William Gibson's Cyberpunk Settings

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In Gibson's dystopian future, a nightmare vision of supposed late capitalism, large multinational corporations, often centered in Japan, have more power than national governments, which have so lost power that they seem almost to have ceased to exist. One result of such political situations, he implies, appears in the grey skies and polluted air that permeates his novels. In *Neuromancer*, whose first sentence offers its famous description of the sky "a color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (3), we continually encounter such polluted environments : "beyond the neon shudder of Ninsei, the sky was that mean shade of gray". The air had gotten worse; it seemed to have teeth tonight, and half the crowd wore filtration masks. [*Neuromancer*, 15]

Gibson creates his characteristically grim visions of future urban environments with two techniques - 1) analogies that present social or neutral settings in terms of products of technology (and vice versa) and 2) catalogues that that mimic the accumulated detritus of the trashed environment, as in the following passage :

> The door swung inward and she led him into the smell of dust. They stood in a clearing, dense tangles of junk rising on either side to walls lined with shelves of crumbling paperbacks. The junk looked like something that had grown there, a fungus of twisted metal and plastic. He could pick out individual objects, but then they seemed to blur back into the mass : the guts of a television so old it was studded with the glass stumps of vacuum tubes, a crumpled dish antenna, a brown fiber canister stuffed with corroded lengths of alloy tubing. An enormous pile of old magazines had cascaded into the open area, flesh of lost summers staring blindly up as he followed her back through a narrow canyon of impacted scrap. He heard the door close behind them. He didn't look back. [*Neuromancer*, 48]

Compare Gibson's description of Washington, D. C. in *Count Zero*, which applies the same cataloguing to an external environment :

> Condensation dripped steadily from the old Georgetown dome, built forty years after the ailing Federals decamped for the lower reaches of McLean. Washington was a Southern city, always had been, and you felt the tone of the Sprawl shift here if you rode the trains down the stations from Boston. The trees in the District were lush and green, and their leaves shaled the arc lights as Turner and Angela Mitchell made their way along the broken sidewalks to Dupont Circle and the station. There were drums in the circle, and someone had lit a trash fire in the giant's marble goblet at the center. Silent figures sat beside spread blankets as they passed, the blankets arrayed with surreal assortments of merchandise : the damp-swollen cardboard covers of black plastic audio disks beside battered prosthetic limbs trailing crude nerve jacks, a dusty glass fishbowl filled with oblong steel dog tags, rubber-banded stacks of faded postcards, cheap Indo trodes still sealed in wholesaler's plastic, mismatched ceramic salt-and-pepper sets, a golf club with a peeling leather grip, Swiss army knives with missing blades, a dented tin wastebasket lithographed with the face of a president whose name Turner could almost remember (Carter ? Grosvenor ?) fuzzy holograms of the Monument... [CZ 201]

Note how Gibson's physical descriptions implicitly contrast a fallen environment (suitable to Meat-bound existence) to the spiritually finer no-place of cyberspace. Note, too, how these descriptions of place convey his political and economic attitudes.