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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WILLIAM GIBSON INTERVIEWED ***

William Gibson Interview

by Giuseppe Salza

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INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM GIBSON by Giuseppe Salza

This interview will be included in the book "Net-Surfers" (tentative title) by Giuseppe Salza, to be published by "Theoria Edizioni" in Italy in Spring 1995

CANNES. William Gibson was in Cannes in May 1994 to promote the filming of "Johnny Mnemonic", a \$26 million science fiction movie based on his short story, and starring megastar Keanu Reeves as the main character. Directed by the concept artist (and Gibson's pal) Robert Longo - with a few music video and TV credits, but for the first time in charge of a feature, the film also stars Ice-T, Dolph Lundgren, Takeshi Kitano (of the cult "Sonatine"), Udo Kier, Henry Rollins and Dina Meyer. William Gibson also wrote the screenplay of his original story, which was published in the anthology "Burning Chrome". "Johnny Mnemonic" goes into wide release in current 1995.

In this interview, William Gibson talks at length about "Johnny Mnemonic", movies, SF, net culture and issues.

What are your initial impressions on how "Johnny Mnemonic" is turning out ?

I have just seen the pre-assembled 10-minute show reel. I think it is fantastic! It felt very good seeing

the universe of "Johnny Mnemonic" taking a life on its own. If it had been different, I wouldn't probably be here. But it can be safe to say that "Johnny Mnemonic" has been the optimal screen experience so far.

Robert (Longo, the film director) and I kind of had a mutual experience with it. We first tried to make a screen adaptation of "Johnny Mnemonic" back in 1989, so we started pitching it around film companies, asking for money. Didn't work out. We realized afterwards that our major mistake was asking too little money. Our aim back then was to make a little art movie, we figured that we would need less than 2 million dollars. Jean-Luc Godard's "Alphaville" was our main inspiration back then. We should have asked more money.

We went through several script drafts and stages. It became very painful pursuing the project. If it were just for me, I would have given up long ago. It was really Robert's faith and persistence in getting this film done that made it possible.

Have you written any film scripts before, besides this and the ill-fated drafts for "Alien3"?

Yeah, I have done a couple of screen adaptations that never got made. One was "Burning Chrome" (ED.Kathryn Bigelow was involved in it for a while) and the other was "Neuro-Hotel".

What happened ?

I don't really feel like talking about them. Let's just say that these projects have been... developed to death. It was getting more and more frustrating, and I didn't like that.

Have you ever been involved in any other movie or TV project before that ?

I was gonna write a story for the "Max Headroom" series, but the network pulled the plug. My friend John Shirley did a couple of scripts for them. He's the one who convinced me I should have written one, too.

The only thing which was left of your script for "Alien3" was the prisoners with the bar code tattooed on the back of their necks. What do you think in retrospect of this misadventure ?

My script for "Alien3" was kind of Tarkovskian. Vincent Ward (ED.the director of "The Navigator") came late to the project (ED.after a number of other directors had been unsuccessfully approached), but I think he got the true meaning of my story. It would have been fun if he stayed on. (ED.he eventually quit. "Alien3" was finally directed by David Fincher)

You seem very detached from your previous experiences in movies. "Johnny Mnemonic", on the other hand, seems very personal to you. Why is that ?

I wrote the original story in 1980. I think it was perhaps the second piece of fiction I ever wrote in my life. It held up very good after all these years. "Johnny" was a start for many creative processes: it was in fact the root source of "Neuromancer" and "Count Zero". It is only fair that the first script of mine that goes into production should come from that, from my early career.

The world of "Johnny Mnemonic" takes for granted the Berlusconi completion process, I mean the media baron becoming one of the Country's leaders. I think the distinction between politicians and media is gonna disappear. It already has, in effect. It is very sad.

It's like saying that the theories you imagined in your science fiction stories are becoming real...

Yeah, but people shouldn't look at science fiction like they look at "real" fiction. They shouldn't expect that this is what the future is gonna look like. We (ED. science fiction writers) are sort of charlatans: we come up with a few ideas and we make a living out of that.

When I wrote "Neuromancer", I would have never imagined AIDS and the collapse of the USSR. We never get the future right. I always thought that USSR was this big winter bear that would always exist. And look at what happened. In 1993 I wrote an afterword for the Hungarian version of "Neuromancer". I wrote that nothing lives forever, and that it's time that the winds of democracy blow over the East.

But now, after the arrival of people like Zhirinowsky, I have second thoughts again and I fear for them.

Now you also write "geo-anthropological" reports...

That's right. I did a portrait of Singapore for "Wired Magazine". That place gave me the creeps.

You are considered the true father of cyberpunk. What do you think of how this word has spread in the world and has gained new meanings ?

It depends whether you believe in such a thing. "Cyberpunk" has become a historical word, one of these words which you use to describe a definite period of time. The risk is that it could suddenly become outdated, *passee*. Now it is a very fashionable thing to say: wearing cyberpunk outfit or behaving cyberpunk has become hip: you see it on MTV. I was never comfortable with this interpretation. Billy Idol (ED. he released in 1993 the album "Cyberpunk") has turned it into something very silly.

Finally, I think that cyberpunk is one of these journalistic terms, that media like to rely on. I am aware that most young writers are delighted being considered cyberpunk authors. But I'm older. I remember well the Sixties. I know that once you have a "label" attached onto you, it is over.

Let's go back to "Johnny Mnemonic". Which direction have you given the screenplay ?

"Johnny" is about the politics of Information. It's an action film of course, but it doesn't forego for flashy and graphic FX: there's too much of that already on MTV. Besides, Billy Idol burned that look. We preferred opting for an anti-realistic look: we want to plunge the audience into a very strange but consistent universe. In short, we have decided to tell a story. That's what science fiction literature has often managed to achieve, unlike most films.

Which science fiction movies you like most ?

I like "Blade Runner", Andrej Tarkowski's "Stalker", Chris Marker's "La jetee", and also the British pilot for the "Max Headroom" series. (ED. it was directed by Rocky Morton & Annabel Jenkel)

"Johnny Mnemonic" has a superstar, Keanu Reeves. What do you think of his portrayal of your character ?

Keanu is fantastic! I have this problem: I have never been able to describe the character of Johnny, until he came aboard. One day in the early stages of development, we were discussing the character, and I wasn't making a good job of doing that. But he really got Johnny from day one. It helped me better understand this person that I had imagined, so I was able to make small adjustments to the story. I have always had a good attitude towards actors, and Keanu helped me reinforce that idea. Once "Johnny" got its second chance, Robert (Longo) and I have talked to each others on the phone at least once every day. Subsequently, I was often on the sets during the filming, doing rewrites. The sets of this picture were awesome! Everything was hung 50 feet up in the air. They were quite dangerous: you really had to watch where to put your feet. But I was able to not black out.

You and Bruce Sterling are the forefathers of the new science fiction. Isn't it ironical that he is very fascinated by hackers and the new edge, whereas you're not a technical person ?

Bruce practically lives on the Internet. I don't even have a modem or e-mail. My computer is outdated by any standards of criteria. I never was a technical guy and never will be. I'm a writer, and poetry and pop culture are the two things which fascinate me most. I'm not deeply excited by hi-tech. The Edge of the U2 was over here the other day and he was showing me Net stuff. He showed how he could telnet to his Los Angeles computer and he was very excited. I'll never be like that. However, I feel obliged to be ambivalent towards technology. I can't be a "techie", but I can't hate it, either.

You have written "Virtual Light". So, what do you think of Virtual Reality ?

If we take what I consider the "Sunday paper supplement" of VR, I mean Goggles & Gloves, I think that it has become very obvious, very cliche. I think that real VR is gonna come out from the new generation of visual effects in movies. I met Jim Cameron when he was editing "Terminator 2": he

showed me the clips of the T-1000 emerging from fire in the L.A. canal. He said they were gonna use the actor for the whole shot, but it was easier for them to do it in digital. This is the future. One day there will be entire virtual replicas of real actors.

Incidentally, the book I'm writing now is about virtual celebrities. It's the story of a guy who becomes obsessed with the virtual replica of a star, and falls in love with her.

You're not fascinated by technology, and yet you come up with ideas on the edge...

When I write my books, my favorite part is always "art direction", not the plot. I admit I like giving people a visual impression of the world I'm creating. Then, I have to remind myself that I have to tell a story, foremost.

Another issue you focus on are Information Superhighways. What actions have you taken ?

Bruce Sterling and I went to the National Academy in Washington to address the Al Gore people. We told them that this is the last chance to give the poorest schools equal chances than the richest. In a few years it will be too late and we won't be able to fill up the gap.

To me, Information Highways are best described by the most interesting image I've seen on TV during the Los Angeles riot. A Radio Shack shop (ED. a chain of shops selling consumer electronics gear) was being looted. Next to that there was an Apple shop, and it was untouched. People wanted to steal portable TVs and CD players, not computers. I think this clearly indicated the gaps of culture, or simply the gaps of chances, in our society. Besides, the Information Highway issue gives the public a false perception. They don't wanna offer you exhaustive accesses to information; they wanna offer you a new shopping mall.

What do you think of the Clipper issue ?

The NSA wants to legislate that every computer manufactured in the U.S. will have a chip built inside that will allow the Government to decrypt the information. The worst thing is that people are not informed of what is at stake here. Who would buy a computer with a spy inside? The Clipper chip is an admission of incompetence. They say they wanna be able to decrypt the information that would jeopardize National Security. But to can prevent the Medellin cartel to buy - say - into a Swiss corporation which comes up with a new encryption system which totally cuts out the Clipper ?

Encryption programs are stronger and stronger. There is a new one called Stego, which is free on Internet. It takes written material and hides it in visual elements. I send a digitized e-postcard from Cannes and there is half a novel hidden in its data. I've seen it work. I haven't understood the half of it yet.

Man, the Clipper chip is fucked anyway. Most of the new edge guys are into computers, and they're coming up with new gear nobody had the slightest clue about five years ago. I saw recently a prototype which looked like a beeper, but it was a virtual telephone. Unfortunately, we have to deal with more paper than before. We are submerged by tons of paper!

Wait a second. A few minutes you said you're not into hi-tech, and now you're raving about it...

I'm not a techie. I don't know how these things work. But I like what they do, and the new human processes that they generate.

What is in your opinion the most important technological breakthrough of our society in recent years ?

My favorite piece of technology is the Walkman. It forever changed the way we perceive music. The Walkman has given us the opportunity to listen to whatever kind of music we wanted wherever we wanted.

The Fax machine is also an amazing thing. We live in a very different world because of that: instantaneous written communication everywhere. It is also a very political technology, as the Tien An Men Square events told us.

What about e-mail ?

E-mail is very glamorous. Way too glamorous.

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