



GR CORRESPONDENT

# Aaron Stewart-Ahn

is a New York-based filmmaker.

## Neuromantic

words by **Aaron Stewart-Ahn**

pics and captions courtesy of **William and (mostly) Claire Gibson**

**William Gibson earned literary immortality by coining the word *cyberspace* (now entered in the Oxford English Dictionary) in his early short story “Burning Chrome.”** The true heart of Gibson’s fiction may lie less in buzzwords and more in what a narrator confides in the same story: the street finds its own uses for things. This aesthetic for repurposing and recycling art and technology in the margins of human ingenuity suffuses all his work.



East 7th, just off Main, near a hidden strip of temporarily free parking alongside a (temporarily) vacant lot.

His seminal sci-fi novel *Neuromancer* was a touchstone for those who were about to grow up in an age of ubiquitous computation and who hadn't quite worked out what that was going to mean culturally. Perhaps this was because underneath the fiction, he is essentially most interested in the experience of what it means to be human, and his unique prose made words like *modem* functionally poetic. In a twist both strange and comforting, he's since stopped writing science fiction, setting his two latest novels, *Spook Country* and *Pattern Recognition*, in the present day. Despite this shift to the present, they remain subtly prescient, are even funnier, and vividly reflect the anxieties and aspirations of who we are now.

Appropriately enough for this era, I caught up with him via Twitter (@GreatDismal), where I saw that he was giving *Giant Robot* an anniversary shout-out. A longtime fan of the magazine, in between writing his new novel, *Zero History*, and spending time with his family, he let me catch up with him.

**GR: Correct me if I'm wrong, but you grew up in the South in the '60s and, just after adolescence, ended up traveling for years. How did Asia place a foothold in your imagination and become a recurring setting for your writing? Did you go there before you began writing?**

WG: I left southwest Virginia just in time to spend the summer of '67 in Toronto. The closest I got to Asia in that era was the European side of the river in Istanbul. A couple of years later, I just watched the ferry but didn't go. Asia got to me when I was living in Vancouver in the '70s and early '80s. My wife taught ESL at UBC and had mostly Japanese students. By the end of their course, I could talk with them a little and was fascinated by where they seemed to have come from. The bubble was happening, but North America hadn't really noticed yet. When I started to write fiction, the idea that Japan was a place with an interesting future



*Puget Drive at dawn, overlooking Mackenzie Heights.*

*When I started to write fiction, the idea that Japan was a place with an interesting future struck people as odd.*

*Accidental heroic robot at the Vancouver Maritime Museum.*



struck people as odd, an almost random choice, until the “OMG, They’ll Buy the Whole Planet” media stories hit a couple of years later. I was only able to go to Japan after *Neuromancer* became popular in translation, so the writing definitely came first.

**GR: Was there some convergence between the imagined and the real, given that as a traveler you only access slivers of a place?**

WG: I actually prefer the slivers. For purposes of imagination, I’ve always found that less is more. First impressions, particularly. Tokyo was certainly everything I’d imagined—and, of course, more. On a given day, offered an effortless

trip, I’d probably choose Tokyo. I like to go back to cities and go deeper. Judge the extent of change since last visit. I’m not really that adventurous a traveler; I think at this point I may have my list of favorites.

**GR: Did you have to reconfigure your depictions of Tokyo in later writings to match your experience? Does it still strike you as some kind of test bed for the future?**

WG: I had to go back for *Pattern Recognition* because my Japan had gotten so old. I don’t actually think of myself as that much of a futurist, or anyway as that kind of a futurist. I’m more interested in “the futuristic” than in the future, and



*Asian food is one of the most powerful of Vancouver's many blessings.*

they're never the same thing at all. The futuristic is an expression of an attitude. Tokyo is tremendously good at that—which isn't to say that the future is going to be anything like Tokyo.

**GR:** You were seemingly the first person to utilize the word *otaku* in English, or at least in literature, way back in 1996. Do you recall how you came across it and how the notion became something so fascinating that you've continued to write about it?

WG: I don't remember where I first encountered it. I do know, though, that it must have been before the word was stigmatized by one particularly horrible murder in Japan, committed by a young man the Japanese press

labeled an *otaku*. That made it into magazine articles over here, and was the first I'd seen of the concept in popular media. But it was "otaku: threat or menace" tabloid-y hysteria in those stories, and I remember not buying that at all.

I must have encountered the concept earlier—probably in some essay on contemporary Japanese culture. I read as many of those as I could find at that point. I imagine I immediately found it very resonant. I suppose I'd become a sort of proto-geek by my early teens, and had more or less remained one. We [in the West] didn't have a term for that galaxy of behaviors and interests, but it was already there. Later, I began to think of it in terms of the democratization of the curatorial impulse, which was something I kept seeing in the late 20th century. I think it took the web to fully get that going, and today we take it quite for granted, don't notice it, and forget that there was a time when the most arcane hyper-specialist information wasn't as readily available, virtually anywhere, as running water.

**GR:** In some ways, hasn't modern consumerism co-opted the idea of *otaku*? Car manufacturers will pre-customize your ride, and special, limited editions are ubiquitous. Brand loyalty and fanaticism has become more important than making things well...

WG: I like Bruce Sterling's idea that bohemia were the dreamtime of industrial civilization. If we're post-industrial now, our relationship to bohemia will necessarily have changed. I'm not certain that bohemia, in the traditional sense, are even possible now. I think *otaku* cultures are one of the later iterations of bohemia—part of a sort of mass unconsciousness of post-industrial civilization.

But I can't stand things that aren't made well, and watching once-great brands turn themselves into ghost iterations of what they were is creepy and depressing. It's really difficult, for instance, to convince anyone much younger than I am that Eddie Bauer was once really cutting-edge good. But they were. Nothing to do with nostalgia—which I regard as a fundamentally

*Claire's view from the Maritime Hotel, NYC.*





Granville and Broadway from within a Blenz Coffee.

*I'm more interested in "the futuristic" than in the future—and they're never the same thing at all.*

unhealthy impulse—but simply about making things really well.

**GR: That Abercrombie & Fitch was once a genuine retail venue for hunting and fishing gear seems unfathomable...**

WG: A&F were the legendary upscale retailers for that in America. Hemingway shopped there for bench-made British shotguns. I know—it's weird!

**GR: You wrote that at one time you were a "picker," someone who had a talent for finding desired items in thrift stores to be passed to antique dealers. I wasn't very surprised. It seems that you always approach technology by thinking of what the highest-tech device might look like in a pawnshop under a glass counter. How did you fall into that kind of work?**

WG: It was the only way I could

afford stuff, initially. Stuff at the Salvation Army store costs next to nothing. But then you start to notice that some of the old stuff is weirdly, powerfully beautiful. That was not so widely known, once, and there was a lot of great stuff because nobody wanted it, but there were already shops selling that to people who didn't want to dig through the bins themselves. So you learn to sell part of what you find to those shops and the shop owner starts asking you for stuff you don't know about, tells you he wants the rayon aloha shirts—but only with the coconut-shell buttons—so you've learned something else.

**GR: Do you remember any particularly good thrift scores?**

WG: Everything really memorable cost 25 cents. A '40s Mexican sterling-and-gold belt buckle, tarnished black except for the gold, in a box of old buttons, was a quarter. Still have it. In Toronto they had huge piles of the most amazing old geezer shirts: Savile Row makers like Turnbull & Asser, detachable collars, like new, still the best cotton I've ever seen, starched and laundered one day back in the '40s, and folded ever since—25 cents. It cost more to get them re-laundered than to buy them. Fifties horsehide jackets for a couple of bucks, just before the idea of "vintage" hit.

Claire's dog Happy, on our back porch. She is!



PROJECT BLACK BOOK

NAME  
WILLIAM GIBSON

OCCUPATION WRITER BLOOD TYPE ??

BIRTHPLACE CONWAY, SC RESIDENCE VANC. BC

ASIAN ZODIAC RAT WESTERN ZODIAC PISCES

MOVIE/TV SHOW  
LA UETEE (MARKER)

BAND/MUSICAL ARTIST  
DOCK BOGGS

WEBSITE/BLOG  
TA-NEHISI COATES

T-SHIRT/ARTICLE OF CLOTHING  
AKRONYM SJ-11

FOOD  
OKONOMIYAKI

COLLECTION  
OUTERWEAR

GAME/HOBBY/SPORT  
LE DERIVE

TURNING POINT(S)  
MEETING MY WIFE  
STARTING TO WRITE

PROUDEST MOMENT(S)  
SEEING OUR KIDS  
BE GOOD PEOPLE

IF I COULD REDO SOMETHING IN LIFE, IT WOULD BE  
TO WASTE LESS EN-  
ERGY ON ANXIETY

WHY EXIST  
IT'S PART OF THE  
PACKAGE

GR: What do you think the durability of modern goods might prove to be? I really don't mean this as nostalgia, but rather from the perception of someone who has a relation to stuff that my generation lacks. Do we have and are we making too much stuff? I'm amazed by the complete disposability of modern furniture and the indestructibility of obsolete digital cameras.

WG: Well, there's that idea of "the valley of no value." Most manufactured objects go through that. People chopped up blackened-oak Stickley chairs for firewood in the '40s. You couldn't give that stuff away. Now it's strictly a rich man's taste. Steel office furniture from the '40s went through that, too. Now I look at websites from L.A. and New York and everything good's a couple grand. Back in its particular valley of no value, they'd pay you to haul it away. Will a really clean example of an IKEA foil-and-composition desk be worth something on the far side of the valley? Probably, but the valley's about 40 years, usually.

In the '60s, my parents' generation thought Art Deco was sad, creepy, and reminded them of the Depression. I remember watching them being amazed at how valuable it had become. I actually found it sad and creepy, too, for my own reasons, but it had definitely come through the valley of no value.

And we seem to build so much straight-to-landfill furniture, or little techy things that are utterly useless two years after they're made, and which really ought to be promptly broken down and recycled. Or cheap clothing that's distressed, made to look sort of like really well-made clothing that someone's worn for years and years, but it isn't, and they haven't, and it won't last two years. That J. Crew simulacra thing-biting the past—I'm ambivalent about that.

GR: So how do you end up—and maybe this even relates to the small sort of incidental details that end up collage-style in your books—writing about Buzz Rickson jackets, to the point where they name one after you?

WG: I had a web friend in Seoul who went to Tokyo and mentioned buying a jacket by this rather arcane firm that did obsessively accurate reproductions of old U.S. military jackets. I was looking for wardrobe for Cayce in *Pattern Recognition*, Googled them, and saw they made an MA-1, a pattern I've always liked. But I made mine black, and it turned out they never did black ones because the USAF never had, and they started getting queries from people wanting Cayce's jacket. It just sort of rolled from there. But really it all sprang from the guy in Seoul, who had major otaku DNA. He had a buddy at work who collected nothing but the zippers from vintage U.S. military jackets! I loved that. I wanted it in the book but never quite found a place where it fit.

GR: What is around today that strikes you as really well made or ingenious?

WG: Whenever I'm in New York, the two retail outlets I absolutely have to hit are Muji and Uniqlo. But all I usually buy at Muji are little injection-molded utility items (boxes, travel bottles) and dozens of packs of their eyeglass tissues. They make the best eyeglass tissues in the world. And the only thing I ever buy at Uniqlo (if they have them) are their plain T-shirts in Supima cotton.

Down by Canal Street somewhere. I love incremental graffiti and I loved this guy. Wonder if there's any of him left?

In an alley off West 8th, near Main, Claire demonstrates the family eye.



*Crossing Broadway at Main, the sky goes gothic.*



My favorite clothing designer is Errolson Hugh. His Acronym label is genuinely well made and ingenious. There isn't much that I like as much. Otherwise, I look for things that could have been designed before 1970, aren't "distressed," and are made well. But aside from things I'll actually wear or carry, I'm pretty much a design slob.

**GR: You do seem to have a knack for sort of believably conjecturing and postulating what marketing companies will do. The names of your fictional companies and brands have an unusual authenticity. Is that something you work at, about where you see language going, or just instinct?**

WG: I used to think that was something I could actually have done, job-wise, but as I've met more people who do it, it's become a less attractive fantasy job. I've met those people because, apparently, a lot of them think I know what they really do—which I find quite spooky.

**GR: Much has been said of your experiences with Hollywood, but I wonder if advertising agencies ever come calling to you. Aren't they the ones with the real money and power?**

WG: Not really. Just as well. As is evident in my books, I hope, I'm quite ambivalent about what they do. And I'm really most interested in that area, in highly alternative strategies—strategies that work because big agencies somehow can't employ them.

*I think otaku cultures are one of the later iterations of bohemia.*

**GR: I once read that you would take trips to newsagents and collect heaps of magazines and some of that process would inform your books deep in the writing stages. Is that true? Still doing it?**

WG: I'm living evidence of the Internet hurting magazine publishing! For the last few years, *Fortean Times*, *Giant Robot*, and *Juxtapoz* have pretty much been it. All three are great novelty aggregators, but the net is the ultimate novelty aggregator, and searchable.

**GR: How viable is publishing considering how information moves now? Do you find Twitter, blogging, and Google to be mutually exclusive of it or affecting how you write a book?**

WG: Google has become a huge part of the process for me, but that's quite seamless now. Twitter is becoming a part of it, I suspect. With Twitter, blogging starts to feel like... magazine publication. The great thing about Twitter is how massively multiple users randomize the aggregation of novelty: my bookmarks used to get stale, but no more. 🍷

*Comforting sushi kitsch; I love macro highlights.*



*Self-portrait in an undisclosed part of British Columbia with my wife hunting shells in the foreground. Extremely relaxing.*

