a stuffed horse on display as a novelty:

> "Hey, Christ" the Finn said, taking Case's arm, "looka that." He pointed. "It's a horse, man. You ever see a horse?" Case glanced at the embalmed animal and shook his head. It was displayed on a sort of pedestal, near the entrance to a place that sold birds and monkeys. The thing's legs had been worn black and hairless by decades of passing hands. "Saw one in Maryland once," the Finn said, "and that was a good three years after the pandemic. There's Arabs still trying to code 'em up from the DNA but they always croak." The animal's brown glass eyes seemed to follow them as they passed. (Gibson, 1984, pp. 91–92)

From a comedic perspective, these entelechial instances encourage a critical posture from which to examine the ramifications of technology on the lives and environment of humans. *Neuromancer* encourages the audience to reflect comedically on the status quo by presenting the future as a stretched version of the present. Trends toward urbanization and virtual worlds—when stretched to their future possibilities—open up a discursive space in which individuals are positioned to consider the trade-off that these trends may entail in terms of animals, the natural landscape, and human integrity.

Employed in this manner, the entelechy enacted in *Neuromancer* establishes for the reader a sense of what Burke labeled perspective by incongruity. This is "a method for gauging situations by verbal 'atom cracking.' That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rationally planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category" (Burke, 1959, p. 308). Juxtaposing ideas not normally paired together creates a kind of "double vision" where new connections can be discerned (Burke, 1984, p. 398). This method is particularly valuable in revealing new dimensions of things that had previously been taken for granted. Burke (1954) explains that "where the accepted linkages have been of an imposing sort, one should establish perspective by looking through the reverse end of his glass, converting mastodons into microbes, or human beings into vermin upon the face of the earth" (p. 120). In other words, juxtaposing two incongruous ideas can alter an orientation or expectation and allow new perspectives to flourish as unnoticed similarities may emerge between elements previously viewed as incongruous, or characteristics that had been obscured may now emerge as central features (Bostdorff, 1983).

Perspective by incongruity is integral to a comic perspective because it exposes those things that had been previously obscured by tradition or habit, thereby encouraging an individual to recognize a multiplicity of options for viewing a situation. Indeed, Burke (1954) argues that this perspective "should be deliberately cultivated for the purpose of experimentally wrenching apart all of those molecular combinations of adjective and noun, substantive and verb, which remain with us" (p. 119). Perspective by incongruity "is not 'demoralizing,' however, since it is done by the 'transcendence' of a new start. It is not negative smuggling, but positive cards-face-up-on-the-table. It is designed to 'remoralize' by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy" (Burke, 1959, p. 309). Thus, planned incongruity fosters a comic corrective to tragic frames of acceptance.

Neuromancer is riddled with incongruities that, from a comedic perspective, could lead an audience toward a more critical examination of the technologies of the present day. Planned incongruity can also be thought of as a deliberately "impious" orientation to the "linguistic categories established by custom" (Burke, 1959, p. 309). Piety is a schema of orientation based upon "*the sense of what properly goes with what*" (Burke, 1954, p. 74, italics added here). Perspective by incongruity takes these customs and turns them on their head; unsettling the ways things are in favor of a "state of transition" (Burke, 1954, p. 69), removing situations "from their 'constitutional' setting" (Burke, 1959, p. 309). Gibson, like Burke's evangelist, "is asking us to alter our orientations. He would give us new meanings" (Burke, 1954, p. 80). The perspective encouraged by aligning the incongruous shakes the audience out of its traditional ways of thinking, causing them to question their assumptions by exposing them to unexpected combinations of ideas or possible outcomes.

One of the starkest examples of the dialectical tension proffered by the planned incongruity in *Neuromancer* is the emotional longing of the computer-generated artificial intelligence in comparison to the utter lack of emotional attachment of the primary human characters. Wintermute, an artificial intelligence (AI), has an overwhelming need to be joined with its companion AI, Neuromancer. Wintermute explains this feeling as instinctual. "'Well, I'm under compulsion myself. And I don't know why . . . . But when this is over, we do it right, I'm gonna be part of something bigger. Much bigger'" (Gibson, 1984, p. 205). Many people feel this desire to be connected to something larger, to feel a part of something, to avoid isolation, to find friendship, and to build relationships with others. Unlike Wintermute, however, Case exhibits no desire to be connected to others, has no tendencies toward building relationships and loathes the idea of being controlled by emotion.

Case is emotionally isolated from everyone in the story and his closest friend in the novel is a computer memory device that holds the recorded personality of his dead mentor Dixie Flatline. "When the construct laughed, it came through as something else, not laughter, but a stab of cold down Case's spine" (Gibson, 1984, p. 106). Case is aware that the construct is not quite human, yet he still feels more in touch with this memory device than with anyone else. Interestingly, the personality of Dixie Flatline is appalled by the idea of having become a computer-mediated personality. The device says, "'do me a favor, boy . . . . This scam of yours, when it's over, you

erase this goddam thing'' (Gibson, 1984, p. 106). While the recorded personality hopes to be erased and cease to be machine, Case, on the other hand, has no appreciation for his own status as human. He disparages his body as ''meat'' (Gibson, 1984, p. 9) and believes emotions are beneath him. His contempt for feelings is apparent when the thinks of an old girlfriend. ''He remembered the smell of her skin in the overheated darkness of a coffin near the port, her fingers locked across the small of his back. All the meat, he thought, and all it wants'' (Gibson, 1984, p. 9). Being unable to access the matrix is the ultimate punishment—a life sentence to a fleshy prison for the mind. After the operation to repair the damage that kept him from accessing the net is complete, Case fears that the procedure was unsuccessful. ''Then the fear began to knot between his shoulders. A cold trickle of sweat worked its way down across his ribs. The operation hadn't worked. He was still here, still meat . . . . It was all some dream, some pathetic fantasy . . . . Hot tears blurred his vision'' (Gibson, 1984, p. 37).

The most pressing need for connection that Case exhibits is his desire to access cyberspace, a connection that can isolate him even further from the human world outside the matrix. Case's days as a cyberspace thief were the highlight of his life. ''Case was twenty-four. At twenty-two, he'd been a cowboy, a rustler, one of the best in the Sprawl . . . . He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix'' (Gibson, 1984, p. 5). Later, Molly teases him about his affection for his computer access unit to the matrix when she says '' 'I saw you stroking that Sendai, man, it was pornographic' '' (Gibson, 1984, p. 47). Access to the matrix goes beyond energy and lust for Case. For him, it is home, the place where he is most comfortable. While he was prevented from accessing the matrix, Case resigned himself to the world of humans. He tells Armitage, '' 'I'm never gonna punch deck again, not for you or anybody else.' He crossed to the window and looked down. 'That's where I live now' '' (Gibson, 1984, p. 28).

The world of the matrix is the only connection that is important to Case or that inspires feelings of joy. He longs for a computer-mediated reality where he is no longer limited or controlled by human needs or emotions. Aside from his desire to be in cyberspace, the other emotion that Case experiences is hate. Hate serves to alienate, rather than connect, individuals from one another. In order to motivate the players to see the mission through to its end, Wintermute creates situations where Case, Molly, and the others will feel hate. Molly explains, '' 'I guess it [Wintermute] wants me to hate [Riviera] real bad, so I'll be psyched up to go in there after him' '' (p. 149). Initially, this hatred is unusual for Case. ''He sat on the bed for a long time, savoring the new thing, the treasure. Rage'' (Gibson, 1984, p. 145). After closer examination, Case concludes, ''It was a strange thing. He couldn't take its measure. 'Numb,' he said. He'd been numb a long time, years . . . . But now he'd found this warm thing, this chip of murder. *Meat,* some part of him said. *It's the meat talking, ignore it*'' (Gibson, 1984, p. 152, italics in original work). Wintermute, speaking through a man called the Finn, explains, '' 'You gotta hate somebody before this is

over,' said the Finn's voice. 'Them, me, it doesn't matter'.... 'Hate'll get you through,' the voice said. 'So many little triggers in the brain and you just go yankin' 'em all. Now you gotta *hate*'" (Gibson, 1984, p. 261, italics in original work). This focus on hate and alienation occurs in contrast to the need for connection exemplified by the artificial intelligence.

Wintermute is driven by a desire to be connected, a longing to become more than itself, but Case is motivated by hatred or the desire to be separated from others. The idea that a computer exhibits the typical human desire to be connected with others while a person, conversely, is devoid of these feelings is incongruous. Similarly, the idea that a computer could deliberately create and feed feelings of hatred in others is profoundly disturbing. This incongruity between a computer's longing and a human's alienation produces a dialectical tension around the ideas of emotion, longing, desire, and humanity and the role that they would have in a future shaped by massive technological change. The audience can dwell on these incongruities then step back from Gibson's tragic vision and reflect on these ideas from a comic posture.

Wintermute exhibits a great deal of personal and creative power that is, in many ways, more dangerous than human power. For instance, Wintermute is capable of rendering Case brain dead when communicating with him in cyberspace. Wintermute can also access the memory of human beings. For example, it renders an environment for their discussions out of Case's personal memories. Looking out the window of the world that Wintermute constructed, Case asks, "What's out there? New York? Or does it just stop?' Wintermute explains, 'You can go for a walk, you wanna. It's all there. Or anyway all the parts of it you ever saw. This is memory, right? I tap you, sort it out, and feed it back to you'" (Gibson, 1984, p. 170).

Wintermute also demonstrates human cunning by devising the plan for joining itself with Neuromancer, using Armitage as his agent in the physical world, selecting a group of humans to carry out its wishes, and arranging for the successful breaking and entering of the Tessier-Ashpool compound. Molly explains that the AI has been especially devious in developing this plan. "'He told me,' she whispered. 'Wintermute. How he played a waiting game for years. Didn't have any real power, then, but he could use the Villa's security and custodial systems to keep track of where everything was, how things moved, and where they went'" (Gibson, 1984, p. 180). Wintermute also has the power to effect changes in the world outside the matrix by controlling technology. Case tells the Dixie Flatline construct about the death of one of the members of their group, "'"'Wintermute killed Armitage. Blew him out in a lifeboat with a hatch open"'" (Gibson, 1984, p. 201). Wintermute's power is considerable, and the tension it produces calls into question the idea of a future where artificial intelligence exists and is able to flourish. "Wintermute was a hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the world outside.... Wintermute. Cold and silence, a cybernetic spider slowly spinning webs while Ashpool slept" (Gibson, 1984, p. 269). The idea of a computer that can think for itself and devise an intricate plan for enhancing itself contradicts our understanding of computers as tools that are used by humans. The idea of intelligence, or wisdom, is not a concept that tends to be associated with circuits, files, and keyboards. This planned incongruity reverses that

assumption and makes humans the tools of the computer. The dialectical tension between the possibilities of powerful computers and artificial intelligence may result in a critical assessment and reevaluation of the current trends toward increasingly powerful computer networks.

Dialectical Tension and Critical Self-Reflection

Understanding the ways in which the dialectical tension inherent in a comic posture can foster critical introspection and a larger social critique is an important step in the creation of a future that is the product of conscious and well-considered dialogue. *Neuromancer* is an illustrative case where discursive space for social critique and a comic perspective are constructed through dialectical tension. The audience is encouraged to reflect critically on contemporary trends and to make sense of the tension that arises when these trends are paired incongruously by extending them to their entelechial ends. When viewed from a comic perspective, the close alignment between the present and the cyberpunk future prompts a self-conscious critique of the current society, technology, and cultural trends. Such fictive portrayals of the future are an important facilitator of social criticism because they provide enough distance from the present to invite self-reflection. This critical distance is important because it allows individuals to engage in self-reflection and personal interrogation without risking too much of themselves. When Burke (1973) says that literature is equipment for living he means that individuals can gain a fuller understanding of their world by examining the rhetorical constructions of different authors. He believes that "one must *size things up* properly. One cannot accurately know how things *will be*, what is promising and what is menacing, unless he accurately knows how things *are*" (Gibson, 1984, p. 298, italics in original work). In the case of *Neuromancer*, the audience becomes more aware of the current attitude toward technology by seeing what kind of future that attitude might create.

Gibson's portrayal of a future whose roots can be discerned in our contemporary society highlights trends and attitudes of the status quo that might otherwise remain hidden. Many of these trends, such as plastic surgery and the expansion of the Internet have become even more pronounced in the years since the publication of the novel. Once these trends are revealed, they can become the object of critical reflection. Consequently, understanding rhetorical constructions of the future from a comic perspective reveals a complex set of strategies that act together as a compelling form of social commentary. The dialectical tension created by the incongruity inherent in entelechial extension is an important part of *Neuromancer* because it encourages in the audience a comic perspective on the possibilities of the future. Such a comic frame allows audiences to see that the future is not predetermined or set but rather has a plastic, synthetic, and evolving quality, reminding us that we need not be trapped by resigning ourselves to socially constructed limitations (Burke, 1959). Embracing dialectical tension allows the audience to recognize and resist power dynamics by standing outside of the mainstream of society (Moore, 1998) and encourages them to actively seek the possibilities for corrective action.

Neuromancer—and cyberpunk fiction more generally—has been characterized as an influential new form of social criticism. Kim (1994) explains that Gibson's concepts have seeped into mainstream culture and inspired a wide range of new forms of social commentary, ranging from the music of the rock band U2 to the art of painter Robert Longo. Additionally, Gardner Dozois, the former editor of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, indicates that this novel "redefines the consensus of what the future will be like" (quoted in Kim, 1994, para. 2). Kellner argues that "these writings constitute the first radical high-tech, new wave social theory. They also involve what is perhaps the first self-consciously produced science fiction social theory to project futuristic anticipation of the world to come, the world right around the corner" (quoted in Taylor, 2001, p. 90).

It is clear that there is general agreement that *Neuromancer* has generated attention and laid the foundation for other critical self-reflection about the future. However, the mechanisms by which this kind of critical thought is created and/or encouraged in this work are less clear. We have argued that critical application of the comic frame can illuminate the ways in which the entelechial extension in *Neuromancer* can create the dialectical tension that can allow this work, and other cyberpunk fiction, to function as a vehicle for promoting social change through self-reflection and critical assessment. To the extent that we are correct in this assertion, it suggests that critical application of the comic corrective can extend beyond its use as a mechanism by which to repair the hierarchy, to its applicability as a method for examining how critical self-reflection can be encouraged from within the confines of a fictional account of the future.

Although we maintain that *Neuromancer* is a form of social commentary and a tool to foster introspection, Gibson has been criticized for not making concrete suggestions for changes in the status quo that could interrupt the current trajectory of technology and society. Sponsler (1992) explains that this critique of Gibson is based on ideological grounds "for refusing to propose progressive politics even though its dystopian future opens up considerable space for a resistance to the logic of late capitalism" (p. 640). Ross argues that Gibson's novels "harbor no utopian impulses, offer no blueprint for progressive social change, and generally evade the responsibility to imagine futures that will be more democratic than the present" (quoted in Sponsler, 1992, p. 640). However, we suggest that the absence of concrete suggestions for intervention is one of the strengths of the book. Instead, *Neuromancer* operates by raising the public consciousness about the implications of technology and then allows for innovative solutions to emerge as a result of individual self-reflection. Had concrete solutions been proposed, this book may have ceased to stimulate individual thinking and creativity and, instead, may have become didactic and prescriptive. In fact, any solutions proposed in the novel would likely become new limitations to thinking about change since laying out paths for reform would become limited, tragic paths as they are then pushed to perfection. Indeed, we agree with Ingram's observation that "condemnation courts a tragic outcome" while "a comic frame instills a reflexive awareness that helps to correct imbalances in our perspectives" (2002, p. 15). Gibson, through his novel, is able to encourage even more innovative

ideas concerning social reform or progressive politics by avoiding the impulse to force his hopes for society on the audience and instead simply offering his perspective as one possibility for the future.

Furthermore, the lack of specific solutions does not diminish the potential for social criticism inherent in Gibson's work. *Neuromancer* "makes strange" the dominant technological metaphors in our culture, which then highlights existence of these metaphors (Beard, 1999, p. 5). Gibson explains that his text is "about the present. It is not really about an imagined future. It's a way of trying to come to terms with the awe and terror inspired in me by the world in which we live" (quoted in Beard, 1999, p. 5). In other words, Gibson deliberately uses his novel as a vehicle to raise social consciousness about the possible implications of current technology. *Neuromancer* is a fascinating text because, although it has an overt social mission, it still retains its entertainment value. The dialectical tensions that encourage introspection are embedded throughout the text but are not initially obvious as mechanisms for social or personal criticism. The critical adoption of a comic perspective illustrates how embedded elements within the story encourage the audience toward the posture of self-reflection concerning potentially problematic trends within our culture. We agree with Ingram's observation that a comic frame "provides an ideal combination of criticism, common ground, and transformative potential" (2002, p. 15).

We acknowledge that there are also pronounced limitations to the use of the entelechial extension as means of stimulating critical self-reflection through dialectical tension. For instance, the use of irony often leaves rhetorical strategies like entelechial extension vulnerable to interpretations that the rhetor may not have intended. Although irony can be a potent source of rhetorical resistance, its effectiveness depends on the audience sharing a perspective with the rhetor. There is always the possibility that the audience may not share the same assumptions and hence may fail to understand the subversive ironic meaning of the text (Shugart, 1999). In the case of failed irony, it is unlikely that the audience would be encouraged to develop a comic posture or to engage in a process of self-reflection. For those audiences that do not read the text as a commentary and instead see it as a future that sounds attractive, there would likely be no sense of social criticism at all.

In the case of *Neuromancer*, it is clearly the case that many of the book's readers did not share enough of Gibson's perspective to see the novel as a warning about the future. For example, Pengo, a German computer hacker, claims that he was inspired by *Neuromancer* to steal data from U.S. computer networks and sell it to Russia's KGB (Zuckerman, 1991, p. 103). Similarly, there are groups of adolescents and young adults who are actively attempting to bring the world of *Neuromancer* into being. Adolescent computer hackers who seek to emulate the streetwise characters of books like *Neuromancer* proudly proclaim themselves cyberpunks and explain that, although cyberpunk began as a literary genre, it "escaped" into cultural reality ("Cyberpunk as a subculture," 2004). Obviously, these self-avowed cyberpunks do not share Gibson's apprehension about the future described in his novel or his assumption that technology should be closely scrutinized rather than mindlessly embraced. Thus, the irony inherent in Gibson's entelechial extensions is lost to this particular audience.

The reality of oppositional readings of the same text serves to highlight one of the limitations of Burke's theory of the comic corrective. Burke assumes that individuals, having gained a perspective on themselves, will be able to note their own foibles (1959, p. 171). The idea that people will recognize their own weaknesses as a result of a comic posture suggests that a normative standard for determining strengths and weaknesses exists. However, what one person considers weakness another might consider strength. Thus, the possibilities of corrective action from a comic frame become infinite. Burke allows for oppositional readings, but he assumes that the motives for a change of attitude meet with his vision of social good. For instance, he explains "the comic frame might give a man an attitude that increased his spiritual wealth, by making bad books and trivial remarks legitimate objects of study" (1959, p. 173). So, in Burke's example, bad books and trivia can be redeemed, but the value of "increased spiritual wealth" is unquestioned as a positive attribute without regard for its negative possibilities.

Similarly, Burke summarizes his position on the comic frame by noting that "its value should only reside in helping to produce a state of affairs whereby these rigors [of economic necessity] may abate" (1959, p. 175). In this explanation, Burke fails to consider that a comic posture could be used to generate a form of social criticism or personal interrogation that is contrary to his idea of the good life; one that might, for example, seek to foster a system in which "jobs that make [people] rot in the dark while the sun is shining" might be deemed preferable to other kinds of work (Burke, 1959, p. 174). In other words, Burke seems to assume a consensus about what "the good life" (1954, p. 81) entails and constructs his theory of comedy around the changes that would bring it to fruition. A comic posture is a powerful mechanism for creating self-reflection, but the conclusions of that reflection must be left to the individual. In fact, to dictate the acceptable outcome of a comic frame is antithetical to its entire notion. Burke assumes that there are values that are shared by all or most people and that the comic corrective would seek to further these goals. However, the different readings of *Neuromancer* demonstrate that a comic posture is not limited to what a rhetor intends. This analysis demonstrates that one of the limitations of the comic corrective is a lack of consensus about what constitutes a problem or a solution. Indeed, what one person finds abhorrent about a particular vision of the future, may be what another looks forward to with excitement.

But even recognizing the fact that not everyone will assume the same comic attitude toward the future that Gibson intends, the creation of dialectical tension remains a useful rhetorical strategy for encouraging individuals to interrogate their role in the present social order more critically and to design their own corrective actions in response to trends that they find unsettling. This method of enabling introspection and social criticism avoids a prescriptive tone that may alienate audiences with its heavy handedness and resists the creation of new tragic trends that might result from prescriptive recommendations. *Neuromancer* creates a discursive space for self-reflection in that it stretches the trends of the present to their entelechial ends and creates incongruity between the world of the present and the possibilities of the future. These dialectical tensions, then, foster a comic perspective that allows for social criticism and may lead to corrections of the tragic trajectories inherent the status

quo. *Neuromancer* serves as a useful text to explore the possibilities and limitations of a comic posture as well as the self-reflection and social criticism that may a result from this perspective.

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