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 **Cyberpunk, War, and Money: Neal Stephenson's
*Cryptonomicon***

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Contemporary Literature

University of Wisconsin Press

Volume 53, Number 2, Summer 2012

pp. 319-347

10.1353/cli.2012.0011

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Cyberpunk, War, and Money:
Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*

Paul Youngquist (bio)

The king called up his jet fighters
He said you better earn your pay

The Clash, "Rock the Kasbah"

Old punks never die, only young ones (think Sid Vicious). Old punks get day jobs, like Joe Strummer—or William Gibson. It has been over twenty-five years since Gibson hacked his way onto the science fiction continuum, creating a subgenre that became instantly infamous: cyberpunk. It was dystopian. It was hip. It was Goth angst meets digital wizardry. But in retrospect, like the musical movement it invokes, cyberpunk appears shockingly short-lived: Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985)—only a few novels still wear all that black with panache. Neal Stephenson dealt the genre a killer blow with his virtual swift sword in *Snow Crash* (1992). Cyberpunk has been bleeding slowly ever since, never quite dying but no longer capable of the dazzling fictional displays that made it seem, for a time anyway, immortal. It spawned sub-subgenres, of course—splatterpunk with its ballistic gore and, more recently, steam-punk, a sentimental mixture of info-tech and industrial chic that answers globalization with Victoriana. But cyberpunk, the sci-fi subgenre that gave us cyberspace, now seems a thing of the past, an old dystopian daydream of Reaganomics gone global. **[End Page 319]**

Maybe that's the point. Maybe cyberpunk was less a departure than a destination, the arrival in popular fiction of cultural possibilities that had been developing for years. Cyberpunk is certainly the brainchild of the economic history that fulfills itself in globalization. Fredric Jameson got that much right when he called it *the* literary genre of transnational corporate capitalism (38). But I want to suggest that its popular force arises from its capacity less to disrupt than to consolidate that history. Cyberpunk confirms the arrival of a world built by cybernetics, sustained by info-tech, and driven by global capital flows. That world did not drop from the sky on the day in 1984 when *The Washington Post* first printed the word "cyberpunk" ("Books"). It took decades to cohere. Science

fiction morphed to accommodate the world's growing devotion to cybernetics, info-tech, and global capital. Cyberpunk may be the ultimate result, but a long, interesting, and unacknowledged legacy of science fiction leads up to its dark flowering. Call that legacy "cyberfiction"—cy-fi for short. Outer space falls into cyberspace and life moves online. Science fiction slides into cyberfiction, becoming the preeminent literary genre of postmodern culture.¹

The work of Neal Stephenson illustrates both the history and fulfillment of this development. Set in the recent past, *Cryptonomicon* (1999) provides a fictional account of the conceptual origins of cyberfiction. Set in the near future, *Snow Crash* takes up a position at the far end of the genre's emergence. Written in reverse order to the history they trace, these novels bookend the development of cyberfiction. Between them unfurls a history of economic and technological advance that gives the genre its cultural authority. While Stephenson's account of this history turns out to be peculiarly flawed—or better, sentimental—*Cryptonomicon* in particular offers a convenient introduction to the main obsessions, aims, and effects of cyberfiction, whose contributions to popular culture are hard to understate, even if they remain hard to see. **[End Page 320]**

A Genealogy of Speed

It's worth looking directly into the cultural history that Stephenson's work traces. The theoretical origins of cyberfiction (granting the heuristic function of such a statement) run back to World War II. If necessity is the mother of invention, war is its abusive father. Cyberfiction would be impossible without the emergence during World War II of the science of cybernetics.² Derived from the Greek word for navigation (*kubernētēs*, "steersman"—also the root of the word *government*), cybernetics was initially conceived as a systems science for coordinating agencies among humans and machines. While it lays the groundwork for today's theoretical fascination with cyborgs, the initial development of cybernetics was perilously practical. Norbert Wiener, who coined the

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