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The Future's Overrated: How History and Ahistoricity Collide in William Gibson's *Bridge* Trilogy

Abstract: In 1988, Gibson asserted his interest “in the how’s and why’s of memory, the ways it defines who and what we *are*, in how easily it’s subject to revision” (qtd. in McCaffery 224). While this statement is a reflection on his appropriation of human memory in the *Sprawl* trilogy, it is also a useful standpoint from which to assess the interplay between history and memory in the *Bridge* trilogy. In my view, this trilogy is primarily concerned with the implications of postmodernization for historical perception. Moreover, it serves to explore how the proliferation of the spectacle has significant effects on social memory, the ramification of which is the eventual effacement of memory’s value, and its substitution by commodified images. Through a close assessment of Gibson’s architecturally familiar landscape and the perseverance of nostalgia in an ahistorical society, I argue that in this postmodern world, history *as a concept* is not obsolete despite the death of historical perspective that postmodernism ideologically affirms. In fact, by creating a world that simultaneously experiences the “abandonment of history” and the “*false consciousness of time*” (Debord 90), Gibson is able to convey the idea that historical perspective, no matter how unreliable, is the only means through which to fully understand not only the past, but also the present, and, indeed, the future.

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According to Fredric Jameson, “[i]t is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (*Postmodernism* ix). This assessment of postmodern culture is an interesting standpoint from which to explore Gibson’s treatment of history throughout the *Bridge* trilogy. In fact, while Gibson’s previous work has been criticized for its “apparent obliviousness to the historical process” and its predictable submission to the postmodern “nostalgia for the present” (Booker 82), his *Bridge* trilogy should be commended for its manipulation of narrative devices that simultaneously maintain the progression and deterioration of history in a world that is, for the most part, entirely present-oriented. Inspired by his acknowledgement of contemporary culture’s obsession with the present, and sympathetic to Jameson’s critique of that culture’s critique of that culture’s “loss of historicity” (*Postmodernism* x), the *Bridge* trilogy observes the catastrophic symptoms of postmodernization and highlights the importance of history in the postmodern epoch.

Historical perspective may be diminishing in this postmodern world, tainted by the pursuit of presentism, a cultural desire for instantaneity, and the paralysis of “history and memory” synonymous with spectacular societies (Debord 90). However, at no point does Gibson do away with history entirely. On the contrary, the trilogy becomes a means through which he evaluates the perseverance of history in a society that is, for the most part, profoundly ahistorical. Through his representation of our own present as history in the not-too-distant future, his attention to the preservation and reconstruction of historical narratives, and his observations of the death of history as a *concept*, Gibson paradoxically upholds the importance of history for the *Bridge* trilogy’s culture which, in the most Jamesonian of ways, has been reduced to experiencing “a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (*Postmodernism* 27). Thus, rather than exhibiting an “obliviousness” toward history, Gibson’s postmodern narrative actually articulates how historical perspective, no matter how unreliable, is the only means through which to fully understand the past, the present, and indeed, the future.

In *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, the final and most important installment of the *Bridge* trilogy in terms of its postmodern approach to historicity, Colin Laney proposes what is perhaps the trilogy’s most distressing historical assumption. Having become obsessed by the nodal visions in which he foresees a radical change in the world as we know it, he comes to the dramatic revelation that within his technologized society, history, as a concept, is “dead” (165). For Laney, who inadvertently perceives “every version” of the historical narrative (Gibson, *Tomorrow’s* 165), the absence of historical perspective within his technologized culture is particularly unnerving. Exhibiting a Baudrillardian apprehension for the way “[h]istory has gradually narrowed down to the field of... current events” (Baudrillard, “The Illusion” 259-60), he becomes a means through which Gibson consolidates his own investigation into the paradigm, and its application within a dystopic future. Deriving from his solitary understanding of the historical continuum, Laney’s criticism of the cultural belief that “only the moment matters, matters absolutely” (Gibson, *Tomorrow’s* 42) is crucial to an analysis of the decline of historicity evidenced throughout the *Bridge* trilogy. Not only does it uphold the postmodern sensation of “everything happening at once” (Sofia qtd. in Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 29), but it also condemns that sensation, and the “disappearance of a sense of history” with which it corresponds (Jameson, *Cultural Turn* 20).

The most troubling thing about the postmodern present, as pointed out by Laney, is not just a cultural lack of historical insight, but more so, the unconscious acceptance of this within a spectacularized society. Hence, he poignantly observes:

That history in the older sense was an historical concept. History in the older sense was narrative, stories we told ourselves about where we’d come from and what it had been like, and those narratives were revised by each generation, and indeed always had been. History was plastic. Was a matter

of interpretation. The digital had not so much changed that as made it too obvious to ignore. History was stored data, subject to manipulation and interpretation. (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 165)

What makes this assessment so interesting is the implication that history, in its totality, has never been entirely accurate. In fact, as well as articulating the typically postmodernist concern for society's "historical amnesia" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 69), his diatribe adheres, by way of its summation of history's malleability, to the traditional attitude whereby representations and interpretations of the past can only be shaped by, and belong to the present (Mead, "From 'The Nature of the Past'"). By amalgamating these conflicting attitudes towards history, it becomes apparent that the *Bridge* trilogy as a whole is still inherently driven by an historical imperative.

While Gibson has already been credited for his Jamesonian "eclipse... of all depth, especially *historicity* itself" (Jameson, qtd. in Farnell 467), and for his presentation of a world that rejects "the ideological... masterplans of the past" (Tschumi, qtd. in Beehler 90), his historicization of our own present as an essential narrative function has yet to be fully acknowledged. Modernity may persevere within the trilogy's cosmopolitan setting, but the suggestion that it is "on its last legs" (Beehler 82) rejects both fascinating persistence of *history* in Gibson's present-oriented society, and its subsequent propagation by way of nostalgic practice. As clarified by his characters' various reactions to the decline of history within their spectacular society, postmodern theories of history underpin the narrative plot of the *Bridge* trilogy. Initiated from the earliest stages of *Virtual Light*, where the key setting of San Francisco pays homage to a bygone era, and continuing right through to Laney's philosophical utterances in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, the development of history, and of its complications with a spectacular context, is a tour de force for Gibson. While characteristic of the way science fiction commonly "apprehend[s] the present as history" (Jameson, "Progress" 153), and the way postmodernism "abandons all sense of historical continuity and memory, while simultaneously developing an incredible ability to plunder history and absorb whatever it finds there as some aspect of the present" (Harvey 54), his focus on history is also the means through which he explores what he refers to as the present's "fractal" nature (*Tomorrow's* 107).

From the very beginning of the *Bridge* trilogy, Gibson's sophisticated articulation of history's demise is ironically centered on his unique portrayal of our own present as history in a world that has clearly forgotten it. Notwithstanding the opening scene of *Virtual Light*, which conveys a dystopic premonition of what is to come, much of the action of the *Bridge* trilogy takes place in vastly familiar settings that have clearly been tainted by the shock of the future. Conforming to science fiction convention, which as Jameson insists, "transform[s] our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come" ("Progress" 152), Gibson integrates the familiar with the unfamiliar throughout each text, portraying images of a future that, albeit distorted, are relevant to the present epoch. The setting of the *Bridge* trilogy,

regardless of its initially defamiliarizing nature, is remarkably like our own; its future images comprise a recreation of modern-day America (Farnell 264), complete with the residue of notorious architectural structures and suburban landmarks familiar to even the contemporary geographical novice. From *Virtual Light's* earliest pages, where Gibson makes note of familiar American places like "Knoxville" (19), "Memphis" (21), "West Hollywood" and "Ohio" (25), to his detailed but deliberately estranging imagery of a post-earthquake San Francisco, still divided by wealth into lucrative areas like "Geary," inner-city crime-warrens like the "Tenderloin," (35) and the infamously gang-infused district of "Oakland" (59), his intent is to offer "only the illusion of 'radically changed landscapes,'" according to Ross Farnell, "as it is our social, political, economic and cultural present that underwrites the novel's 'future' world" (462). While to start with, this world seems expressly unlike our own, particularly because its prelude is that execrable Mexico City that Blix encounters on his way to a more habitable North America, in actuality, it is our own world crippled by future consequences. On closer inspection it becomes increasingly evident that his modification of the world as we know it is an effective way of conditioning the reader's understanding of both history's persistence and its premature demise.

Gibson's ironic grafting of an ahistorical culture on a historically formed landscape interrogates the overwhelming nature of the present and future "colliding" (Farnell 262), as well as the "collapse of the future onto the present" that for Zoe Sofia defines postmodernization (qtd. in Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 27). This is because, while his fictionalized culture has limited access to, or interest in, attenuating information about its own past, that past is in fact a dystopically modified historicization of our world as it is today. His San Francisco is constrained by a now exhausted architectural program; its most modern building, confirmed by Rydell upon his arrival to the city is the "big spikey one with the truss-thing on it (and he knew that one was old too)" (Gibson, *Virtual* 106). This monstrous configuration of the Transamerica Pyramid, a structural marvel of the reader's present, was constructed some thirty-three years before the novel's 2005 setting and, alongside the Oakland Bay Bridge, defined by its "mad maw, the gateway to dream and memory..." (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 19), it positions the deteriorating city as one of the few remaining enclaves where the last vestiges of our own history survive. For Claire Sponsler, "these decaying remnants of an otherwise demolished, meaningless and inaccessible past... [are] clearly an insistence on the 'past as pastiche' typical of the postmodern sense of history so persuasively analyzed by Jameson" (630). Given Jameson's contention that historicity "can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective" (*Postmodernism* 284), Gibson's invocation of the future of our own present ironically positions us to view our own world historically. While the function of San Francisco's prominent modern landmarks has been altered, their physical manifestation, aside from their now crumbling facades, has not; they remain throughout the Bridge

narrative as harbingers of the postmodern future and the associated diminishment of historicity that is to come.

In a deliberate response to the postmodern condition of ahistoricity, the Bay Bridge and Transamerica Pyramid ultimately provoke the very thing they aim to refute. As well as being deliberately malformed symbols of the dystopic, they are implemented as stark reminders of a preceding time period. Subsequently, despite the diminished cultural knowledge of its humble origins, the *Bridge* trilogy's San Francisco represents Gibson's partiality for architecture and its integral obligation to history. His San Francisco's retention of modern architecture solidifies the future's history, or our present, in a familiar and tangible way. Intruding on a culture that in the most postmodern of ways "has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (Jameson, qtd. in Gomel 63), the Bridge, with "its span... [as] rigorous as the modern program itself..." (Gibson, *Virtual* 58), and the Pyramid, with its fleeting image of an "upright thorn" (210), become Gibson's most significant historical creations. Not only are they means through which he makes his vastly dystopic city more recognizable for a reader who is otherwise confronted with the futility of technologization and post-industrialization; they also enable him to hint at history's prevailing nature in spite of the "all-voracious present" that, according to Ballard's early critique (1974) of postmodern society, has "devoured" both the past and the future (qtd. in Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 28).

Regardless of its postmodern transformation, which makes it both functionally and aesthetically dissimilar from its original purpose, the Bay Bridge of Gibson's future is an irrevocable symbol of the ongoing relevance of history in a society that, synonymous with Jameson's cultural assessment, is denied the privilege of historical contemplation. Bringing to mind historical objectives similar to those of Orwell's *1984*, a pre-Cold War novel that imagines a time where "[t]he past was dead, the future... unimaginable" (Orwell 28), the rest of Gibson's world appears to be saturated by postmodern commodification, the frightening result of which, as in Orwell's totalitarian regime, is that "the past, starting from yesterday, has actually been abolished" (162). But whereas Orwell destabilizes history to refute a totalitarian approach in which it constitutes "whatever the records and the memories agree upon" (222), Gibson's cyberpunk fiction manipulates elements of history to expose the "radical transformations of global structures," which, for David Harvey, are the postmodern consequence of the dissolution of the past and present "into a transcendent future" (225). To this end, in a world that seems entirely dominated by the spectacle, by those "empty images and commodified artefacts" (Farnell 467), the Bay Bridge, at least until its own spectacularization in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, is the only refuge from the pacifying hyperreal images of the consumer-driven society, a society where the prolific nature of the media has "participat[ed] in history," or, as *Idoru's* Kathy Torrens would argue, "had replaced history" (Gibson, *Idoru* 39).

Through its unique and autonomous development, and its effective reconsideration of an historical relic, the Bridge community implements neither the

postmodern amendment of the past that Ihab Hassan associates with Orwell's 1984 (which he refers to as revision without vision) (26), nor the eradication of history that results from spectacularization and hyperrealization. Instead, it subconsciously develops its own cultural hegemony, and with it, a rich and morally guided history that attempts to negate the "mythical... historical consciousness" with which capitalism and commodification is associated (McNally 195). Converted by the homeless and "dispossessed" (Farnell 464) into a "heterotop[ic]" (Campbell, qtd. in Beehler 88; Farnell 464; Hoepker 223) escape from the nightmare of postmodern urbanization, the Bridge's most significant feature is, for Hoepker, no longer its fixed corporeality but "the potential of its interstitial structure" (223). In truth, it is profoundly interstitial, a space between spaces where a new world has opened up, neglecting to acknowledge the original history of its physical structure while creating a rich history of its very own. From its introduction in *Virtual Light*, where it is viewed by a fascinated Yamazaki as a chaotically anthropomorphic construction, to its near demolition in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, where the routine motion of its citizens' evacuation connotes an ideologically unified sub-culture, the Bridge, defined by the nameless assassin as "[a]pparent disorder arranged in some deeper, some unthinkable fashion" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 273), houses the most, if not the only, historically defined culture in Gibson's megalopolis. Functioning as a renegade community steeped in its own traditions and beliefs, the world on the Bridge is infinitely human and intensely historical. It may have dismissed its modern heritage, a notion emphasized by Chevette's failure to "imagine that people wouldn't have lived here" (108). However, by refusing to subscribe to the spectacular society from which it absconded, or to its late capitalist hegemony, the Bridge becomes the one place where humanity, and therefore history, is able to prosper.

Accordingly, the greatest paradox of Gibson's Bay Bridge reinvention is that while the transient lives of its community are mimetic of its original purpose, the structure paradoxically enables a sense of stability that is seemingly unattainable in the rest of San Francisco, if not the world. That stability, corresponding with Charles Jencks' supposition that postmodernism "mak[es] new connections out of the older values of the past... [while] asserting the possibility of a plurality of new values" (Rose 149), arises from a collective nostalgia for a brief yet deeply meaningful communal history. By establishing a rich history of their very own, one that is entirely separate from the rest of the world, the Bridge community clearly maintains a refreshing distance from a society that is otherwise bound by its obsessions with the spectacle, and by the captive nature of the postmodern present. The Bridge, therefore, may be a symbolically disintegrating icon of the modern movement (Beehler 88), but, as argued by Graham Murphy, it "has a historical lineage, an echo of the past guiding the future" (85). Indeed, while its purpose has shifted dramatically, the life span of the Bridge itself has not ceased, instead being adapted from a means of providing vehicular passage to a place that enables rites of passage to a new form of socialization. When, at the end of the trilogy, Rydell recognizes that "[t]hese were

not, in some sense, civilians, but hardened survivors used to living on their own in a community of similar people" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 255), his musings demonstrate a final understanding of what it is, exactly, that holds the community together. The fraternity's cultural values, which are unique to its motley constituents, evolve from its moral heteronomy and an ingrained communal urge to forego a social inclusion in the world responsible for their home's preliminary construction.

Its historical origins may well be forgotten, even by its own community, but Gibson's Bay Bridge is initially positioned as a symbol of idealism in a society that is otherwise subjugated by the dominating forces of the spectacle. Unquestionably subversive and disenchanted by the outside world, its community, with its "unnumbered population and its zones of a more private fantasy" (Gibson, *Virtual* 59) represents an unfaltering and refreshing dedication to dissident ideologies. However, while these ideologies persist throughout the trilogy, the spectacular transformation of the Bridge in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, and its subsequent consolidation with a world that it desperately tried to avoid, signifies the end of its ideological era. Restructured according to a cultural plan for prolific consumption and homogeneity, the newly reformed Bridge, with its Lucky Dragon franchise and its "shudder of video up the trademark tower of screens" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 66), is Gibson's way of acknowledging the spectacle's inevitable permeation into even the most resistant social spheres. Located within what is considered as the final "place of resistance to late-capitalist hegemony" (Farnell 467), the convenience store, combined various other shops "built with nonresident money, the owners hiring people to live there and maintain possession" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 160), indicates a strong potential for history's imminent end. The Bridge's gradual metamorphosis and the pending decline of its spectacular resistance essentially parallels the consumer satisfaction which, like many postmodernists, Gibson sadly associates with the post-historical period.

The interesting thing about that image of the Bridge is that while it can, in many ways, be seen to symbolize the preservation of history, it also invokes Jameson's assumption that in postmodern societies, "even the surviving historical monuments, now all cleaned up, become glittering simulacra of the past, and not its survival" (*Postmodernism* 311). While the Bridge community itself may attempt to maintain its own history, at no point does Gibson imply that their history evolves from a definitive or tangible link to San Francisco's industrialization. Like the spectacular society from which they fled, the inhabitants of the Bridge are inherently captivated by their own frenetic present, and even their initial distance from the rest of the world is not quite enough to inspire an interrogation of their past, or its impact on their present. In fact, only Skinner, the oldest and in many way the most knowledgeable character in the entire trilogy, appears to have any cognitive access to history, and his personal commentary on the past, the present, and the future provides a heart-breaking insight into the postmodern dismissal of historicity, and its catastrophic effects. Characterized by his consistent historical narratives, and the importance he places on a collective historical memory, Skinner's futile desire to preserve history becomes

a means by which Gibson once again comments on postmodernism's replacement of history by memory, and the importance of this in what is primarily an ahistorical society.

Having personally experienced more of the historical continuum than any other character, and therefore being able to recall with relative accuracy the various stages of the world's development, Skinner is devised by Gibson to impart a wisdom that is otherwise lacking in a society conditioned by the immediacy of its hyperrealized surface. Representing a distaste for how, in the society of the spectacle, "[e]verything that was directly lived has receded into representation" (Debord 7), he is a crucial device through which Gibson exemplifies the importance of social memory. Essentially, he is the only character who, having lived through time itself, knows there is more to life than the spectacular. For this reason, "[c]onvinced that Skinner somehow held the key to the Bridge's existential meaning, Yamazaki had abandoned his physical survey of secondary construction in order to spend as much time as possible in the old man's company" (Gibson, *Virtual* 85). Yamazaki realizes that there is much more to Skinner than the mind behind the evolution of the community, concluding from their earliest meeting that the man's "mind was remarkably like the Bridge. Things had accumulated there, around some armature of original purpose, until a point of crisis had been attained and a new program had emerged" (60). That program, metaphorically invoking the computerized minds synonymous with the cyberpunk technique, positions Skinner as pure memory: a personal recording of bygone days inspired by his principal concern for the changing nature of humanity. For Skinner, the greatest peril of the world he has grown old in is its acquiescence to the elimination of historical discourses. Through his interactions with Yamazaki and Chevette, his insistence on the preservation of historical narratives, and his nostalgia for a past that has been obliterated by the postmodern symptom of perpetual presents (Jameson, *Cultural Turn* 20), he confidently exposes the importance of history and memory as individual and cultural shaping paradigms.

Subscribing to the postmodern movement, which Jean-François Lyotard characterizes by an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), the "large, explanatory ideas... like religion, science, [and] historical progress" (Thompson 51), Gibson's cyberpunk fiction is necessarily compelled to reject the chronicle of history. Hence, by establishing Skinner as the ultimate metanarrator, *Virtual Light* exhibits not just an ideological break from its postmodern conditioning, but also the persistence of philosophical history, which, according to Georg Hegel, is "nothing but the thoughtful contemplation of history" (*Reason in History* 10). This "thoughtful contemplation" is exactly what Skinner pursues, as he frequently engages in conversation simultaneously designed to educate his more ignorant compatriots on the past, while criticizing the present's limited inquisitions into that past. While the copies of *National Geographic* strewn across his container on the Bridge suggest that he too has submitted to the spectacle, his research into culture and geography, and his corresponding social commentary are his most defining characteristics. As

concluded by Chevette, Skinner is ingrained with a deep and unusual desire “to know where things came from” (Gibson, *Virtual* 71). When he explains to her how “[t]here’d been countries big as anything: Canada, USSR, Brazil... [and that] America had gone down that route without admitting it” (71-72), his comparative practice is reminiscent of Hegelian philosophy because, in remembering how things were, he experiences a dissatisfaction with the way things are (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* 35). He may, to some extent, wear the “nostalgia-tinted spectacles” that Jameson attributes to inaccurate representations of the past (*Postmodernism* 290), but in Gibson’s futuristic world he is the only person able to substitute the spectacle of history with the absolute experience of it, thus invoking Michel Foucault’s perception that in order to be aware of our present circumstances, we need also be aware of our history (327).

Having established a personal connection with a past denied to San Francisco’s younger cohort, Skinner is infinitely troubled by the intellectual limitations imparted by the depthless simulacra. Even Yamazaki, a university student driven by the pursuit of academic success and intellectual satisfaction, inadvertently submits to this depthlessness. Skinner’s harsh criticism of his ignorant absorption of whatever superficial information is fed to him incriminates not so much Yamazaki’s submission to the spectacle as the social ramifications of its infinite dispersal. “I know you think you live in all the times at once,” he says to Yamazaki, “everything recorded for you, it’s all there to play back. Digital. That’s all it is though: playback. You still don’t remember what it felt like” (Gibson, *Virtual* 238). His innate awareness of the eradication of history from the cultural discourse is fundamental to the reader’s understanding of the death of history throughout Gibson’s fiction. He is the last resource of theoretically accurate historical information in this new world, and his death, coinciding with the corporatization of the community he inadvertently created, is symbolic of the death of history in its entirety.

Reassuringly, even after Skinner’s passing, there are still faint glimmers of historical resonance, and bodega owner Fontaine, through his personal memories of Skinner’s historical epithets and his own interests in the archaic, attempts to continue the legacy Skinner established. As a self-confessed “anachronist” (Gibson, *Tomorrow’s* 49), Fontaine’s chosen profession as antique-cum-junk-store-proprietor asserts more than just a need to make a living and provide for his family, primarily because the refuse that fills the shelves and display windows of his shop are of little interest, or value, to anyone other than himself. Like Skinner, he “was crazy about old things” (158) and his pawn-style shop, which enables him to receive and store the simultaneously invaluable and worthless antiques of bygone eras, is an outlet for him to develop his own narrative of history, and to ensure that history is maintained in a culture that is, for the most part, alarmingly uninterested in it. “He sold nothing unserviced, everything cleaned and lubricated... And he did this, he knew, not to provide a better, more reliable service, but to ensure that each one [object] might better survive in an essentially hostile universe” (131). For Fontaine, the only hope

for the preservation of historical discourse is in the maintenance of its artefacts, each of which has a story to tell and each of which contributes to whatever knowledge of historical linearity still persists. The problem with this approach is that the tangible objects do not, in themselves, convey an accurate representation of history, and Fontaine's fondness for them derives from his fictional account of their origins. Hence, he becomes a mimetic device through which Gibson foregrounds the notion that history is resolutely malleable, unreliable and, at its very core, untrustworthy.

The key problem for Fontaine is that, because of his limited access to genuine information, the histories he creates become little more than pure imagination, substituting fact for fiction through his ideological process of constructing a coherent narrative of the past. As time progresses in Gibson's postmodern society of the spectacle, historical introspection becomes increasingly thwarted and plagued by his lack of knowledge, Fontaine is driven to enquire into the origins of things in order to better understand the world from which they evolved. Even before Skinner's death, he would ask him questions about objects that came into his store. "If Skinner couldn't tell Fontaine a story about something, Fontaine would make up his own story... It seemed to comfort him" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 158). Where Skinner's connection to history, aside from his worthless books, is purely narratological, history for Fontaine is objectified, converted, as it is for the young Silencio (whom he by no coincidence decides to foster), into something tangible. When at the end of the trilogy the Bridge starts to burn down, his refusal to evacuate, because "[i]t's where [he] live[s]" (247), indicates not just a personal or nostalgic connection to the Bridge, but a historical one. All that Fontaine knows of his world, and of the world that preceded his, resides within the four flimsy walls of his shop, and in a stoic if not stupendous act stemming from a refusal to live in a world without that history, he is adamant that he will fight the fire that could cause that world to come crashing down, or at the very least, die trying. Unwilling to experience a world without history, no matter how reconstructed that history may be, his choice to protect his room of collectables demonstrates how history, for him, can only exist in a physical form.

Save for the hideous "Another One replicas," the ugly dolls forced upon him by his wife that were "manufactured in the closing years of the previous century" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 94), there is nothing remotely new, or at least nothing that does not have a story, in Fontaine's run-down shop. This, however, does not mean that Fontaine preserves history. Rather, his hoarding of society's unwanted junk and his fictionalization of its origins is just as harmful to historical authenticity. Like those antiques, Fontaine's collection becomes little more than a fraudulent memory of a rapidly receding past. Thus, his creation of historicity for objects that would have ordinarily become simulacra is so important because while he attempts to preserve history through the acquisition of tangible goods, those goods, and their historicity, are still always open to interpretation. Indeed, the irony of his historical interpretations, and of his vested interest in the development of a story, of a chronology of the past's transition to the present, is that his imaginary narratives only exacerbate what, in

History in Crisis, Norman J. Wilson considers are the destructive ramifications of history's innate malleability. According to Wilson, in the same way that the past is seen to shape the present, the present is most certainly seen to shape our perspective of the past (30-31). Correspondingly, Fontaine's fictionalized historical views, compelled by the antique objects he acquires, are unavoidably distorted by the lens of the present. In fact, history in his world has, as Jean Baudrillard would argue, has been transcended by the instant information of the media society (*Paroxysm* 7-8). Where it has not been completely erased, it has been re-written by substanceless hyperreal images, a notion best articulated by Chevette's memories of her mother's placating dialogue in *Virtual Light*. "He's right," Chevette remembers being told. "About history, and how they change it... Everybody does that anyway, honey. Isn't any new thing. Just the movies have caught up with memory, is all" (242). This statement, reminiscent of what Hassan insists is postmodernism's reinvention of the past (25-26), consolidates Gibson's own viewpoint on history in postmodern culture and effectively foreshadows Fontaine's historical practice. As a product of a postmodern world which typically experiences the "disappearance of coherent patterns of history" (Kroker 62), Fontaine is already conditioned by a lack of historical intelligence and, therefore, promotes the historical ignorance he so desperately tries to eschew.

Of all the characters in the *Bridge* trilogy, with their differing inclinations for reconstructing history, it is Colin Laney who, as a result of his intuitive data-fishing skills, is most challenged by his historically-oriented sensibilities. From the moment he is introduced as a laborious and speculative employee of media conglomerate Slitscan in *Idoru*, to his vehement apprehension of a nodal-vision in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, from which he concludes that the world is on the brink of disaster, Laney is Gibson's most active historian. Classified as an atypical "soothsayer" by Dani Cavallaro due to the way he amalgamates the traditional mystical idealism of prophecy with cybernetic discourses (298), Laney's posthuman composition, and its effects on his interpretative abilities, is the medium through which Gibson examines the fundamentals of history in a postmodern culture. Historical perspective may be stunted in the postmodern present, but, as demonstrated by the creation of the Bridge community, and by the nostalgic meditations of Skinner and Fontaine, history as a process still continues. Through Laney's exploration of history, and his reflective assessment of its constituents, Gibson clarifies his postmodern theory that history is an imperative culturally shaping force. Consisting, as Laney reflects, of a "shape that comprised of every narrative, every version" of the past (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 165), it may be inherently depthless and unreliable, but it is still the only means through which to make sense of the present and the future.

The most interesting thing about Laney's historical knowledge is that, unwittingly granted historical omniscience by means of the 5-SB drug, he becomes devastatingly aware not only of its gradual disappearance in his postmodern culture, but also of its inherently fictitious nature.

All his life Laney has heard talk of the death of history, but confronted with the literal shape of all human knowledge, all human memory, he begins to see the way in which there never really has been any such thing. No history. Only the shape, and it comprised of lesser shapes, in squirming fractal descent, on down into the infinitely finest of resolutions. (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 107)

In effect, conditioned by his own hyperrealized perspective, Laney's analysis of historical content confirms the unavoidable ramification of the hyperreal, whereby history becomes little more than a construction (Baudrillard, "Mass (Sociology of)" 72). Like Fontaine's stories, it is always fictionalized by its malleability, by its irrevocable openness to interpretation, and most importantly, by its increasing distance from the present. With this in mind, the more Laney investigates the nodal points, desperately trying to find information about what led to the present moment, the more aware he becomes that history is "dead" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 165). By deducing that it is little more than an interpretation of past events, he experiences an uncertainty that is characteristic of every true historian. According to George Herbert Mead, "[t]he historian does not doubt something has happened. He is in doubt as to what has happened" (*The Philosophy* 9). This doubt is exactly what clouds Laney's present and future perceptions. In a world where the "digital soup" of the historical continuum "thin[s] out rather rapidly" as time progresses (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 251), suffering the wrath not just of its own spectacularization but of its narrative incongruities, only Laney and PR genius Cody Harwood, recipients of the 5-SB, are truly aware of history's complexities. The problem with this is that they too are perplexed by its simultaneously complicated and depthless nature. Able to see versions of the past, but unable to make sense of those versions, they serve to confirm the catastrophe of history's unreliability and the magnitude of that within Gibson's future context.

The paradox of Laney's ability is that even though it enables him to "see the nodal points in history," to identify how and when "everything changed" (Gibson, *Tomorrow's* 4) and to predict that the world "as we know it" is "going to end" (169), the drug that facilitates such evaluations also restricts his capacity for memory. In fact, where in most other cases memory replaces history, for Laney, history replaces memory, and this only emphasizes the relevance of history to his personal evolution. He may understand the historical paradigm, but by *All Tomorrow's Parties*, he has limited access to his own recent past. He doesn't even remember how he came to reside in Tokyo's cardboard city, because "things got a little fuzzy around the time the syndrome kicked in. Some kind of state change, some global shift in the nature of his perception" (13). As a consequence, even though he is endowed with perceptual skills that enlighten his historical frame of reference, Laney is disheartened by his loss of personal history. Reflecting the radical dehistoricization of his postmodern culture, he mourns what Jameson refers to as "the memory of deep memory" that postmodernism revokes (*Postmodernism* 156), enacting instead the postmodern

practice of “nostalgia for nostalgia” (57). Subject to media culture in which “hyperinformation... clutter[s] up the space of the representable” (Baudrillard, “The Masses” 214), Laney’s own mind, driven by a fanatical obsession with celebrity, is fundamentally inscribed by the hyperreal spectacle. This memory loss aside, the syndrome enables Laney to experience visions, no matter how distorted, of the past and the future. Those visions, compelled by his “recognition of the nature of the universe. How nothing is perfect, really. Nothing ever finished” (Gibson, *Tomorrow’s* 13), motivate his actions and make it possible for him to counteract the “forces of history” (175) that both he and media mogul Cody Harwood deem responsible for whatever changes are taking place. While it is never quite clear what he foresees in his nodal visions, what does become evident as the trilogy draws to a close is that the future is always shaped by the past. That past may be distant, obstructed by the depthless referents of simulacra, but without it, there is no future.

History, in Gibson’s world, has not come to an end. It may well seem “dead,” as Laney so conclusively pronounces, inhibited by a postmodern propensity for “ephemerality” and “discontinuity” (Harvey 44), but at no point does it actually stop progressing. Stimulated by way of residual modern architecture, nostalgic narratives and prophecies for the future, history in Gibson’s world is still pertinent to cultural development despite that culture’s indifference to the past from which it emerged. The people of the *Bridge* trilogy may have no insight into the past, conditioned by the historical amnesia that defines their postmodernization and by the cultural creed that “only the moment matters” (Gibson, *Tomorrow’s* 42), but that lack of insight is what makes history all the more important. Not only does Gibson bring to light the problem of history’s unreliability within a context that is already denied historical introspection, but he also propels a dialogue in which those issues are seen to sustain the significance of history in an ahistorical society. Indeed, through the finale’s prophetic offering that “the past [is] alive in everything, that sea upon which the present tossed and rode” (158-59), one thing remains certain: while historicity is weakening, made malleable by the lens of the present, the historical process continues, commanding not only the present, but also the future on which it is always inscribed.

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