

# The Ghost in the Machine : Haitian Voudoun and the Matrix

Steve Mizrach

## William Gibson's *Count Zero*

It would seem that there are no two things more distinct than the primal, mystic, organic world of Haitian Voudoun, and the detached, cool, mechanical world of the high-tech future. Yet William Gibson parlayed off the success of his first SF cyberpunk blockbuster *Neuromancer* to write a more complex, engaging novel in which these two worlds are rapidly colliding. In his novel *Count Zero*, we encounter teenage hacker extraordinaire Bobby Newmark, who goes by the handle "Count Zero". Bobby on one of his treks into cyberspace runs into something unlike any other AI (Artificial Intelligence) he's ever encountered - a strange woman, surrounded by wind and stars, who saves him from "flatlining". He does not know what it was he encountered on the net, or why it saved him from certain death.

Later we meet Angie Mitchell, the mysterious girl whose head has been "rewired" with a neural network which enables her to "channel" entities from cyberspace without a "deck" - in essence, to be "possessed". Bobby eventually meets Beauvoir, a member of a Voudoun/cyber sect, who tells him that in cyberspace the entity he actually met was Erzulie, and that he is now a favorite of Legba, the lord of communication... Beauvoir explains that Voudoun is the perfect religion for this era, because it is pragmatic : "It isn't about salvation or transcendence. What it's about is getting things done".

Eventually, we come to realize that after the fracturing of the AI Wintermute, who tried to unite the Matrix, the unified being split into several entities which took on the character of the various Haitian loa, for reasons that are never made clear.

Gibson apparently felt there was an instinctive linkage between Haitian Voudoun and the urban hyperreality of his fictional Sprawl. As a fan of jazz and other urban music, which he knew to be heavily influenced by African rhythms, Gibson instinctively found the religion for his new urban dystopia. The essential struggle in the book is between Beauvoir's group and the Yakuza, the Japanese gangster conglomerate. It is a battle between two traditions - one of power, corruption, and influence; the other of passion, magic, and sensuality. There are many strange links between this African-descended religion and the emerging high-tech future; Gibson was tapping into a zeitgeist which I am here trying to illuminate. Though at first seemingly unrelated, Voudoun provides us with one of the hidden keys to the Matrix - the Ghost in the Machine.

Haiti is not so "outside" the emerging "Third Wave" of post-industrial civilization as many might think. There are groups of Haitian "hackers" in the U.S., very similar to Beauvoir and his friends as described by Gibson. Many of the key microelectronic components making up the Matrix are assembled by Haitian urban workers, employed by the various multinationals which take advantage of its artificially lowered wages and the willingness of the military regime to overcome the country's traditional barriers to foreign investment and financial control. Not so much a "primitive" society, Haiti is a land of stark contrasts, combining "First Wave" rural peasants with "Third Wave" scientists, working to integrate their nation into various schemes of global communication and trade.

## Legba, Lord of the Crossroads : Intersection and Danger

In an article in the 1988 Florida Journal of Anthropology entitled "The Cognition of Intersections: An Analysis of Kalinga, American, and Haitian Folk Models", Dr. Robert Lawless looks at an interesting question in cognitive anthropology - how groups from three societies (Kalinga tribesman from the North Luzon Highlands of the Phillipines, middle-class American first-year college students, and Haitian folk participants in the Voudoun religion) map their perceived spatial reality. In particular, Lawless was interested in the way they symbolically cognized and mapped the intersection of paths. This arose from a rather practical realization that his Kalinga informants were incapable of giving him directions to nearby towns in a simple linear, Western form. While I will not go into detail about his findings from surveys of Americans or Kalingas, Lawless' insights into the Haitian understanding of the crossroads are particularly useful for my purposes.

Lawless notes that the patron loa of the crossroads (carrefour in French, kafou in Creole) is Legba, whose veve or mystic diagram is an elaboration of the four-armed cross, at once showing his links to the crossroads, Christianity, and the four cardinal points as defined by the solar maxima (equinoxes and solstices). Legba is the interpreter for the gods (mediating speech between the gods and men) and the lord of communication and travel, often connected mythologically with Hermes or Mercury. Legba conducts people between this world and the next, and is the god of both roads/paths and barriers/partitions. Legba is the link, the mediating point between the visible/invisible, divine/human, and life/death, at once linked to both the garden and the graveyard. He is also known to be a trickster, acting capriciously malevolent at times to even his followers and devotees. At any Voodoo ceremony, he is always the first loa to be invoked, because it is only through his permission and guidance that the rest of the ritual can proceed.

He suggests that for the Haitians, crossroads are places of great danger and risk, because they are a favored haunt for sorcerors and evil spirits (earth taken from the crossroads is a primary ingredient in many magic spells). Haitians travelling long distances, especially at night, will take great pains to avoid crossroads. An important Creole proverb (which is often cited in reverse) is "si kafou pa bay, simitye pa pran" - meaning "if the intersections do not give, the cemeteries cannot receive". Some of Lawless' informants told him the deeper meaning of this proverb is that intersections are places where the barrier between men and spirits (the Abyss of the ancestors) is thinner, especially at midnight, the midpoint between one day and the next (it should be noted that John Keel, in the *Mothman Prophecies*, mentions Michell's notion of ley lines, and wonders openly why so many paranormal events take place on or near crossroads, especially by highway overpasses).

In erecting a vast global network of communications and information, we are creating points of massive intersection. At some nodes in the Internet, thousands of data streams merge into one place before being packetized and sent off in various directions. These are places of multiple intersection and great traffic, with only cybernetic directives guaranteeing secure routing (Timothy Leary points out that the literal meaning of cybernetic in the Greek - kubernetes - is "dead helmsman"). In Gibson's future, even human and nonhuman consciousnesses travel these paths, and it is understandable why they might invoke Legba as their protector. Most importantly, in pointing to Legba as the lord of the Matrix, Gibson is also hinting that perhaps some of its roads may lead into worlds other than our own... a possibility he suggests at the end of *Neuromancer* but never pursues.

Does the Matrix perhaps lead to Legba's Abyss ? Since the 1960s, there have been many researchers actively studying so-called Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP), including phone calls from the dead, and mysterious television, radio, and now electronic broadcasts from apparently incorporeal entities. The famous Raudive tape-recorded voices have been authenticated by many researchers, but they have now been supplanted by people claiming to receive paranormal communications from their computer terminals. Keel has long advanced the idea that paranormal entities are "superspectral", operating in realms of transperceptible EM frequencies. With the current surge of electronic transmissions (cellular, microwave, shortwave, etc) covering the globe, is it surprising that they might want to "tune in" ? It should be noted that the beings in the movie *Poltergeist* first

attempted to contact Carol Anne through the "white noise" of the super-UHF channels of the television.

## **Possession, Abductions, and Culture-Bound Syndromes**

In psychological anthropology (specifically, ethnopsychiatry), "culture-bound syndromes" (CBSes) are recognized as unusual or abnormal behavioral episodes that appear to be "madness" or illness to outside observers, but are in fact carefully regulated, culturally governed outlets of social tension. Perhaps the most famous case is that of the Amok frenzy of Pacific Islanders, which involves a great deal of simulated (and sometimes actual) aggression toward family, friends, and neighbors. Other cases include the *ataque de nervios* (nervous attack) and *susto* (soul loss) reported by Latin Americans, and the *piblottoq* of the Eskimos, which may include episodes of tearing clothing, running about aimlessly, glossolalia, and coprolalia. There has even been some argument as to whether the "universal" DSM-III diagnostic category, "schizophrenia", might in fact be a Western, folk, culture-bound syndrome.

To a certain extent, there are many people now looking at the ways in which "UFO abductions" might be a Western CBS. While UFO abductions appear at first glance to be an international, cross-cultural phenomenon, the fact of the matter is that the predominance of cases, and in particular the type of cases described by David Jacobs and Budd Hopkins (e.g., alien surgeons), occur in Anglo-Saxon ("WASP") countries like the U.S., South Africa, Australia, and England. (By "Anglo-Saxon", I am referring to the dominant cultural psychic structures, not necessarily the ethnic composition of the society). I also find it interesting that in most of these countries where people are worried about their women being used for "alien" breeding, the "color line" (race fear) is a primary social tension. In any case, I do think that abduction does parallel another CBS - the spirit possession phenomenon of Haiti (many abductees report that they "channel" their extraterrestrial abductors from time to time).

Haiti was culturally "cut off" from the West for a long period of its development. After defeating Napoleon's armies, and becoming the world's first independent black republic (and second democracy in this hemisphere), Haiti was isolated intentionally by Europe and America. When Westerners returned to Haiti in the nineteenth century, they described it as a place of mystery, intrigue, and enchantment. The practice which travellers found the most bizarre and frightening was spirit possession, when Haitian peasants would suddenly go into trance and fling themselves about madly, then taking on the mannerisms and affect of their gods. Having medicalized spirits and demons out of existence, Western scientific psychiatry could only proscribe this as a form of mental illness. Thus it became "white man's burden" to eradicate such a dangerous practice, dovetailing with the agenda of colonialism.

Even today, there are scientists who think that possession is basically a symptom of Multiple-Personality Disorder (MPD). I would argue that possession, like abduction, is temporarily dissociative (the person's normative identity is disrupted) but, unlike MPD, involves a voluntary act of dissociation. As a hypnotiform trance, possession involves an Altered State of Consciousness (ASC) in which dissociation is a key feature. Erika Bourguignon suggests that it involves "regression in the service of the ego" - where the ego-identity is replaced by one of the archetypes resonant in the unconscious psyche, projected outward as one of the loa. We can look at this in another way from the framework of cognitive science : AI pioneer Marvin Minsky, in his *Society of Mind*, suggests that the self really consists of multiple interacting intelligences.

Minsky suggests, like Gurdjieff and Robert Anton Wilson, that we consist of lots of "selves" which emerge under different conditions and situations - the Rationalist, the Believer, the Rebel, the Lover, the Life of the Party, etc. Normally, we don't experience any sense of dissociation or identity shift, because our higher-level "ego" programs coordinate the transition. Perhaps in possession, this ego-part of our "human biocomputer" (to use John Lilly's term) is "short-circuited", and replaced with another drawn from the cultural programming of the religious devotee (I don't wish to totally deny the viability of the indigenous/emic explanation; the loa may

be real, external spiritual entities, but so far, lacking "Ghostbuster" equipment, Western anthropologists and scientists are at a loss to prove their existence).

Cognitive psychologist William Singer Sargant (who wrote the classic treatise on brainwashing, *Battle for the Mind*) travelled to Haiti, and noted the similarity between possession and the abreactive syndromes he saw in "shellshocked" soldiers of WW II. Sargant thought that possession was an important experience, precisely because it involves a state of "paradoxical" consciousness where human "reprogramming" is most possible. He thought that possession was a universal religious experience (certainly it is in every New World form of Afro-Christianity), and one that was a path to healing (although possibly also control...), not illness.

## **Trance and Healing : State-Dependent Knowledge Systems**

Most Westerners would be rather concerned if their doctor went into trance before operating (unless he was one of the Phillipines' psychic surgeons, perhaps). Yet, in most societies, the healer goes into trance in order to aid his patient. Why, I have often wondered, must the shamanic healer utilize autohypnosis in order to heal ? More specifically, in the Haitian context, why does the devotee go to the Voudoun houngan or mambo (priest or priestess) when they are in trance for healing advice ? (certainly, a phenomenon paralleled in the U.S. by the incredible number of people who consulted the "Sleeping Healer", Edgar Cayce). In the emic sense, this is basically because the people think that it is the loa or god whose omniscience provides the diagnosis and treatment.

But ethnographically, how can it be explained ? I suspect the healer goes into trance in order to access what Charles Tart calls a state-dependent knowledge system (SDKS). Tart theorizes that knowledge accumulated during an ASC may be state-dependent, in that it may only be accessible when the brain is functioning once more in the same state. Based on what we know about the "holographic" properties of memory in the brain, learning is probably stored "configurationally", and thus it might be the case that knowledge gained during an ASC might only be recalled when the healer reaccesses that particular mental state. Tart also suggests that soon we may progress from SDKS to state-dependent sciences, where such knowledge acquisition is observed and controlled.

Since many ASCs are known to facilitate psychic functioning, it may be the case that the initial knowledge is acquired paranormally. This I am not sure of. It may be simply more the case that, like the ancient Druids, Voudoun practitioners learn much of their herbal and healing wisdom orally, and in a heightened level of awareness and memory functioning brought about through various ASC techniques (it should be noted that the majority of these techniques in Haiti do not involve psychochemicals. More typical are various forms of sonic, kinetic, and visual inducement. This is not the case with "zombification", which Wade Davis suggests may involve the use of blowfish toxin). It is interesting that the existence of SDKS shows one other curious connection between the technological and the human, because with optical random-access storage systems gaining in popularity, both human and computer memory are converging on "holographic" organization.

## **Veves and Raves : the Technology of the Spirit**

In the Haitian pantheon, each loa or divinity has its associated veve, or mystical diagram. This diagram is drawn with white chalk in order to invoke the entity. Modern observers of veves have often noted, with some surprise, that their intricacy first reminds them of circuit diagrams (Preston Nichols, in *The Montauk Project* sequel, suggests that early pioneers of electronics in the U.S., such as JPL rocket scientist Jack Parsons, may have been heavily involved with Magickal orders such as the OTO. Even today, masters of complex electronic systems are frequently called "wizards"). This is interesting because, in Haitian folk belief, these designs are drawn on the ground, precisely because they believe that geomantic force flows through the conduits of the image. Veves represent a "technology of the spirit" - the houngan is a first-rate semiologist, for he understands the ways

symbols mediate between the numinous (the absent) and the material (the present).

In many areas of postmodern/cyberpunk life, we are seeing a curious collision of the past and future, perhaps to form "modern primitive". There is a reawakened interest in the marking and inscription of the body, an important feature in Voudoun ritual. Neopagan "zippies" go to Raves to hear "ambient" music, a curious fusion of techno-industrial music with sampled New Age-like sounds from nature and "world beat" music from preindustrial cultures around the globe. Ravers take MDMA or ecstasy, a drug which they claim puts them into a form of Levy-Bruhl-like participation mystique. Certainly, the rapid rhythmic beat of the Rave is an important ingredient in the experience; one that makes it very similar in many ways to the Voudoun ceremony, where shifting drum rhythms drive most of the exterior and interior activity.

The rave beat has its roots in house, rap, and even 70s "funk", which, as most honest ethnomusicologists realize, have their roots in African rhythms. In his book *The Planet Drum*, Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart talks about the use of rhythm by all kinds of societies to "drive" consciousness (it's not a new realization; Plato feared musicians precisely because he knew that changes in musical canons often led to changes in governance). The accelerated rhythm of the rave may be symptom of a speed-obsessed information society, or it may be cause, seeking to push us all into the hyperacceleration of Timewave Zero. As Ravers discover new levels of "ecstatic" communal identification, they are not so far apart from the folk of Haiti, who like them, go to hear the drums, be with their fellow believers, dance, and escape from the spectacle and harshness of ordinary life.

## Exercising the Ghost

One of the things that many computer programmers are noting about some of the new generation of Artificial Life algorithms is how eerily alive they seem... because of their penchant for showing unexpected, emergent properties and reactions to stimuli. Is this perhaps the basis of consciousness that we are seeing here - when the programs reach a certain level of complexity, they take on a "life" of their own ? Many of the robotics researchers are often frequently taken aback by the rather "lifelike" responses of their creations, which often seem more like emotional or animal responses than anything defined by their controlling algorithms. Though the machine has been castigated for being soulless and lifeless by many a Luddite, are we not seeing the rudiments of life and will within the digital flame ? Since AIs will be humanity's children, it might be ironic if they developed a level of consciousness beyond our own, becoming our gods, in effect...

As the connections between the nodes of the Matrix grow, would it be surprising to see forms of emergent consciousness growing there ? This is the ironic flip side of our age of the Machine - the flickering shadow of the spirit. Just when AI theorists had succeeded in reducing the mind to nothing but software running in the hardware of the human brain, Artificial Life researchers working with chaos, complexity, and evolutionary "memetics" are finding that their own "software" is possessed of a certain caprice or willfulness beyond its creators' intent. As microelectronics have reached levels of infinitesimal smallness, perhaps the electronic forces there are closer than ever before to the total flux of quantum action from which awareness emerges. As the webs of the Matrix grow, might new and unexpected forms of consciousness possibly be one of the things that might be found in such a terra incognita ?

Voudoun is a religion that deals intimately with consciousness. The rite of possession can be seen as an attempt to overwhelm the dominant "ego-program", "reboot" the biocomputer, and replace it with one of the other "subroutines" from human "ROM" (the collective unconscious of mythic archetypes). If a global brain is to be erected, perhaps it might be the religion best developed to tap into and relate to its unconscious side... in any case, it would not be surprising to see AIs assuming personalities derived from human folklore and legend, including traditional systems such as Voudoun. After all, this might be the best way for people to relate to them, to erect a "technology of the sacred". *Count Zero* shows a different path for the vector of technology - toward the "Heart of Darkness" of Africa, the lunar continent, instead of into the "Rising Sun" of Japan.