



WILLIAM GIBSON
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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Great pleasure to have you here.

WILLIAM GIBSON: It's wonderful.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Great pleasure to have you here, free to talk about whatever goes through our minds. I have a few things already going through my mind. Maybe the first thing going through my mind might be the choice of these words, these seven words. A lot of words in those seven words that have the word "war" in them.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Well, it struck me, when you asked for those seven words, that my life feels to me as though it breaks down into those eras. I was born into the great American postwar, moved into the Cold War, then into the sixties of Vietnam, and the sixties, and everything subsequently seems all of a piece, but I don't think it really is all of a piece, I think it's simply that—simply that I'm no longer in my formative years.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But rather—

WILLIAM GIBSON: Well, I think that the postwar, the Cold War, and the sixties, more or less made me, made me who I am, and so the after part is me carrying that set of coordinates around.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is that the explanation of the word “later”?

WILLIAM GIBSON: Later, yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So, I would like to start—I would like to start by a very formative moment for you, quite early moment, a writer who mattered greatly to you, a voice from the dead. You're interested in the fact that we can hear the voices of the dead, something that our—three, four generations ago, people barely started to hear, and we can hear Walt Whitman, but much more before that we can't. And we do have a

recording of “A Thanksgiving Prayer” and I want us to listen to it carefully. I’ve only played this once before, when I had the pleasure of having Chris Blackwell here on stage, he also is a William Burroughs fan. Let’s watch this.

(William S. Burroughs clip plays)

To John Dillinger in hope he is still alive.

Thanksgiving Day November 28 1986

Thanks for the wild turkey and
the passenger pigeons, destined
to be shat out through wholesome
American guts.

Thanks for a continent to despoil
and poison.

Thanks for Indians to provide a
modicum of challenge and
danger.

Thanks for vast herds of bison to
kill and skin leaving the

carcasses to rot.

Thanks for bounties on wolves
and coyotes.

Thanks for the American dream,
To vulgarize and to falsify until
the bare lies shine through.

Thanks for the KKK.

For nigger-killin' lawmen,
Feelin' their notches.

For decent church-goin' women,
with their mean, pinched, bitter,
evil faces.

Thanks for "Kill a Queer
for Christ" stickers.

Thanks for laboratory AIDS.

Thanks for Prohibition and the

war against drugs.

Thanks for a country where
nobody is allowed to mind his
own business.

Thanks for a nation of finks.

Yes, thanks for all the
memories—all right let's see
your arms!

You always were a headache and
you always were a bore.

Thanks for the last and greatest
betrayal of the last and greatest
of human dreams.

(William S. Burroughs clip ends)

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You have said that William Burroughs had such a huge influence on you, was very important to you early on. I'm wondering if you can take us back to that moment when you—when you read him as an odd teenager.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Well, I found—I was probably twelve or thirteen years old, and I went virtually every day to the three rotating wire paperback book racks in the small rural town in Virginia where I lived, to see if there were any new books. The library had burnt to the ground forty years earlier, and never been replaced, and so that was my library. And even though I knew that the books on the racks were only changed once a month, I would still go every day just in case something—something had arrived. So, you know, and I literally checked out everything.

And I found a very cheaply assembled anthology of Beat writing, which I bought and took home and hid from my mother, because I could see that—from the content that she wouldn't approve of it. And so I started reading the Beats out of this rather, like, badly assembled little anthology. And I really couldn't make head nor tail of most of it. But then I hit their excerpts from *Naked Lunch*, which made no sense to me at all. **(laughter)** It was like reading messages from Mars. Except that I could—I could sense that it was in part built out of science fiction.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Really?

WILLIAM GIBSON: In some cases quite literally, because Burroughs would chop up

whatever SF he happened across and collage it—collage it into the text. So I could see the gristle of SF floating on this bilious soup of rectal mucus. **(laughter)** And there I was at thirteen going, “Whoa, what is, you know, what is this, what is this about?” But even then I could sense that he was able to do something really remarkable with words, and that was what kept me reading Burroughs, was the extraordinary things that he could do with the English language that I’d never encountered anywhere else. It was like discovering the one human being on Earth who could play slide guitar. So, you know, that’s what I came back for. I didn’t come back for the baldly libertarian politics, or the supercranky Reichian Dianetic stuff. I mean, I didn’t come back to Burroughs for the intellectual content, I came for the—I came for this extraordinary style, this completely original way of handling language. Because, in some way, I wanted to be able—I wanted to play slide guitar. I wanted to figure out how he was doing it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You came back also perhaps for the feeling of uncanniness.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yes. And by the time I encountered Burroughs, I had read a great deal of English-language science fiction.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What in particular?

WILLIAM GIBSON: Mmmm—I tended—I read the central, the central shaft of commercial SF, so, Heinlein, and Bradbury. So I started with that. But I very quickly found myself over in a sort of left wing, reading Philip K. Dick and Robert Sheckley, and

people of, people Heinlein probably would have thought of as being of a certain ilk.

(laughter) Definitely not West Point material. **(laughter)** And all of these writers prided themselves on being able to hit the Uncanny Valley pedal now and again. Like you go, “oooooo, that’s weird!” I was reading these really very mild publishable excerpts from *Naked Lunch* that were just blowing that stuff away. I mean, Burroughs’s foot on the Uncanny Valley pedal was an eye-opener.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I mean, on a less certainly blowing your mind away much less but important for you was a very early discovery—you were nine or ten—of Sherlock Holmes.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why did he matter to you?

WILLIAM GIBSON: I think—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It’s one of the first books you got, I think your mother gave it to you.

WILLIAM GIBSON: When my mother realized that I could read at a more or less adult level, for some reason she bought me a two-volume omnibus set of all of the Holmes novels and stories. So that was—you know, for me that was the beginning, that was the

beginning of literature, it was the beginning of my knowledge of cities, because those books have such a wonderful sense of urban existence, delight in the complexity and secrets.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And the congestion of cities, of cities as being particularly alive when they are congested.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yes, although, you know, when I was bit older, I realized that there was a kind of inherently stodgy superpatriotic aspect to those stories in which London is a sort of magnificent platter on which can be arranged the jewels and the crown, so you have an lascar here and a Chinaman there, and but none of it threatens the inherent supreme Britishness of the natural order.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But then when you read Sherlock Holmes, your own little town changed in your mind.

WILLIAM GIBSON: I began to—I found it so seductive that I began to look for bits of—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: London—

WILLIAM GIBSON: Bits of things so I had chosen one particular very modest Edwardian brick building which was unusual in a town of wood-frame houses and when I would walk by it, I would imagine it, that building endlessly multiplied, that the streets were lined with replicas of that building, and that became my sense of London, and oddly when I actually got to London in—I think when I was twenty-two—it—that image came back to me and it worked very well.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So what's that about?

WILLIAM GIBSON: How do you mean?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That you recognized, in what you had imagined, London.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yeah! Well, I had modeled, I guess I found that I had modeled it to some degree of accuracy. I had extrapolated its visual, part of its visual impact.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: 'Cause I'm interested in the way in which reading can offer us other spaces, perhaps other cyberspaces, as it were, reading as a way of making us travel in—at the very beginning of your collection, *Distrust that Particular Flavor*, of essays you write, “We have to learn to write fiction but we have already to varying degrees had to learn to read it and I felt like quite a good reader of fiction when I began to write fiction, or at least a good reader of that fiction which I most keenly enjoyed, and thus are we shaped as writers, I believe, not so much by who our favorite writers are, but

by our general experience of fiction. Learning to write fiction, we learn to listen for our acquired sense of what feels right based”—this I love—“on the totality of the pleasure—or its lack—that fiction has provided us. Not direct emulation, but rather a matter of a personal microculture.”

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yes.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You would tend to agree with this.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In *Zero History* you speak about reading as really your first drug.

WILLIAM GIBSON: It was a marvelous—reading was a marvelous escape for me as a child and opened innumerable vistas that otherwise simply wouldn't have been there. One of the reasons that that worked so powerfully for me was that the community where I lived was not at all a literary community. So the gatekeepers of experience were indifferent to the content of the books I carried home from those wire racks.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thus you had to hide in some way in reading Burroughs, or do you think people were just seeing you as a reader and they didn't quite know what you were—

WILLIAM GIBSON: Well, generally, no one was interested—no one was interested in books, it just, it wasn't a very bookish sort of place and they would see me with books, and if the books didn't have anything pornographic on the cover, **(laughter)** no one was interested so I very quickly developed this life in which I was being coached and taught these extraordinarily subversive things in terms of the culture in which I lived. And I mean the people around me might vaguely know that there were such things as beatniks and that they should be shot on sight **(laughter)** should they make the mistake of venturing out of the Greyhound bus terminal, they would know that, but I had read Kerouac. So there was just this huge—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Dissonance.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Gap, there was this tremendous gap in life experience and I didn't, I think that literary experiences are experiences. The people around me couldn't imagine that, couldn't imagine that, so they, whatever, "he reads too much," "he reads too much," it wasn't that "he reads Allen Ginsberg," he just reads too much.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Did you feel that you were the bearer of a secret or of a sect?

WILLIAM GIBSON: I began to—I began to be aware more and more constantly of a gap between what I had not yet learned to call my worldview, I don't think that expression had been coined then, and the worldview of those around me. To be a—to be a white, middle-class, male, southern child in the early 1960s was to be part of a very extreme monoculture. That was what there was, and outside of that might be something else, but let's not go there. Nobody would want to go there, and reading made me want to go there from a very early age, and that gap started making me intensely curious about anything—anything that didn't seem to be approved of by the monoculture. I very quickly got it that if I wasn't supposed to know about it or read about it, it was probably pretty interesting.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In another essay, entitled “Since 1948,” you write the following, “Gene Wolfe said that being an only child whose parents are dead is like being the sole survivor of drowned Atlantis. There was a whole civilization there, an entire continent, but it's gone, and you alone remember. That's my story, too. My father having died when I was six, my mother when I was eighteen. Brian Aldiss believes that if you look at the life of any novelist, you'll find an early traumatic break, and mine seems no exception.”

A bit further, you say, “My mother took me back to the small town in southwestern Virginia where both she and my father were from, a place where modernity had arrived to some extent but was deeply distrusted. The trauma of my father’s death aside, I’m convinced that it was this experience of feeling abruptly exiled to what seemed like the past that began my relationship with science fiction. I eventually became exactly the sort of introverted hyperbookish boy you’ll find in the biographies of most American science fiction writers, obsessively filling shelves with paperbacks and digest-sized magazines, dreaming of one day becoming a writer myself.” The relationship between the death of your parents and science fiction seems very interesting to me as another form of creating another world, another space, another place to imagine.

WILLIAM GIBSON: It probably provided a lifesaving degree of dissociation, and that may be one of science fiction’s more biological functions, but if my father’s death hadn’t caused my mother to retreat, as it were, into the bosom of her family in this little county seat up in the mountains, I would have continued to live in the modern world. My earliest memories are of being in postwar fifties America, living in a, you know, a crackerbox ranch house in a suburb in Charlotte, North Carolina. The cars had tailfins, and watching television— and I knew, watching television when it was still quite new, and I knew from watching television that I was living in the modern world.

Then suddenly not only is there trauma and loss, but I’m transported to a place in which you might look—you might look in one direction and see that you were in 1956 because

there's a car with tailfins, but if you look in the other direction, you'd be seeing exactly what you would have seen in 1915, see a guy plowing a field with a mule, and Jack Womack has written beautifully about that exact weirdness, he grew up in Kentucky not too far, in a different culture, but not too far from where I grew up, but he also had that experience of the temporal split of living in the modern world in a very retrograde sort of culture.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And this temporal dissonance, this early temporal dissonance that you felt, what kind of effect did it have on you when you started to write?

WILLIAM GIBSON: One awareness I had when I began to try to write science fiction that I think was very, very valuable was that having grown up where I did, I had a sense that all of us all the time are living in someone else's past, and some of the—because I would sometimes find myself reading science fiction written by—written by people who it seemed to me believed in the primacy of the present. “Here we are, we're modern,” and when I started, when I started writing SF, I had the sense that any newest thing, any hot new thing, any piece of technology, will be an old dusty piece of junk in someone else's—in a future that I'll never see, and I found that immensely useful, if only for the sake of naturalism.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And in some way it brings us back to that experience you had in your early twenties of discovering a city like London or European cities, you speak about your love of going to cities ruled, that were—that had Fascism as their ruling class

because they were cities you could actually afford, in those cities, in those various cities, you discovered what is so prevalent in Europe, is that there are layers to the city, there are layers, the way Schliemann spoke about seven layers, there are layers upon layers, and I think that layering of the city, including the congestion, has had a rather important effect on your work.

WILLIAM GIBSON: See, being—that was an important to me, my, you know, initial, initial grand tour was really, really a big deal because it gave me, it gave me a realer kind of deep human time and, you know, going down in the basement of someone’s house in London and seeing part of a Roman wall that had been worked into the foundation, hundreds of years before, or being in a garret room which in an, on an unusually hot summer day smelled of pitch because the beams had been recycled from the masts of sailing ships. And I had—growing up in Virginia where I did, I had a very considerable sense of, sense of the past, it was an old part of the country, and it had a lot of history, but that hadn’t resulted—it had a lot of history, but the history was quite thin on the ground, and seeing it, seeing it in London or Paris or Rome or Athens, stacked up in—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Layers.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Layers, the strata of time, it gave me a sort of yardstick that I wouldn’t have had otherwise.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You—you, quickly another early influence other than Burroughs is the discovery at an ungodly early age of Borges.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you speak about Borges's—because you were talking about layers and it comes to my mind that you speak about Borges as adding bandwidth to your understanding of—of—of what? Of—

WILLIAM GIBSON: I don't know, possibly of mind, because to encounter Borges is to encounter this absolutely extraordinary mind capable of, capable of modes of thought which until I encountered them I don't think I could ever, ever have imagined. So if you can, with Borges, if you can go with him, if you can go where he's going in his fiction, it's I think literally mind-expanding.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Mind-expanding.

WILLIAM GIBSON: In a way that's quite unusual, quite unusual for fiction.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Burroughs and Borges. Nearly at the same time.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yeah, very close. I mean, I just—it was, I was reading so omnivorously and so thoroughly without any program, there was no reading list, that, you

know, I'm sure I discovered William Burroughs and Edgar Rice Burroughs in the same summer and read them both, **(laughter)** read them simultaneously, it's like *Naked Lunch* and *Thuvia, Maid of Mars*, **(laughter)** and I think that that possibly is—the literary DNA that accounts for, you know, much of what I've done.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The sheer folly of contiguity. I mean, what was next to this book and you encountered it simply because it was on the rack that you went to visit as often as you possibly could. You said that your hometown is science fiction, and I'm curious by this formulation and I'm curious if you still consider it that way and if indeed there are other passports you would wish to have, or other visas you would want to have?

WILLIAM GIBSON: Oh, all right, now I know what you mean. Well, science fiction was a huge part of my native literary culture. It was, but, you know, as time goes, as time goes on, I see more, I see more clearly that it was actually that the odd mixture of the contiguous things that happened to be on the wire rack that affected me. When I was younger, I wanted—when I was younger I think I wanted to see science fiction as having been the primary, the primary influence, simply because it was less ridiculous, but the truth is really in I think in the—this absolute randomness and a child attempting to—to model the universe out of this ridiculous random assortment of things that happened to turn up at a very formative time in his life. As I get older, I don't really see anything wrong with that, because I think it's sort of really all like that anyway, although teachers try to tell you it isn't.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In some sense the power of serendipity.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And this is a maybe a good way to start to attempt to understand this notion for which you're so well known, the notion of cyberspace, and I like the way in which you, you connect it to what is called the steam-engine moment, which is something that I had never really thought about quite in the way you phrase it. I've always been interested by a writer, I think I've mentioned him to you, called Wolfgang Schivelbusch, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch wrote a book called *The Railroad Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, and he was so fascinated by what the railways changed in human perception and how some people were completely opposed to it and felt that it was flattening culture and flattening values and flattening the landscape, and others, painters were particularly impressed because all of a sudden pointillists saw when on a train they saw the landscape as it looked, as they had painted it.

And so the train happened at a certain moment when it was possible for the train to happen and you came up with this word, "cyberspace," at a moment when it was possible to think about what this space we now no longer have to call a space because we're all in it is and I'd like you to bring us back to that moment of trying to name something.

WILLIAM GIBSON: I came to that out of a perceived need to find an arena in which I

could set science fiction stories. The science fiction arena of my childhood was space travel, and the vehicle was the rocket ship, the space ship. And in the late seventies, early 1980s, that wasn't resonant for me. I knew I didn't—I knew I didn't want to do that. I knew I didn't want to do the postapocalyptic wasteland. I wanted to try to write science fiction, but I didn't have an arena. And I arrived at cyberspace—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: By arena, you mean—

WILLIAM GIBSON: A territory, a place in which the story can unfold. And I wanted that sense of another realm, and I wanted a sense of agency for the characters, and particularly for the protagonist. She drives her *mmmmmm* through *mmmmmm*. **(laughter)** But I didn't know what she was driving, and I didn't know what she was driving it through. So in some odd way I think I began to mull over that and keep my eyes open as I walked around and went through my daily life looking for bits and pieces of reality that could be cobbled into—bits and pieces of something that could be cobbled into the arena I needed for this character to have some sort of agency in.

And the pieces that I came up with were the—the vision—this is sort of—just the sight of kids playing very early huge plywood-sided arcade games, and the body language of just like intense longing and concentration, and when I glanced into these arcades that I was probably afraid to go into myself, it felt to me that like they wanted to go right through the glass at the back of the machine, they wanted to be inside there with the Pong, or whatever. **(laughter)** But you could see they wanted it, and I think I could also see that

they were very likely to get more complicated games than Pong pretty quick. Which indeed they did.

I had that, I had the big bus stop posters of the actual computer part of the Apple IIc, which was smaller than most briefcases. And it was a very crisp, suited businessman arm, holding this thing. It didn't show you that there was this big clunky monitor you had to have. **(laughter)** He was just holding this thing with a keyboard on it. I knew people who were starting to buy Sinclairs and kits, building kits, like these incredibly primitive little computers that, you built it, and you had to keystroke all of the programs into it, and if you made a single mistake, the whole thing wouldn't work. **(laughter)** But I knew that people did that. I started hearing about people who'd connected home computers distantly via telephones, and because, fortunately, I knew absolutely nothing about computers, I was able to sort of mush that all together **(laughter)** and get this vague vision of my arena, which I then needed a really hot name for. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you played with a few.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yeah, and "dataspace" wouldn't work, and "infospace" wouldn't work. But "cyberspace."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Whoa.

(laughter)

WILLIAM GIBSON: It sounded like it meant something, or it might mean something, but as I stared at it in red Sharpie on a yellow legal pad, my whole delight was that I knew it meant absolutely nothing. **(laughter)** So I then would then be able to specify the rules for the arena.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You know, I'd like to read a few lines in *Neuromancer* about cyberspace but one word that caught me off guard in your description of the arcade was the adolescents in the arcades, you said that they were longing.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yeah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's so interesting. Longing to be even more immersed.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yeah, they wanted further immersion. They wanted a better virtual surround, it seemed to me. They were like children pressing their faces against a toy shop window, unable to get—unable to get to the other side, but I think even then I could see that they willed themselves to a higher immersion through their concentration—their concentration on the game, the mundane world disappeared, which is really what—I think what they were paying for.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A sense of true, a desire for the sense of true ubiquity.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yeah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You—I mean, these famous lines, “Cyberspace, a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts, a graphic representation of data extracted from the banks of every computer in the human system, unthinkable complexity, lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data.” I must say, for something that you believed meant nothing, **(laughter/applause)** that is quite—quite a description.

WILLIAM GIBSON: The significant thing about the context, the context of that description, is it’s the Discovery Channel, **(laughter)** it’s a television on in the background, and Case overhears the voice-over, and so I wanted—the author is sneaking, sneaking the description of the arena into the text and selling how sexy it is at the same time. But I think it sort of works, because it’s what you expect from the Discovery Channel. **(laughter)** I don’t even know if we had a Discovery Channel when I wrote that, so maybe I predicted that, too. **(laughter/applause)**

It’s got a kind of—it’s like a postwar, what it’s really a lot like, I never thought of this before, it’s the postwar pitch to schoolchildren about how good atomic energy is for you. There were sort of PSA cartoons, “The Friendly Atom.” “Look, your shoes are always going to fit because you can go down to Sears and stick your feet into this totally radioactive shit,” **(laughter)** but it had that, you can almost hear the music like, “Here

we are!”

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Speaking of music, let’s listen to something.

(Bruce Springsteen, “Darkness on the Edge of Town”)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So you’ve said of this album that it had quite an important influence in some way, that’s Springsteen, and this album of Springsteen in particular.

How so?

WILLIAM GIBSON: Around the same time I was looking—looking for an arena that I could write science fiction in, I was looking for voices that resonated for me that I had never encountered in my reading of science fiction and in that album I found that really abundantly. I mean, I would listen to that I think what I thought was, “Wow, what if there was a kind of science fiction in which this is the voice of the protagonist?”

And it doesn’t seem like very much, but it was huge, it was huge for me because I came to—I came to science fiction as to an abandoned but handsome municipal building going, “You know, this could be a nightclub.” **(laughter)** I came really in the late seventies—I hadn’t been reading science fiction except for a few favorites who I felt transcended it, people like J. G. Ballard and M. John Harrison and when I thought, “Maybe I should try writing science fiction,” I went and bought a bunch of contemporary science fiction, and I was like—I felt like someone who had grown up on Texas swing discovering Nashville

country, I was going like, “Damn, this used to be a viable pop form, you could kick ass with this stuff in the 1960s. What the hell happened?” **(laughter)** And I thought, “Well, it’s an opportunity, you know, so be it, it’s an opportunity.”

But then when I started trying to put my own science fiction together, it wasn’t as though these characters were springing fully formed from my brow, I couldn’t even figure out how to do characters, but Springsteen, who is a superb writer of fiction, a superb writer of fiction as a lyricist, and an absolute master of terse but intense characterization gave me, gave me that and, you know, I studied him very carefully, and Lou Reed as well, and David Bowie’s album *Diamond Dogs*, which I rediscovered about the time I was— actually I had missed *Diamond Dogs*, so it was sort of new to me when I started, and I listened to *Diamond Dogs* and I go, “this is totally science fiction, this is like Mike Moorcock, New Worlds, science fiction and apparently it was because they were recording it on Denmark street not very far from the store that eventually turned into Forbidden Planet, and Bowie would apparently come in and buy like great hods of new-wave SF and take it away, take it away and read it. So I didn’t go to—I didn’t go to the available science fiction or even my personal shelf of classics for a sense of what characters should be or what the environment should be. I went to a lot of places, and a lot of the places I went were music.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Music, so Springsteen in some way gave voice better, was of more help, than some of the writers.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. The character in that song—I think that that song is actually based to some extent on a film called *Two-Lane Blacktop*, and I can't remember who made it and I cannot remember the name of the very talented and quite eccentric American novelist who wrote the screenplay, but the screenplay was published in its entirety in *Esquire* when I was about seventeen years old, and I was quite impressed by it. It's a very similar—the characters are very similar, this drag racer, his mechanic, and a girl they pick up as she's hitchhiking on the highway, and it's just this triangle, so when I was trying to write science fiction, I thought, "Well, okay, this is like, it's a story about technology," you know, it's about he's got—he drives the car but he has to have the mechanic to keep the car going. In a way, it's really about the car, that's their arena, and, you know, part of the beauty of that song is that it articulates the arena of these nomadic dragstrip racers who drive around making their living betting that they can do a mile faster than the local guy.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And a movie gave you also to some extent an arena in which to imagine your future science fiction. If we could look at that clip quickly.

(Clip from *Blade Runner* plays.)

WILLIAM GIBSON: The older that gets, the better. **(laughter)** It's an amazing thing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's amazing. Why so?

WILLIAM GIBSON: Well, you know, that wasn't, that actually wasn't an influence. I was about a third of the way into the earliest version of *Neuromancer* when *Blade Runner* had its initial theatrical release, and I literally after like five minutes just sort of left the theater almost in tears (**laughter**) because this guy Scott had made this—what I could tell was like the most beautiful movie I had ever seen and it put the tawdry stuff I was projecting on the inside of my own forehead to shame, and I just thought, “all this work I've done, all this suffering, it's now been, you know, wiped out by this movie *Blade Runner*.” But you know and then within a week or two I noticed that it was like a complete and utter box office and critical disaster. (**laughter**) Everybody—Nobody went, the critics hated it, and it didn't make any money, and in those days I had no way of seeing it again, isn't that amazing?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You had no way of—

WILLIAM GIBSON: I had no way of seeing it again unless it was theatrically released again. It was gone. It was gone, so okay, I'm going to do my thing, do my thing here.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Imagine if it had been successful.

WILLIAM GIBSON: It could of. I don't know if it would have stopped me. It might have done. It just shocked me, like the vision was so close to what I was thinking of and so rich, and years later I had a very nice lunch with Ridley Scott, just the two of us, and we talked about influences and they were just identical. He would say, “I was looking at

French comics,” “oh, yeah, French comics,” and we were working very much from the same palette.

But a way in which *Blade Runner* became very important to me is that over three or four years after its release, I began to see that it was the most influential film that I could remember ever having been released, because it was influencing fashion, it was influencing architecture, it was influencing the design of automobiles, it's a film that actually changed the way the eighties look, and there are for the most part unfortunate examples of *Blade Runner*-inspired eighties architecture in most North American cities, **(laughter)** and I thought that's remarkable, that Ridley Scott's film, it changed the way people dressed, and it changed for a while the way women wore makeup to nightclubs, I could see it having this effect and I thought that was really very interesting that a film could do that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Here we are at the New York Public Library and it's a passage in *Neuromancer*. “The transition to cyberspace when he hit the switch was instantaneous. He punched himself down a wall of primitive ice belonging to the New York Public Library, automatically counting potential windows, keying back into her sensorium, into the sinuous flow of muscle senses, sharp and bright.” I just couldn't keep myself from reading this.

(laughter)

WILLIAM GIBSON: That was probably—I probably chose the New York Public Library for contrast, that I and I may even have had a sense in writing that the New York Public Library is a kind of cyberspace.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you've just had an experience of the New York Public Library.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yes, we've been down in the dead core, the deep, deep core. This thing has roots, **(laughter)** below you, below you is the most single most *Difference Engine*-style environment I have ever seen in my life. It just goes down and down.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you have seen fairly much. I mean, this, for you to say that this is more than anything you have seen is saying something. We went down twenty-two feet underground. What, at this moment, I'm sure if we speak in a year's time, it will be different, but at this moment what struck you the most?

WILLIAM GIBSON: The sense of the building having originally been an enormous, intricate, massive information retrieval machine, quite literally, with conveyor belts for buckets filled with books and threaded with ganglia of pneumatic tubes through which whizzed brass cylinders with beautiful red velour—I'm just imagining those. I didn't see any.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah, because we didn't see any of that. I was trying to think, where was I when the velour was there?

(laughter)

WILLIAM GIBSON: The department stores of my very early childhood still had those, though, so they did have the brass cylinders with the red velour caps to maintain the air pressure, and they were probably built by the same people who built the library's here.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, they existed recently, so you're right, in some way, what you're imagining is a recent past.

WILLIAM GIBSON: This was a—this structure was a massive automation of information retrieval optimized for speed and accuracy, a single huge machine.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There's so much else I want to talk to you about. There's one thing in particular that interests me, is when in this steam engine moment something appears and something appears that is taken for granted, that we don't notice anymore, but in some sense it's magical. I think of my father, who was always an early adopter of new technologies, so when I was ten years old living in Brussels, we would go downtown to the center of Brussels, and he would go and retrieve Telexes as they arrived. All of a sudden a machine—you remember Telexes, machine, a machine would arrive, a letter

would arrive that was typed somewhere else, from Singapore, and he would get this piece of paper that had just been sent to him.

And I was reminded because you speak about these moments when something is taken for granted but actually has an origin where it might seem uncanny, and I found this passage, which I want to read to you and I want you to react to it, it's in *Remembrance of Things Past*, and it's a passage of Proust where he talks about the telephone, and he's amazed by the telephone, he's amazed that when he can call his grandmother, he can hear the *cloche*, the clocks of the big cathedral, and he can imagine the whole world around him, around her, being so far away but then that amazement dies out, and he writes, "And I would go down almost without thinking how extraordinary it was that I should be calling upon the mysterious Madame de Gourmont of my boyhood simply in order to make use of her for a practical purpose, as one makes use of the telephone, a supernatural instrument before whose miracles we used to stand amazed and which we now employ without giving it a thought to summon our tailor or order an ice cream." Isn't that fantastic?

WILLIAM GIBSON: I've never read that or heard it before, and it's absolutely a brilliant illustration of one of the problems I've faced in writing science fiction and in *Neuromancer* in particular and that is the problem that the miracle with which I wish to amaze my reader would in reality be an invisible banality for the people using it, and the one of the things that's quite hokey about the cyberspace in *Neuromancer* is it's simultaneously, it's simultaneously, "Whoa! This is so sexy and far-out and psychedelic,"

and “it’s how we do everything.” There’s a kind of voice, it’s like the voice from the Discovery Channel passage saying, “It’s how we do everything,” and there’s Case going, naaaaaah, having these orgasmic experiences with pure information, and it doesn’t really fit—it doesn’t really fit together, and in that way it’s absolutely not a predictive text—that wasn’t—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There’s a difference between prediction and imagining.

WILLIAM GIBSON: I think it was—in some sense—I wanted the evocative—evocation is an important part of science fiction and fantasy for me. The calling, if only calling the image of something unreal into being in the reader’s mind for a moment has always seemed to me to be like a great hack, it’s a fun thing to do if you can, if you can do it, so I was evoking, I was evoking that, but there really wasn’t any particular part of me that was like, “Oh, I really want this to happen, I really want this equipment, I want these machines.” That wasn’t it. I wanted to induce something in the reader, but it came as a sort of shock to me when I started to meet people whose relationship to my first novel was like, “Holy shit, I want all this stuff right now. Why is my computer so slow?” **(laughter)** I really hadn’t, I really hadn’t expected that, and generally I had better sense than to say, “Come on, that’s not what it’s about.” I just said, “Well, you know, they’re getting faster.”

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: William, now, moving to the here and now and to what you're in the middle of—I'd like to hear a little bit about it and you're offering something to this audience today at the New York Public Library that you've never done before.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Indeed. Indeed.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why are we so lucky?

WILLIAM GIBSON: I don't know. I'm a third of the way—I may regret it. I'm a third of a way through a novel that is probably called *The Peripheral* and, you know, I don't know when it will be finished, I hope it won't take forever, or indeed that much longer, but I've had a very different relationship with this. I've always been like obsessively unwilling to discuss what I'm working on with anyone, it's just—it's all had to be very, very closely held, and for some reason this book isn't like that, and friends of mine know just how incredibly, ridiculously, adolescently boring I can be when I start talking about the contents and the direction of my book which I'm writing.

I'm not going to do that—I'm not going to do that with you, in part because it would all be spoilers, **(laughter)** and it's a story that more than usually depends on a series of reveals as screenwriters say, but if you don't mind I will read you the first couple of pages of it, and actually I'm doing this really selfishly because I'll get something out of that, I'll get my echolocation mechanism will get a fix on your reaction, so I'm going to do that.

(applause)

This chapter, this chapter is called “The Gone Haptics”

They didn’t think Flynn’s brother Burton had PTSD but that sometimes the gone haptics would glitch him, they said it was like phantom limb, ghosts of the tattoos he had worn in the war, put there to tell him when to run, when to be still, when to do the bad-ass dance, which direction, what range, so they allowed him some disability for that, and he lived in the trailer by the creek. An alcoholic uncle had lived there before, a veteran of some other war, their father’s older brother.

When Burton got his discharge, the trailer was empty aside from the biggest wasps’ nest any of them had ever seen. She and Burton and Leon had used it for a fort the summer she was ten. Leon had tried to take girls there later on, but it smelled too bad. It was the single most valuable thing on their property, Leon said, an Airstream, 1977. He showed her ones on eBay that looked like blunt rifle slugs and went for crazy money in any condition at all. The uncle had gooped this one over with white expansion foam, gone gray and dirty now, to stop it leaking and for insulation. Leon said that that had saved it from the pickers. She thought it looked like a giant grub but with tunnels back through it to the windows.

Down the path through the trees to his door there were flakes of that foam flattened into

the hard black earth. He had the lights turned up, and through the windows she saw him stand and turn, and on his spine and side the marks where they'd taken the haptics off like the skin was dusted with something dead-fish silver. They said they could get that off too, but he didn't want to keep going back.

She called his name. "Easy Ice," he answered, her gamer tag, bumping the door open with the flat of his hand, pulling a new white T-shirt down with the other hand across that chest the Corps had given him, covering the mark above his navel, size and shape of a playing card. Inside, the trailer was the color of Vaseline, LEDs buried in it, bedded in Walmart amber. She had helped him sweep it out before he moved in. He hadn't bothered to bring the shop vac down from the garage, just bombed the inside a good inch thick, some Chinese polymer, glassy and flexible. Now you could see stubs of burnt matches in it, or the cork-patterned paper on the squashed filter of a legally sold cigarette, older than she was. She knew where there was a rusty jeweler's screwdriver and somewhere else a 2020 quarter. The polymer had taken care of the smell, now he just had to get his stuff out before he hosed the inside every week or two, like washing Tupperware. Leon said the polymer was curatorial. You could peel it all out before you put your American classic up on eBay, let it take the dirt with it.

Burton took her hand, stepping back, helping her up and in. "You going to Davisville?" she asked. "Leon's picking me up," he said. "Luke 4:5 are protesting there. Shaleen said," she said. He shrugged, moving a lot of muscle but not by much. "That *was* you Burton last month on the news, that funeral they protested in Carolina." He didn't quite

smile. “You might have killed that boy,” she said. He turned so she wouldn’t see him grin. “Scares me Burton,” she said, “when you do that shit.”

He turned back. “You still walking point for that lawyer in Tulsa?” “He isn’t playing as much she said, busy lawyering I guess.” “You’re the best he’s got,” he said, “you showed him that.” “It’s just a game,” she said, telling herself more than him. “He might as well be getting a Marine,” he said. She thought she saw the thing the haptics did then, that almost invisible shiver, then, gone.

(applause)

The thing that’s complicated about this book is that that’s one of two voices, and in the tedious and repetitive way that I have with narrative structure, the two voices alternate between chapters, and the other voice, which I’ll not get into at all, the voice of the second chapter, is so different than—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I read that there are two futures.

WILLIAM GIBSON: Yeeeah. It’s—this is—Flynn’s world is maybe thirty years from now and is relatively familiar, and the other one is is way the hell down the time line and consequently really hard to write.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You shared this with us, which is greatly generous, wishing something in return from us perhaps as well, and you write, I think I know that you write with an open browser, you tweet a lot, you have an enormous amount of followers on Twitter. How have these tools in some way, as maybe sharing this with us tonight, influenced you, or do they influence you?

WILLIAM GIBSON: I don't know, and I don't think we—I don't think we can know how technology affects us. As soon as it affects us, we become that which has been affected.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you never want an unmediated experience, or you don't think that an unmediated experience is possible. I'm curious, there's an image that I'd like you to see. This is E. B. White writing.

(laughter)

WILLIAM GIBSON: I've done that. I've done that on a manual typewriter, and I wrote *Neuromancer* on a manual typewriter and *Count Zero* and maybe half of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, and I was a very late adapter of the Internet, very late adapter of the Internet, so but I'm increasingly, I'm increasingly not that way. What I find, though, is that the solitude, the solitude of the act of seriously writing, writing fiction, is such that it—it comes within the whole loopy shitstorm of social media that most of us now live in. It

comes anyway, and you're absolutely alone doing this strange, sometimes seemingly very hard and other times like wildly exhilarating thing and there's nobody, there's nobody else there, even though you're tweeting with your other hand. Some people disagree, some people disagree, they block the little holes in the laptop. I don't have that problem.

Bruce Sterling had a computer before anyone else I knew. He had a computer he used as a word processor, and I remember him calling me up one day and saying that he had a small television set with MTV on top of his computer monitor. He had built this kind of like, this incredible distraction machine. **(laughter)** "It's great. Man, you should try it," and I'm like shuddering delicately **(laughter)** over my manual typewriter. But I soon got with the program.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In closing, I'd like you to read these two pages, maybe you can contextualize it for us.

WILLIAM GIBSON: This is something, a piece called "Dead Man Sings," I have to check. "Dead Man Sings," yes, and this is written for, not for *Forbes* magazine, but for some kind of giveaway side magazine that *Forbes* does, and they said, "We'd like you write something for us," and I said, "What about?" And they said, "Oh, about twenty-five hundred words," **(laughter)** "whatever you like." I wrote this, and I don't know why but I wrote it in this sort of fugue state, I just sat down and went aaaaah, **(laughter)** and this strange thing came out and I actually find I'm more than anything else in this book I've

been mining this for decades trying to figure out what the hell I meant.

(laughter)

Time moves in one direction, memory in another.

We are that strange species that constructs artifacts intended to counter the natural flow of forgetting.

I sometimes think that nothing really is new; that the first pixels were particles of ochre clay, the bison rendered in just the resolution required. The bison still function perfectly, all these millennia later, and what screen in the world today shall we say that of in a decade? And yet the bison will be there for us, on whatever screens we have, carried out of the primal dark on some impulse we each have felt, as children, drawing. But carried nonetheless on this thing we have always been creating, this vast unlikely mechanism that carries memory in its interstices; this global, communal, prosthetic memory that we have been building since before we learned to build.

We live in, have lived through, a strange time. I know this because when I was a child the flow of forgetting was relatively unimpeded. I know this because the dead were less of a constant presence, then. Because there was once no rewind button. Because the soldiers dying in the Somme were black and white, and did not run as the living run. Because the world's attic was still untidy. Because there were old men in the mountain valleys of my

Virginia childhood who remembered a time before recorded music.

When we turn on the radio in a New York hotel room and hear Elvis singing “Heartbreak Hotel,” we are seldom struck by the peculiarity of our situation: that a dead man sings.

In the context of the longer life of the species, it is something that only just changed a moment ago. It is something new, and I sometimes feel that, yes, everything has changed. (This perpetual toggling between nothing new under the sun, and everything having very recently changed, absolutely, is perhaps the central driving tension of my work.)

Our “now” has become at once more unforgivingly brief and unprecedentedly elastic. The half-life of media-product grows shorter still, ’til it threatens to vanish altogether, everything into some weird quantum logic of its own, the Warholian fifteen minutes becoming a quark-like blink. Yet once admitted to the culture’s consensus pantheon, certain things seem destined to be with us for a very long time indeed. This is a function, in large part, of the rewind button. And we would, all of us, to some extent, wish to be in heavy rotation.

And as this capacity for recall (and recommodification) grows more universal, history itself is seen to be even more obviously a construct, subject to revision. If it has been our business, as a species, to dam the flow of time through the creation and maintenance of mechanisms of external memory, what will we become when all these mechanisms, as they now seem intended ultimately to do, merge?

The endpoint of human culture may well be a single moment of effectively endless duration, an infinite digital Now. But then, again, perhaps there is nothing new, in the end of all our beginnings, and the bison will be there, waiting for us.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: William Gibson.

(applause)