

*Tomorrow Through the Past: Neal Stephenson and the Project of Global Modernization* edited by Jonathan P. Lewis

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The works of Neal Stephenson are difficult to locate in one particular genre. Starting his writing career in the late 70s with a futuristic campus novel (which he has since dismissed as ‘juvenilia’), Stephenson later became one of the core ‘cyberpunk’ writers with his stories of renegade heroes navigating technologically-advanced dystopian societies. Before long, however, his focus shifted to the historical novel, and his majestic, complex, yet seemingly effortless *Baroque Cycle* displays a talent that is far from limited to science fiction or any of its sub-genre pigeonholes. This collection of essays springs from papers given at the 2006 XXth Century Literature Conference at the University of Louisville, and is the first academic book to be dedicated to the author’s work.

Taking the novels (and the non-fiction *In the Beginning... Was the Command Line*) in publication order, these essays cover Stephenson’s oeuvre up to the point of publication. The collection begins with a helpful contextualising introduction by the editor. This serves both to identify some of the main themes of the essays, as well as provide brief information on most of the novels for those who are either not familiar with them, or need their memories refreshed. Helpful as this introduction is, it is immediately rendered obsolete by the excellent first chapter which analyses the impact Stephenson’s writing can be said to have had on the worlds of literature, academia and even business. This essay, its author’s enthusiasm for its subject

evident, does well in emphasising the books as worthy of lively study. Having captured the reader's interest, it successfully sets the stage for the following chapters.

Those chapters succeed to varying degrees in maintaining that enthusiasm. Some – particularly those on *Snow Crash* and *Cryptonomicon* – are fascinating, and have the feel of brief introductions to points which could sustain more detailed study. Others, unfortunately, fail to convey a coherent argumentative thread; this being particularly true of the chapter considering 'Ecosophical Struggle' in *Zodiac*, which is impenetrable to the uninitiated, despite a reasonably extensive background section which attempts to clarify the main thrust of its theory. Given that this essay collection appears to be aimed at a general audience, this chapter could have done with laying out its explanatory material in a more transparent way. As it is, the obscurity of expression is a severe obstacle to what seems a potentially interesting discussion. This is, however, not a complaint which can be levelled at the collection overall; most of the chapters do very well at pitching their information at a level which can be understood and enjoyed despite little previous familiarity with either the theory or the novels concerned.

A great success of the collection is in highlighting both the diversity in Stephenson's works, and the common threads that link them. One of these threads which emerges clearly is his fascination with different types of code; the translation of information from one form to another and the ways in which these processes are responsible for shaping much of the world around us. Whether this be between languages, in and out of cyphers, from representation to reality or computer code to functioning application – all are covered by these essays, and provide fertile subject matter, uncovering various

methods of playing with information, changing it, running it through mathematical or cultural filters which alter our way of perceiving it. Perception and its manipulation are integral to the novels *Snow Crash*, *The Diamond Age*, and *Cryptonomicon*; these factors can, however, also be identified in other novels as well as the non-fiction (if now outdated) discourse on computer operating systems, *In the Beginning...Was the Command Line*. Political considerations also shine through as one of Stephenson's preoccupations, particularly the extrapolation of capitalist trends and their place in extending or undermining the structure which holds our society together.

Blending linguistic/cryptographical and political issues, the chapter examining *Snow Crash*, "Tongue-Tied in America's Metaverse", treads Orwellian ground in discussing the use of language as a means towards social cohesion or potential ideological control, producing arguably the most interesting of the essays included. Less convincing, perhaps, is the chapter on *In the Beginning...* which wanders a little between disparate points, and remains vague in its expression of most of them.

In general, this is a worthy first step towards further investigation of Stephenson's work, and it is this goal that appears to be its primary aim. To this end, the collection includes some extra sections in the form of a transcribed interview with Stephenson conducted by the collection's editor, Jonathan P. Lewis, as well as a chronology of important events in the author's life. Included apparently for a sense of completeness, these sections are interesting in their own right. They do not, however, appear to add much of value to the discussion in the rest of the book. The interview, in particular, is puzzlingly empty of anything valuable and reads like a fanzine article, asking questions such as 'which historical character did you most enjoy writing?' and 'do you plan to write sequels to

any of your novels?', but thankfully stopping short of 'boxers or briefs?'. This appears to be one of the bloopers in the editing of the book, along with the regular and frustrating typos.

In no way, however, should the minor glitches be considered to outweigh the positive points of this collection. This is a fascinating volume, displaying the diversity of approaches that can be taken to the study of Neal Stephenson's work, whilst at the same time offering engaging essays revealing the enthusiasm of their authors. It is hopefully the first of many studies to delve into this author's creations, providing as it does many solid first steps for such investigation.