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**Future Presence:
Intersections of Science Fiction and Postmodernism**

Veronica Hollinger

A Thesis

in

The Special Individualized Programme

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada**

April 1994

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ABSTRACT

Future Presence: Intersections of Science Fiction and Postmodernism

Veronica Hollinger, Ph.D.
Concordia University, 1994

This thesis argues that SF is an exemplary marker of our postmodern condition, given that a significant feature of this condition is the perception that technological change has become so rapid that we are already living in a science-fictional future, or, alternatively, that we are lodged in an eternal present of constant transformation. As "the literature of the future," SF is particularly privileged in its ability to explore our sense that the future has already arrived.

In examining how SF, as a popular cultural marker of the present, and postmodernism, conceptualized as the philosophical and aesthetic structure of this present, have intersected to produce a range of cultural artifacts, I approach my subject(s) from two different directions. One explores some of the ways in which genre SF has been influenced by the postmodern environment of late-twentieth-century Western culture; another explores some of the ways in which SF has, in turn, influenced the production of recognizably postmodern aesthetic artifacts. While most of the texts I discuss are works of prose fiction, I conclude with a look at some productions of contemporary theatre and performance art in which can be discerned the growing influence of themes and images traditionally associated with genre SF. This thesis, then, attempts to situate SF within a wide-ranging discussion of contemporary concerns about the subject, representation, and history, concerns at the centre of the postmodern aesthetic and of post-structuralist critical theories and practices.

My introductory chapter examines some theoretical concepts and issues related both to postmodernism and to SF as a literary genre. The next four chapters, which discuss postmodern SF texts, aim to demonstrate how the discourse of SF within the context of postmodernism has shifted from the axis of metonymy (extrapolative SF) to the axis of metaphor (speculative SF). These discussions culminate in four chapters which examine a body of allegorical texts, including theatrical texts, which

I name "specular SF." Woven throughout the thesis is an ongoing exploration of the complex interactions of feminism(s) and postmodernism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, David Ketterer, for his advice, his support, and his patience. I would also like to thank Robert M. Philmus and my co-editors at *Science-Fiction Studies* for helping in my metamorphosis from student to colleague. This thesis is dedicated to Martin Philip Hollinger, who introduced me to SF. I also want to take this opportunity to express my appreciation of all the women who have so enriched the field in the thirty years since that introduction.

An earlier version of Chapter 2A, entitled "Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism," appeared in *Mosaic* 23 (Spring 1990): 29-44; it was reprinted in *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*, edited by Larry McCaffery (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 203-218. The discussion included in Chapter 3A on *The Handmaid's Tale* and the discussion on *Frankenstein* in Chapter 3B are excerpted in part from "Putting on the Feminine: Gender and Negativity in *Frankenstein* and *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Negation, Critical Theory, and Postmodern Textuality*, edited by Daniel Fischlin (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1994), 203-224. The discussion in Chapter 3B of *I, Vampire* is excerpted in part from "The Vampire and the Alien. Variations on the Outsider," *Science-Fiction Studies*, 16 (July 1988): 145-160. An earlier version of sections of Chapter 4A has been published as "Specular SF: Postmodern Allegory," in *State of the Fantastic: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Fantastic Literature*, edited by Nicholas Ruddick (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 29-39. Another section of this chapter will be appearing in a forthcoming essay, "Travels in Hyperreality: Jean Baudrillard's *America* and J.G. Ballard's *Hello, America*," in *Selected Essays from the Thirteenth Annual Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, edited by Joseph Sanders (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press). An earlier version of Chapter 5A appeared as "Playing at the End of the World: Postmodern Theater," in *Staging the Impossible: The Fantastic Mode in Drama*, edited by Patrick D. Murphy (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 182-196.

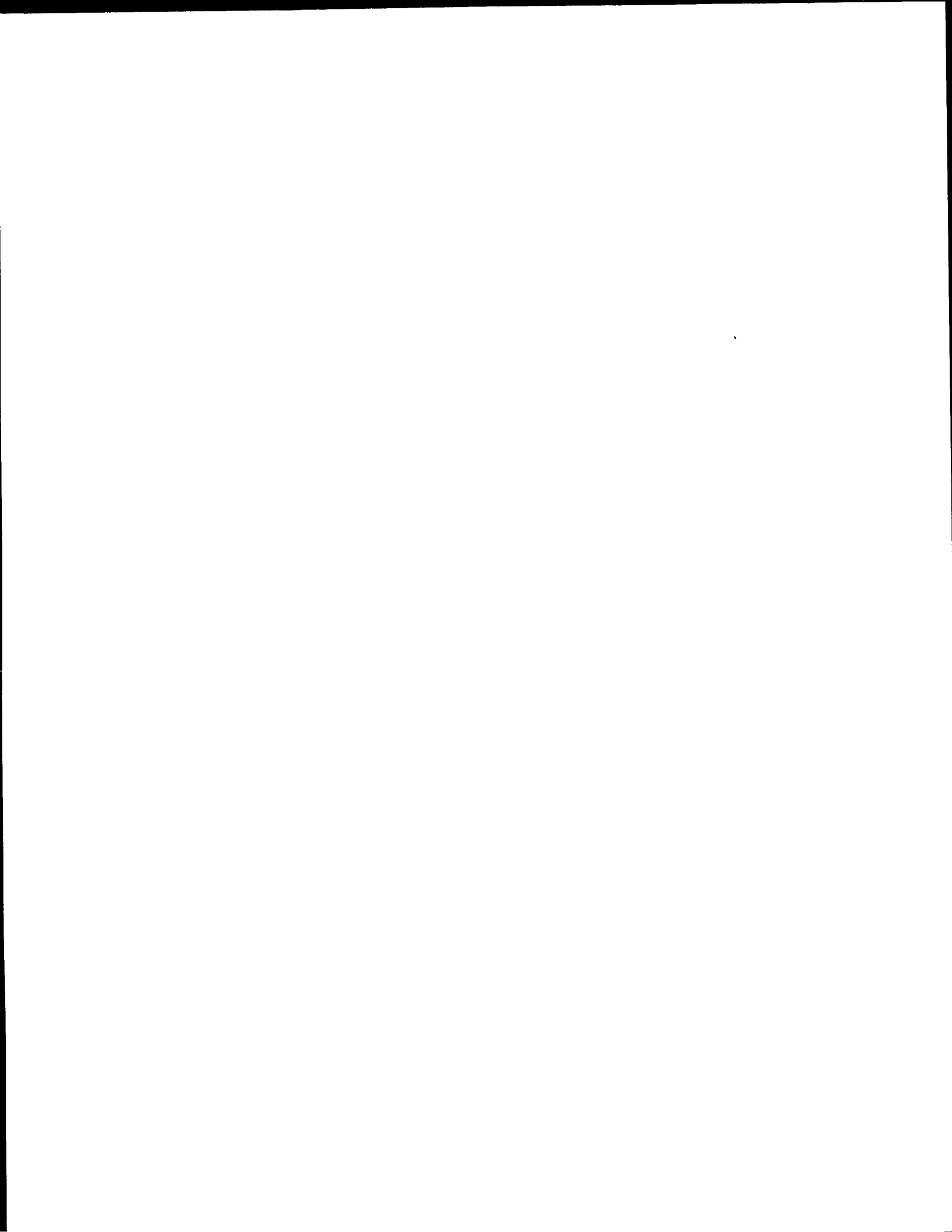


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	v
Chapter 1 The Postmodern Condition of Science Fiction	1
Part I	
Chapter 2A Cyberpunk Deconstruction and Postmodernism	56
Chapter 2B Hopeful Monsters: Feminist SF and Cyberpunk	85
Chapter 3A Demetaforming: Metaphors of the Postmodern in Contemporary SF	97
Chapter 3B Breaking Up the Subject: Feminist Speculative SF	123
Part II	
Chapter 4A Specular SF: Postmodern Allegory	133
Chapter 4B Allegories of Postmodern Feminism	162
Chapter 5A Playing (at) the End of the World: Specular SF in Postmodern Theatre	173
Chapter 5B "Language is a Virus from Outer Space": The Performance Art of Laurie Anderson	203
Epilogue	211
Works Cited	215

CHAPTER 1
THE POSTMODERN CONDITION OF SCIENCE FICTION

[T]he urgency of the subject demands that we make at least some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together. (Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" 86)

The era of hyperreality now begins. . . . Here we are far from the living-room and close to science fiction. (Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication" 128)

1. Contexts: Science Fiction and Postmodernism

The aim of this study is to examine science fiction (SF), conventionally characterized as a literature of the *future*, within the context of the *present* philosophical and political moment. This examination develops from two starting points. The first is the fact that our contemporary context in the late-industrial West is a postmodern one, that, as Fredric Jameson insists, it is "essential to grasp 'postmodernism' not as a style, but rather as a cultural dominant" ("Cultural Logic" 56). While, as Jameson notes, this does not preclude the simultaneous existence of both "residual" and "emergent" cultural currents (57), it is important to take the postmodern context into account in any examination of cultural production today.

My second starting point is the conviction that, as a literary genre which, for the most part—and, at least ostensibly—sets out to explore the implications of technology for human life, both private and public, SF has never been more relevant. This is all the more so since its generic parameters are undergoing an inevitable transformation as it accommodates itself to a cultural moment—that is, to the postmodern moment—which is very different from that which framed its initial development as a genre. Given that a concern for alterity, a "preoccupation with 'otherness' and 'other worlds'" (Harvey 48), is one important feature of postmodernism, this exploration of some contemporary "other worlds" of SF seems to me to be both timely and appropriate. During the course of this discussion, I will also draw attention to the work of other scholars to demonstrate the extent to which critical thinking has already

begun to theorize some of the ways in which SF and postmodernism intersect.

In her discussion of the ineluctable presence of technology in our lives today, Teresa de Lauretis emphasizes that

Technology is now, not only in a distant science fictional future, an extension of our sensory capacities; it shapes our perceptions and cognitive processes, mediates our relationships with objects of the material and physical world, and our relationships with our own or other bodies. . . . Technology is our historical context, political and personal. ("Signs of W[a/o]nder" 167)

An exemplary marker of the pervasive presence of technology and of popular awareness of its influence in shaping the present moment is what we might call the "science-fictionalization of the present," that is, our growing tendency to characterize contemporary life *as if it were science fiction*. It is possible to cite a plethora of recent cultural reports which imply—in tonalities ranging from the celebratory to the funereal—that the future is a destination at which we have already arrived. Jean Baudrillard, in his appropriately titled essay, "The Year 2000 Has Already Happened," flatly states that

It is thus not necessary to write science-fiction: we have as of now, here and now, in our societies, with the media, the computers, the circuits, the networks, the acceleration of particles which has definitely broken the referential orbit of things. (36)

In apparent support of Baudrillard's argument, at what is perhaps the other extreme of cultural analysis, the cover of a recent issue of *Time*—that harbinger of the already-established fact—bore the following announcement: "Genetics: The Future Is Now" (17 January 1994). Even more telling, "cyberpunk," a term first coined to identify a particular group of 1980s SF writers, is now used routinely in *Time* to refer to computer-hacker criminals (Elmer-Dewitt); the term has also appeared in fashion magazines like *Details for Men* to identify the most current "style of the future" ("Eyewitness: Cyberstyle"). "Cyberspace," a neologism introduced by William Gibson in his cyberpunk classic, *Neuromancer* (1984), to name the simulated space which exists both within and beyond our computer screens—arguably the most influential SF concept introduced in the past decade—now also refers to the (virtual) kitchen shop-

ping system of Tokyo's Matsushita Electric Works (Kanise).¹ Debates about human/machine interfaces heretofore confined to the pages of far-future SF scenarios are currently being played out in the pages of popular magazines. *Whole Earth Review* devoted an entire issue in 1989 to discussions of "the body obsolete," debating, in particular, the contention introduced in Hans Moravec's *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* "that we are on the brink of a post-biological human future [because] the mind is evolving away from the limitations of the human body" (Carstensen & Kadrey 2). And, of course, the United States' most notorious defense system—"Star Wars"—is routinely referred to by the title of a popular SF film.

From the analyses of Jean Baudrillard to those of *Time*, the "literature of the future" is currently providing one privileged discourse for descriptions of life in our high-tech late-industrial present.² The perception that technological change has become so rapid that we are already living in a science-fictional future, or, alternatively, that we are lodged in an eternal present of constant transformation, may itself be a significant feature of "the postmodern condition." In a now-classic study which might also be read as an analysis of postmodernism *avant la lettre*, Frank Kermode reminds us in *The Sense of an Ending* that it is characteristic of the apocalyptic imagination to depict itself as existing in a period of ongoing crisis. Kermode refers to this as "the myth of Transition" (12). As I will discuss in more detail below as well as in Chapter 5A, apocalyptic "myths of Transition" are a significant feature of all SF, pre-modern, modern, and postmodern, but these days the notion of apocalypse has taken on a typically postmodern spin.

As Margaret Atwood's eponymous protagonist reminds her readers in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "context is all" (136). Because the historical context which led to the production of genre SF has become transformed, the ways in which SF has traditionally signified are also changing as the world in which it "means" undergoes a quite extraordinary expansion, which, paradoxically, if we are to believe theorists like Baudrillard, is also an implosion. This helps to account for the way in which many contemporary conventional SF texts now function more as exercises in nostalgia rather than as imaginative constructions of future worlds.³ More importantly, it helps to explain why so many fictional "futures" described

in postmodernist SF texts tend *deliberately* to function as more or less allegorical versions of our own present moment, something I will discuss in detail in Chapter 4A.⁴

It is my aim in this thesis to examine some of the ways in which SF, one of the most popular cultural markers of the present moment, and postmodernism, which we can conceptualize as the philosophical and aesthetic structure of this moment, have intersected to produce a particularly engrossing range of cultural artifacts. In the process, I will also examine some of the ways in which, within the postmodern context, SF has undergone a significant expansion beyond the fairly narrow limits of conventional generic definitions. The *raison d'être* for this study is to make some sense of the field of contemporary SF, both for its own sake and as a commentary on some aspects of postmodernism.

Jameson has argued that,

if we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable. ("Cultural Logic" 57).

Making some sense out of what appears to be the "random difference" within contemporary SF and the various ways in which it has influenced the production of postmodern fictions may be less pressing, but it is nevertheless a worthwhile undertaking. There are, of course, other options. One is simply to conceptualize SF as currently inconceivable, that is, to announce something like "the death of SF." The apocalyptically-minded Baudrillard of "Simulacra and Science Fiction" appears to choose this option when he concludes that "the 'good old' SF imagination is dead" (309). Another option, which would preserve traditional generic boundaries, is to exclude from SF works which appear to be, to whatever extent, recognizably science fiction. Carl Malmgren, in his recent genre study, *Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction*, tends to uphold the traditional borders; this leads him to assign Philip K. Dick's classic alternate-history novel, *The Man in the High Castle* (1964), to the subgenre of "science fantasy," "an unstable hybrid form combining features of SF and fantasy" (22), although this novel has always been "read" as SF. A third option is to re-contextualize, that is, to examine SF texts as they function within specific broader categories such as, for example, apocalyptic literature; this is what David Ketterer

undertakes in his study, *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature*. To a certain extent, this is what I am attempting here through an examination of the function of contemporary SF within the context of postmodernism.⁵

The approaches exemplified by Baudrillard and Malmgren risk begging the question about what can be said about the current state of SF. Even Baudrillard admits that, if "the 'good old' SF imagination is dead," then "something else is beginning to emerge" ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 309). In this discussion, I hope to demonstrate both that "the 'good old' SF imagination" is still alive, even if necessarily transformed, as well as to hint at aspects of the "something else [which] is beginning to emerge" from it.

It is possible here to see a parallel with what Thomas Van Laan has termed "the death-of-tragedy myth," that is, the theory popularized in studies like George Steiner's influential *The Death of Tragedy* that it has become impossible in the twentieth century to write authentic tragedy. As Van Laan suggests in his revisionary essay on dramatic genre:

The proper antidote to the myth is to study the plays and novels of the nineteenth and twentieth century not in order to discover how they justify a preconceived idea but to see in what ways some of them may be said to continue the tradition of tragedy even as they modify it to bring it into line with the new context or contexts in which they provide the "pleasure proper to tragedy" [a concept taken from Aristotle's *Poetics*].
(28)⁶

Following Van Laan's suggestion, it is one of my aims here to study various contemporary fictions "in order to see in what ways some of them may be said to continue the tradition of [SF] even as they modify it to bring it into line with the new context" of postmodernism.

During the course of my discussion, I will focus upon three broad categories of texts. The first includes those which emphasize the traditionally-defined extrapolative function of SF and can therefore be comfortably situated within traditional SF territory, while the second and third categories include texts whose metaphorical tendencies push them ever further from this territory.

In *Worlds Apart*, Malmgren organizes his genre study according to the different discursive operations through which SF texts create their fictional worlds. Broadly speaking, these two operations are extrapolation and speculation. As Malmgren explains, extrapolation

creat[es] a fictional novum by logical projection or extension from existing actualities. . . . Extrapolation, as is implicit in the word's etymology, is basically a logical and linear process. The author accepts the current state of scientific knowledge, projects from it either in time or in space, and tries to imagine and articulate the resultant situation or conditions. (12)

Malmgren's examples of extrapolative SF include H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950), Robert A. Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), and John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968). I would also include cyberpunk texts like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991).⁷

The second category of texts I will discuss functions at what Malmgren terms the speculative pole of SF. As he describes it, a "speculative discontinuity involves a kind of quantum leap of the imagination, itself the product of poetic vision or paralogic, toward an entirely *other* state of affairs" (12).⁸ Malmgren's phrase "entirely other," however, is somewhat misleading. In contrast to extrapolative fictions, the future visions constructed by speculative texts are more or less obviously discontinuous with the present to the extent that they have been developed through a kind of metaphorical parallelism. While the state of affairs depicted in a speculatively-oriented text may appear to be "entirely other" insofar as logical extrapolation is concerned, it tends even more emphatically to reflect back onto the "real" world through the force of its "poetic" (i.e., metaphorical) vision. Malmgren includes in speculative SF works like Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961), J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975). I would also include C.L. Moore's early story, "No Woman Born" (1944), Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969), Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).⁹

What is common to both extrapolative and speculative SF texts—in a sense, what makes texts

in these two broad categories clearly *SF* texts—is their commitment to "existing scientific principles or laws" and their inscription "within a naturalizing discourse" (Malmgren 13). The third group of texts I will discuss, however, while it bears more than a passing resemblance to speculative *SF*, demonstrates no such commitment to the discourses of the rational material systems by which *SF* is conventionally bound. The texts in this group push the metaphorical function to such an extreme that, as full-fledged allegories, they perhaps cease to be *SF* at all, although, as postmodern intertexts, they have clearly been influenced by what Damien Broderick, in a semiotic study of *SF*, refers to as "the extensive generic [*SF*] mega-text built up over fifty years, even a century, of mutually layered *sf* texts" (9).¹⁰

Broderick's analysis is based on the concept of "megastory" or "parallel story" applied by Christine Brooke-Rose to her structuralist examination of the techniques and functions of the realist text; and he quotes Brooke-Rose's observation that

the realistic narrative is hitched to a megastory (history, geography), itself valorized, which doubles and illuminates it, creating expectations on the line of least resistance through a text already known, usually as close as possible to the reader's experience. Exoticism is reduced to the familiar. This gives points of anchorage, allows an economy of description and insures a general effect of the real that transcends any actual decoding since the references are not so much understood as simply recognised as proper names. (Brooke-Rose 243; quoted in Broderick 9)¹¹

Broderick rightly argues that this concept is also relevant to *SF*, since the genre now constitutes a heterogeneous "universe" of themes and tropes which are available to writers both within and outside its field.¹² My third category of texts, therefore, includes postmodern fictions which appropriate elements of the *SF* mega-text. In these texts, however, the conventional *SF* function of extrapolation is, for the most part, completely subsumed in a foregrounded metaphorical function; the futures in these texts are allegorical reflections of the present, rather than extensions of it. Fictions in this category, which I term "specular *SF*" (a term I will explain in more detail below) include Anna Kavan's *Ice* (1967), Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar* (1968), and Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*

(1988). To this group also belong dramatic texts such as Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1967), Sam Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), and Philip Glass's *1000 Airplanes on the Roof* (1988). While clearly influenced by the imagery and icons of the SF mainstream, these texts suggest, perhaps, the limits of the genre at the same time as they demonstrate the influence of SF on postmodern narrative.¹³

Broadly speaking, as the above categories suggest, I will be approaching my subject(s) from two different directions: one will examine some of the ways in which genre SF has been influenced by the postmodern environment of late-twentieth-century Western culture; another will explore some of the ways in which SF has, in turn, influenced the production of both SF and non-SF postmodernist aesthetic artifacts. While most of the texts I will be examining are works of prose fiction (since this is the form in which, traditionally, SF has been produced), my discussion will conclude with a look at some productions of contemporary theatre and performance art in which we can discern the growing influence of themes and images traditionally associated with genre SF. Put differently, this study will attempt to "place" SF within the context of some recent contemporary concerns about the subject, representation, and history, concerns which have become singularly pressing within the context of postmodernist aesthetic and post-structuralist critical theories and practices.

2. Science Fiction: The Dialectic of Fantasy and Reality

One of the most significant features of conventionally-conceived genre SF is the paradoxical fact that it is a type of non-realist literature which nevertheless has tended to avail itself of the discursive techniques of realism; and this is in spite of what the structure of its narratives owes to the form of the romance. In her important study of fantasy as "the literature of subversion," Rosemary Jackson, for example, situates SF within that extensive body of fictions which can be subsumed into the broad category of "fantastic literature." As she discusses it, fantastic literature includes

any literature which does not give priority to realistic representation: myths, legends, folk and fairy tales, utopian allegories, dream visions, surrealist texts, science fiction, horror stories, all presenting realms 'other' than the human. . . . It disturb[s] 'rules' of artistic representation and literature's reproduction of the 'real.' (13-14)

It is important to note, however, that while SF is indeed a category of fantastic literature—as suggested by its structural parallels to romance—what distinguishes it from the "pure" fantasy which is the subject of Jackson's study is precisely that which aligns it with realist literature. Within the terms of her analysis, Jackson observes that one of the major distinctions between SF and pure fantasy is the fact that SF can be included among certain fantastic subgenres which function within what she refers to as "legalized" narrative systems; as she describes them, these are subgenres whose worlds

are *compensatory*, which fill up a lack, making up for an apprehension of reality as disordered and insufficient. . . . These fantasies [which, for Jackson, include religious myth as well as science fiction] *transcend* that actuality. . . . They serve to stabilize social order by minimizing the need for human intervention in this benevolently organized cosmic mechanism. (173-174)¹⁴

While myth functions within the framework of a supernatural and transcendent order, SF has conventionally functioned within the framework of a rational and physical order guaranteed by natural law. SF narratives unfold within the context of the systematic and the logical. The definition of SF constructed by Darko Suvin demonstrates that this is probably the most *typical* way in which SF as a literary genre has been characterized. In his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Suvin defines SF as

a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework [of a materialist nature] alternative to the author's empirical environment. (7-8)¹⁵

In his analysis of its characteristic features, Suvin stringently differentiates SF from the supernatural or metaphysical features of myth, which "is diametrically opposed to the cognitive approach" (*Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* 7). Jackson's careful distinction between science fiction and pure fantasy, which she identifies with "all that is other, all that is absent from the symbolic, outside rational discourse" (177), has also obviously developed from her perception of SF as an exercise in rationality.

This characterization of SF was introduced at the very inception of the genre. At the same time

that H.G. Wells, arguably the "father" of modern science fiction, named his own early SF works "scientific romances," he insisted that "[n]othing remains interesting where anything may happen." For this reason, he maintained that the SF writer should provide the reader with orderly groundrules for his—or her—fictional universes. Wells concluded that "[the writer] must help [the reader] in every possible unobtrusive way to *domesticate* the impossible hypothesis" ("Preface" to *The Scientific Romances* 241).

More recently, this position has been reiterated, in different terms, by Eric S. Rabkin, who argues that

what is important in the definition of science fiction is . . . the idea that paradigms do control our view of all phenomena, that within these paradigms all normal problems can be solved, and that abnormal occurrences must either be explained or initiate the search for a better (usually more inclusive) paradigm. (121)

Or, as David Ketterer suggests, "the [SF] technique of extrapolation demands a commitment to logic" (18); for this reason, "the plausibility issue points to an important distinction between science fiction and fantasy" (*New Worlds for Old* 18, n. 10).

One of the conventional functions of SF has been rationally to explore and, in many cases to expand our understanding of, the scope and variety of the physical universe. It is not surprising that this sometimes occurs at the expense of what cannot be explained in terms of natural law and scientific possibility—that is, at the expense of the super-natural or the un-natural, the ontologically indeterminate area of fantasy. From the generic perspective of SF, the territory of fantasy lies just across the border, and SF has always been effective at expanding its own territories through the scientific rationalization of elements originally located in the narrative worlds of fantasy. One classic example of the domestication of the fantastic occurs in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), a novel which draws the conventional figure of the devil—bat-wings, barbed tail and all—across the border of the supernatural into SF territory. *Childhood's End* both provides a "plausible" narrative framework for its demystification of the devil-figure and aims to explain the powerful on-going presence of this figure in our collective

race-memory. Clarke thus transforms mythic fantasy into alien reality and, in this, *Childhood's End* provides a paradigmatic instance of classic genre SF.¹⁶

In terms of its "origins" and "function," therefore, SF can be situated not only within the framework of fantastic literature, but also within the broad context of the project of Enlightenment. As David Harvey describes it,

Enlightenment thought embraced the idea of progress, and actively sought that break with history and tradition which modernity espouses. It was, above all, a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains. It took Alexander Pope's injunction, 'the proper study of man [sic] is man,' with great seriousness. To the degree that it also lauded human creativity, scientific discovery, and the pursuit of individual excellence in the name of human progress, Enlightenment thinkers welcomed the maelstrom of change and saw the transitoriness [sic], the fleeting, and the fragmentary as a necessary condition through which the modernizing project could be achieved. (12-13)

As a literary genre implicated in these forward-looking beliefs in human reason and human progress, SF thrives within an epistemology which privileges the logic of cause-and-effect narrative development and views the potential for the advancement of human knowledge with optimism. Appropriately, the space ship was its representative icon during the 1940s and 1950s, the expansionist "Golden Age" of American SF. Equally appropriately, genre SF can claim the realist novel as its closest narrative relative, at least insofar as its rhetorical techniques are concerned.¹⁷ Both developed in an atmosphere of nineteenth-century scientific positivism and both rely to a great extent on the mimetic transparency of language as a "window" through which to provide views of a relatively uncomplicated human reality. In other words, SF exhibits the conventional features of a literature of direct representation. Not surprisingly, then, genre SF has tended to resist the demands, both thematic and formal, of postmodernism. A product of relative epistemological and ontological certainty, most

conventional SF works remain loyal to the conventions of the genre developed at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

With the waning of the power of realism to explain/represent lived experience comes also the waning of SF's purported function as a literature of extrapolation and its status as a cognitive literary genre—the logic of its logic, as it were. Postmodernism has mounted devastating critiques of the ideals of progress, of human reason, and of universal truth. What can we now identify as the "literature of the future" when both the concept of the individual self (i.e., the subject of that future) and of the linear unfolding of history (i.e., the very notion of that future) have become problematized within the postmodern context?

Paradoxically, it may be that we can still identify *mimesis* as one of the aims of postmodernist SF. Postmodern speculative SF texts such as Carter's *Heroes and Villains* or Hoban's *Riddley Walker* construct logically developed fictional futures which are, clearly, also metaphorical reflections of our own present. And, in certain SF-influenced postmodernist fictions such as Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* or Kavan's *Ice*, we can read versions of our own present outlined in scenarios which clearly function as allegories. These texts tend to collapse the future back onto the present, since their aim is anything but the construction of imagined futures. One of the main purposes of this thesis is to examine the slow but sure movement of SF as a postmodern literature away from the rhetorical pole of extrapolation.

3. Postmodernism: Crises and Repercussions

Postmodernism is both an aesthetic practice and a total environment or "field." That is, there are works of art which demonstrate a sensibility which has been identified as postmodernist—for example, works which mix aesthetic forms and genres, which make use of the techniques of collage, montage, and pastiche. From another perspective, however, all contemporary Western aesthetic production, no matter what it professes, is postmodern, given that postmodernism is the present cultural dominant.¹⁸ As such, to borrow the title of a study by N. Katherine Hayles, we might conceive of it as a kind of "cosmic web" which at present encompasses Western cultural and scientific enquiry. Or, borrowing from Thomas Kuhn, we might conceive of it as the latest philosophical/cultural "paradigm,"

one within which the currently most notorious model of Western science, Chaos Theory, is itself an exemplary postmodern conceptualization.¹⁹

From this perspective, it can be argued that the notion of postmodernism provides many cultural analysts of the present moment with Rabkin's "more inclusive paradigm" (121).²⁰ Given the contemporary perception that the human condition has undergone a critical shift over the last few decades—most studies place this shift somewhere in the 1950s—it is the concept of postmodernism which seems most successfully to "name" the paradoxical and heterogeneous sensibilities of contemporary social and cultural experience.²¹ The irony here—and irony is of the essence of the postmodern²²—is that this particular paradigm has been constructed not as a way either to explain or to exclude the "abnormal," but precisely in order to incorporate it *as is* within the field. Within the terms of the postmodern model, "the norm" is only one of many heretofore unquestioned categories which have come under critical scrutiny. Like Chaos Theory, which aims to include "the irregular side of nature, the discontinuous and erratic side" (Gleick 3) within the conceptualization of a different kind of orderliness in the physical world, the postmodern world-view attempts to incorporate the randomness, decentredness, ambiguity, and disorderliness of contemporary human experience into its theoretical conceptualizations.

It would be a foolhardy undertaking to attempt to define something as all-inclusive as a cultural paradigm, especially one which is characterized by a heterogeneity which undermines the very notion of definition and which ironically supports the impossibility of standing outside a cultural context in order to define it. Here I intend merely to isolate several characteristics of the contemporary condition which have been widely recognized as "postmodern" and which are particularly relevant to my discussion of contemporary SF.

Of primary—even, perhaps, critical—importance is the fact that "the postmodern condition" is frequently represented as itself a critical condition. In these versions, by, among others, the Michel Foucault of *The Order of Things*, the Jacques Derrida of "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," and the Jean Baudrillard of "The Precession of Simulacra," the contemporary moment has been conceptualized as the result of a break or rupture with previous eras/paradigms/cultural

conditions.²³ This characterization has had far-reaching implications for the ways in which we locate ourselves vis-à-vis history, as well as for the ways in which our fictional representations of apocalypse, as the *end* of history, are currently being constructed.²⁴

Two of the most far-reaching aspects of the general postmodern "crisis" have to do with questions of legitimation and representation. Together, this double-edged predicament has come to complicate such heretofore relatively uncomplicated areas as knowledge, history, the subject, the nature of the aesthetic work, and—of particular significance given the alignment between SF and classical realism—the status of the classical realist narrative itself as an aesthetic convention.

3.1. The Legitimation Crisis

One of the most succinct definitions of postmodernism—and certainly one of the most influential—is offered by Jean-François Lyotard in his now-classic analysis, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, which sums up the "condition" as a legitimation crisis, as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv).²⁵ As Alice Jardine explains,

The crisis in legitimation in the West is necessarily a crisis in the status of *knowledge*—traditionally the ability to decide what is true and just—functions that have remained inseparable up to the present. (65)

The legitimation crisis strikes at the foundations of Western science, of course (traditionally the knowledge-discourse *par excellence*), and for decades, the discursive infrastructure—in Rosemary Jackson's terms, the "legalized" system—within which conventional SF narratives have worked themselves out. Analyses ranging from Thomas Kuhn's study of the historical development of Western science, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, to feminist critiques such as Sandra Harding's *The Science Question in Feminism* and Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, have revealed the subjective underpinnings of this most "objective" of enterprises, and have contributed to a growing scepticism towards all universalizing systems.

One result of the legitimation crisis has been a wide-spread movement of decentering, so that "voices" historically relegated to the margins of discourse have come to the foreground.²⁶ Recently,

for example, many examinations of postmodernism have come to include discussion about the implications of postmodernity for feminism.²⁷ It is also not surprising to discover that the intersections of feminism and postmodernism have proven to be both complicated and vexed. Feminist SF remains, on the whole, an enterprise linked to the ideals of humanist and realist narrative. Although some of the most radical postmodernist experiments have appeared in feminist SF—examples would include Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969), and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)—most feminist SF remains more or less conventional in its narrative and rhetorical strategies. For the most part, recent humanist utopias like Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) and Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean* (1986) are far more typical of the texts produced by feminist SF writers. Nevertheless, the very nature of the feminist enterprise—as radical theoretical rethinking and deconstructive practice—already links it to various aspects of postmodernism.

Theoretical discourse as well cannot avoid being implicated in the postmodern legitimation crisis. As Jameson observes in his essay on the postmodern condition, "what is today called contemporary theory—or better still, theoretical discourse—is also . . . itself very precisely a postmodernist phenomenon" ("Cultural Logic" 61).²⁸ Speaking from within the breakdown of previously clearly defined disciplines in a language which functions to remove the speaker from any direct experience of the object of analysis, deprived of any privileged site from which to render objective judgements, the critical theorist no longer stands in any simple relationship to the truth of her analyses, which, as a result, have inevitably become rather ironic undertakings.

Lytard's summation also implies something of the way in which postmodernism has problematized the conventional structure of the realist narrative, since, among other things, it puts all teleological narrative structure—from the metanarratives of Judeo-Christianity or Marxism to the construction of a novel by Dickens or Dreiser—into question. While what Christopher Nash has examined as "the anti-realist revolt" is a complex and over-determined situation, the legitimation crisis is one of the more significant developments influencing the contemporary rejection of classical realism.

Another aspect of the legitimation crisis which is of particular relevance to this discussion is the

way in which previously sacrosanct boundaries—political, philosophical, conceptual, aesthetic—have tended to become blurred within the context of postmodernity. These include innumerable kinds of *inside/outside* oppositional structures which postmodernism has undertaken to undermine and/or to deconstruct. Once again, this has had repercussions for many positions previously constituted as centrally privileged.

The breakdown or at least weakening of the barriers previously separating the products of an élitist "high" culture from those of "mass" or "popular" culture—barriers which for many cultural analysts constitute a characteristic feature of high modernism—is one of the most notable cases in point. Indeed, for Andreas Huyssen, as the title of his study, *After the Great Divide* indicates, this growing lack of hierarchical distinction between the levels of aesthetic production is *the* defining characteristic of postmodernism:

The boundaries between high art and mass culture have become increasingly blurred, and we should begin to see that process as one of opportunity rather than lamenting loss of quality and failure of nerve. There are many successful attempts by artists to incorporate mass cultural forms into their work, and certain segments of mass culture have increasingly adopted strategies from on high. If anything, that is the postmodern condition in literature and the arts. (xi)²⁹

From another direction—one which has far-reaching implications for the rise in popularity of various kinds of fantastic literature—there has been a tendency to question the distinctions we have taken for granted between "reality" and "fantasy." As Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan observe in their introduction to *Formations of Fantasy*, "in popular understanding, 'fantasy' is always opposed to 'reality.' In this definition fantasy is the *negative* of reality" (1). They argue, however, that, at least from a psychoanalytic perspective, fantasy is as constitutive of "reality" as are the more fact-based or experiential aspects of our lives. Rather than functioning as a supplement to empirical reality, therefore, fantasy must be conceptualized as a significant feature of its constitution.³⁰

The breakdown between high and low culture and the deconstruction of the fantasy/reality binary

help to explain the increasingly privileged positioning of non-realist forms of aesthetic production within the postmodern field. For many artists, realism—which must be conceptualized now as only one among many competing fictional discourses—no longer seems to provide appropriate forms from within which to express the experience of life in the late-industrial West. Its trappings—language as both transparent and referential, narrative structure as logical and linear, representation as unproblematically mimetic—have become devalued within the postmodern environment of contingency, indeterminacy, and ambiguity.

Cristopher Nash, tracing what he terms the "anti-realist revolt" in the literature of the last several decades, examines many of the issues, concerns, and narrative strategies which have loosened the hold of realist conventions on literature and have given rise to a new commitment to the literature of the fantastic. Nash identifies two prominent positions taken up by the producers of anti-realist fiction; according to his analysis, "[t]hey'll try to show us 'what else there is' by breaking our conventional relations with 'this world,' or by moving us to other hypothetical worlds altogether" (47). Although his study does not focus on or even mention SF, SF obviously has a role to play within the latter of these two functions of anti-realist fiction.

In fact, several theorists of the postmodern place SF in a particularly influential position in this new valorization of the fantastic.³¹ In his introduction to *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, editor Larry McCaffery claims that "the most significant evolution of a paraliterary form [within the context of postmodernism] has been that of science fiction" (xvii). And, in his *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale has argued that "[w]e can think of science fiction as postmodernism's noncanonized or 'low art' double, its sister-genre in the same sense that the popular detective thriller is modernist fiction's sister-genre" (59). McHale bases this conclusion on what he identifies as a central difference between modernist and postmodernist literature, that is, a shift from epistemological to ontological concerns.³² As Harvey concludes in his own reading of McHale's analysis, "the foregrounding of questions as to how radically different realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate" leads to the effective dissolution of "the boundary between fiction and science fiction" (41). The

"logical" outcome of this foregrounding, of course, leads us to the point at which SF "disappears" into SF-influenced postmodernist fiction like Joseph McElroy's *Plus* (1976) or to the genre stretched to the breaking point as in Beckett's *Endgame*.³³

In an article of growing influence published in *Science Fiction Eye*, sometime cyberpunk writer Bruce Sterling³⁴ has usefully identified a strand of contemporary literature which he names the "slipstream"—a term which plays on the SF community's penchant for referring to non-SF, that is, realist or "mundane" fiction, as "mainstream," against which SF tends to define itself.³⁵ As I will discuss in further detail below, the "slipstream" is the body of texts which most clearly indicates a shift in the emphasis of contemporary SF away from extrapolation. While it is by no means limited to SF and SF-influenced works, it does include texts ranging from speculative SF like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* to allegorical works of "specular SF" such as Kavan's *Ice*. As such, it subsumes two of the three broad groupings of texts—the speculative and the allegorical, excluding only the extrapolative—which are my focus in this thesis. Sterling writes:

It seems to me that the heart of slipstream is an attitude of peculiar aggression against 'reality.' These are fantasies of a kind, but not fantasies which are 'futuristic' or 'beyond the fields we know.' These books tend to sarcastically tear at the structure of 'everyday life.' ("Slipstream" 76)

Given that the slipstream tends to be composed of self-consciously "literary" texts which frequently (although by no means always) incorporate traditional SF imagery and scenarios into more-or-less experimental linguistic and narrative structures, it clearly demonstrates the interplay between "high" and "low" culture which has become identified with postmodernism.

3.2. The Crisis of Representation

According to Jardine, "[r]epresentation is the condition that confirms the possibility of an imitation (mimesis) based on the dichotomy of presence and absence . . ." (119). In terms of the construction of narrative, the crisis of representation again implies a crisis for realist—direct, accurate, mimetic—representation.³⁶ As Brian Wallis argues, in his introduction to the significantly titled *Art*

After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, realist representations "are themselves fictional and contradictory constructions" (xiv). Wallis refers his readers to Michel Foucault's study, *The Order of Things*, in which the latter analyzes in detail the artificiality and contingency of our systems and methods of representation, including such representational disciplines as what Foucault refers to as "the sciences of man."³⁷ If we recall here that SF, according to the terms of Jackson's analysis, is a kind of literature which functions within a "legalized system" which is also a system of representation—in this case, the system of Western scientific logic—it becomes clear that the critique of conventional strategies of representation must also have repercussions for SF.

The crisis of representation, inextricably linked as it is to the legitimation crisis, is also the result of various twentieth-century analyses of the nature of language, initiated by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and extended, for example, in the work of post-structuralist theorists like Jacques Derrida. Put reductively, what all these studies attest to is the fact that language, insofar as its ability to "mirror" the Real is concerned, has—like knowledge—become (once again) hopelessly compromised.³⁸

In the schema which Harvey develops in order to track some of the more significant shifts between modernism and postmodernism, he identifies a shift in emphasis from the production of the signified ("meaning") to the function of the signifier (the means of the production of "meaning") (43).³⁹ Documents attesting to this shift would include Derrida's essay, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," Paul de Man's study of symbol and allegory, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," and, from the perspective of post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, various writings by Jacques Lacan, who insists that it is absolutely essential "to any articulation of analytic phenomena [to promulgate] the notion of the signifier, as opposed to the signified, in modern linguistic analysis" (284).⁴⁰

Lacan, for instance, defines the Real as "that which is impossible" (Sheridan x). He argues that all our interpretations of the Real necessarily involve "*méconnaissance*" (misrecognition), since the Real is that realm from which human beings, once inserted into the Symbolic order—of language, of logic, of the rational, of the social—are forever barred. The Real is precisely that which cannot be represented.

From one perspective, therefore, representation is an acknowledgement of absence; from another perspective, it is "always already" interpretation.

Issues of representation will figure centrally in my discussion of postmodern theatre, since the theatre is the cultural form *par excellence* which depends upon the illusion of presence in performance. These issues will also be taken up in my discussions of feminist speculative SF texts such as Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Jody Scott's *I, Vampire* (1984), since a growing awareness of the *coerciveness* of cultural representations is one of the inevitable results of the postmodern critique.

This again has implications for the work of the critic; it is only with a certain irony that I can pretend to offer a representation of postmodernism which is not hopelessly problematized by the very language of my representation and by my own positioning within the arena of postmodernism itself.

3.3. The "Death" of the Subject

The crisis of representation itself intertwines with one of the more politically charged aspects of postmodernity, the specific crisis relating to redefinitions of the subject, conventionally characterized as the individual self of liberal humanism. Jameson offers one formulation of this redefinition when he notes that the "shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject [a familiar thematic concern of modernism] is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject" ("Cultural Logic" 63). He continues:

Such terms inevitably recall one of the more fashionable themes in contemporary theory—that of the 'death' of the subject itself = the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual—and the accompanying stress, whether as some new moral ideal or as empirical description, on the *decentring* of that formerly centred subject of psyche. (63)

Within the field of the postmodern, the subject is no longer the unified self—often conceptualized in terms of the *cogito* of Cartesian philosophy—of humanism, the construction of which has been tracked by Foucault in works like *The History of Sexuality* and *The Order of Things*. In one of his more apocalyptic turns of phrase, Foucault writes of "man" as "an invention of recent date. And

one perhaps nearing its end" (*The Order of Things* 387). Foucault's is only one of a multiplicity of analyses—linguistic, psychoanalytic, political, and philosophical—which have resulted in the deconstruction of the notion of an autonomous and unified subjectivity.⁴¹

The critique of the liberal humanist subject is a crucial feature of postmodernism, and the deconstruction of the essential self of liberal humanism is a project which corresponds in many ways to the deconstruction of the literary text, the "text itself" as a discrete entity whose "meaning" is singular and determinate. Jonathan Culler explains that

as [the subject] is displaced from its function as centre or source, the self comes to appear more and more as a construct, the result of systems of convention. The discourse of a culture sets limits to the self; the idea of personal identity appears in social contexts; the "I" is not given but comes to exist, in a mirror stage which starts in infancy [the reference is to the work of Jacques Lacan], as that which is seen and addressed by others. (29)

Following Foucault, Catherine Belsey explains how "the displacement of subjectivity across a range of discourses implies a range of positions from which the subject grasps itself and its relations with the real, and these positions . . . may be incompatible and contradictory" (*Critical Practice* 65). And, speaking from a position of post-structuralist feminism, Toril Moi concludes that

Conscious thought . . . must be seen as the "over-determined" manifestation of a multiplicity of structures that intersect to produce that unstable constellation the liberal humanists call the "self." These structures encompass not only unconscious sexual desires, fears and phobias, but also a host of conflicting material, social, political and ideological factors of which we are equally unaware. It is this highly complex network of conflicting structures, the anti-humanist would argue, that produces the subject and its experiences, rather than the other way round. (10)

Obviously, such deconstructions of the unified subject have implications for both the subject of narrative and for the author/subject of that narrative.⁴²

Reactions to the contemporary problematization of subjectivity have ranged from the gloominess of the Althusserian model of an ineluctable "interpellation"⁴³ to (cautiously) celebratory responses by post-structuralist feminists such as Teresa de Lauretis in "The Technology of Gender" and Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Most recently, discussion has focused on the pressing problem of the possibility of individual agency within the post-structuralist model.⁴⁴ It is the very heterogeneity of the forces of subject construction in contemporary life which seems to offer the most potential for individual agency. As Jim Collins argues in *Uncommon Cultures*, "The 'disappearing self' criticism is common, but it fails to take into account the centering power of individual discourses, or the power of individuals to make choices regarding those discourses" (143-144).

In the work of some cyberpunk writers as well as some feminist SF writers—two groups which have demonstrated a tendency towards anti-humanism—it is possible to read a wide variety of responses to the "death of the subject," ranging from the complete anomie of a text like K.W. Jeter's *The Glass Hammer* to more liberating moments in texts as disparate as Sterling's *Schismatrix* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The frequently contradictory demands made by the varying discourses of social interpellation, for example, provide one important element in Russ's depiction of the four "J's" in *The Female Man*, a text which requires readers to both note and resist constructions of femininity which threaten the development of individual women-in-the-world.

3.4. The "End" of History

Several convincing constructions of postmodernity have suggested that our apprehensions of history have also become transformed over the last few decades—due, in part, to the rapid changes we are experiencing in the way we live in the world. Again, Jameson has been one of the most influential explicators of this notion, which, in essays like "Progress Versus Utopia, or Can We Imagine the Future?", he examines specifically in terms of the function of the SF narrative. More generally, however, in "Cultural Logic," Jameson notes a shift from what he identifies as a temporal to a spatial orientation as a particular feature of postmodernism:

We have often been told . . . that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the

diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism proper. (64)

This "domination" by spatial categories is exemplified for Jameson in the postmodernist aesthetics of pastiche, "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general . . . the increasing primacy of the 'neo'" (66).⁴⁵

A similar effect is discussed by N. Katherine Hayles as the "flattening out" of our sense of time as the result of a kind of Tofflerian "future shock," and she speculates that "[p]art of our sense that time has flattened out derives from uncertainty about where we as human beings fit into our own future scenarios" (*Chaos Bound* 280).

These theoretical descriptions are of significance to any discussion of contemporary SF since, as Suvin convincingly argues, the "central watershed" of the SF tradition

is around 1800, when space loses its monopoly upon the location of estrangement and the alternative horizons shift from space to time (however this shift might be curbed by ideological hesitations about a truly different future). (*Metamorphoses* 89)

In other words, as conventionally conceived, SF itself is the product of an earlier shift from spatial to temporal co-ordinates. What Jameson sees as the current reversal of such co-ordinates would presumably have repercussions for the development of a postmodernist SF.

In the very different context of his own study of SF, Malmgren's observations about twentieth-century SF would seem to indicate some of these repercussions. In a discussion which, deliberately or not, manages to deconstruct the traditional space/time opposition at the same time as it emphasizes SF's spatial orientation, Malmgren writes that

The dawning of the space age in the twentieth century . . . restored space to SF as a locus of estrangement as writers realized that it might indeed be possible for humans to negotiate and navigate the expanses of space. In large part, space, and not time, is the dominant locus of estrangement for post-World War II SF, and the genre itself may

well be a space-oriented narrative form. SF's displacements in time function to make available to the narrative imagination new spaces, new frontiers, new topoi, new worlds, either here or elsewhere. (175)⁴⁶

In "Progress Versus Utopia," Jameson writes of a loss of the sense of history—both past and future—as one of the markers of the present moment. He suggests that the historical novel began to disappear as a relevant genre because of a growing loss of a sense of the past since the mid-nineteenth century; the past becomes "reduced to pretexts for so many glossy images" (243). Certainly it is possible to identify, in one strand of genre SF, the future in the process of its reduction to a series of nostalgic images—extreme examples would include the film, *Star Wars* (1977), which sets its action in a distant future which is in fact tinged with the rosy glow of a distant past, as well as the endless replays of television's *Star Trek*, which, after more than twenty-five years in re-runs, has now become a nostalgic collection of "future" images.⁴⁷

Like Jameson, but from his own very different perspective, Baudrillard has also come to much the same conclusion. He argues that, in its most conventional aspect, SF functions as a supplement to the real world through its imaginings of possible futures. Whereas it was the work of utopian fictions to suggest alternatives to reality, "[i]n the potentially limitless universe of the production era, SF adds by multiplying the world's own possibilities" ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 310). Baudrillard associates this conventional SF with the expanding universe of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries; he identifies the present moment as "a period of implosion, after centuries of explosion and expansion. When a system reaches its limits, its own saturation point, a reversal begins to take place" (3).⁴⁸

It is significant, for instance, that cyberpunk, the extrapolative SF *par excellence* of the 1980s, demonstrates a preference for near- rather than far-future speculation. It is also revealing that many cyberpunk texts are fascinated with surface detail in a manner which strikingly recalls Jameson's notion of the "schizophrenic" sensibility—a kind of sublime intensity—of our postmodern obsession with the present. This recalls the anxiety demonstrated by the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Will Postwar be

nothing but 'events' newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history?" (Pynchon 65).⁴⁹

Indeed, it might be argued that such fascination with surface detail virtually defines the rhetorical nature of texts like Gibson's *Neuromancer*. There is also an obvious shift in many of these texts away from the depth modelling of realism/modernism and its aesthetic contexts which relies so heavily upon the notion of the subtext. And many of the more obviously experimental variations of SF—texts associated with the "slipstream"—tend not to be about the future at all. Thus, for example, Acker concludes her *Empire of the Senseless* with a kind of recognition that it has become impossible to imagine a future: "I didn't as yet know what I wanted. I now fully knew what I didn't want and what and whom I hated. That was something" (227).

It is important to note here that, as persuasive as these constructions appear, they are by no means the only possible approaches to postmodernism's relationship to history. While acknowledging that some contemporary art does in fact reduce both past and future to "pretexts for so many glossy images," Jim Collins, for one, has criticized both Jameson and Baudrillard for the one-sidedness of their analyses. Relating the shift in our historical sense to Lyotard's appraisal of the legitimation crisis and the concomitant trend towards decentredness in contemporary culture, Collins calls attention to the postmodernist tendency to juxtapose contradictory elements in order to generate new conceptualizations. Disagreeing with Jameson's characterization of pastiche as "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" ("Postmodernism" 65-66), Collins argues that

Post-Modernist texts acknowledge that 'meaning,' 'identity,' etc., are complicated not only by the decentered nature of current political production, but also by the co-presence of previous representations persisting through mass media In concentrating on synchronic tensions rather than diachronic breaks, the Post-Modernist text constructs *polylogic* rather than dialogic [the reference is to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin] relationships with multiple 'already saids,' where the relationship between past and present [and, we might add here, future] coding is based on interaction and

transformation instead of simple rejection. (134)⁵⁰

Collins thus alerts us to other possible readings of texts like *Empire of the Senseless*; its hesitation in the face of the future does not prevent its launching a scathing critique of political realities in the present, undertaken, in part, through Acker's parodic appropriation of materials from sources as varied as *Neuromancer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. While a text like Beckett's *Endgame* uses the imagery of SF to dramatize the foreclosure of the future within the endless stasis of time present, some postmodernist SF texts, particularly those produced by feminist writers like Monique Wittig and Joanna Russ, use SF as a way to construct metaphorical or fully allegorical versions of the present with a view to the possibilities of changing that present. Their texts imply that, although our connections to the future may have become problematized, there is, nevertheless, a future which must be taken into consideration. Like Marge Piercy's feminist time-travel novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), texts like Wittig's *Les Guérillères* and Russ's *The Female Man* suggest the importance of choices made in the present to effect the shape of the potential future or potential futures.

3.5. The Postmodern Apocalypse

Considering the various predicaments and paradoxes which virtually constitute so many versions of postmodernity, it is perhaps no wonder that it is often characterized as a critical condition. At the same time, however, scepticism and irony constitute an equally strong current which remains mistrustful of representations of "crisis." Before leaving this general discussion of the repercussions of the postmodern, therefore, I want to build upon my comments about postmodernism and history and look at some aspects—often contradictory ones—of the notion of apocalypse within the contemporary context.

The theme of the end of the world has always been associated with genre SF; in fact, David Ketterer's study, *New Worlds for Old*, is devoted to the various ways in which SF interacts with what he terms "the apocalyptic imagination." At the same time, however, according to some analyses, contemporary literature demonstrates little interest any longer in the narratives of apocalypse. Douglas Robinson, for example, in his study, *American Apocalypses*, concludes that "antiapocalypse—not apocalypse, as many critics have claimed—is the dominant topos of American postmodernism" (xvi).

While much contemporary genre SF has abandoned the end of the world as a favourite theme, it is worth looking at some features of an apocalyptic sensibility in postmodern SF.

Among the various ways in which apocalypse can be conceived, one which seems most relevant here is Ketterer's notion of the "philosophical apocalypse," which occurs when the SF text, "extrapolating on what we know in the context of our vaster ignorance, comes up with a startling *donnée*, or rationale, that puts humanity in a radically new perspective" (17). According to Ketterer, the philosophical apocalypse results in a

changed present reality implied by radically new concepts. Although the presentation of these concepts and actual evidence as to their existence often requires the mechanism of temporal displacement, these texts are assumed to apply quite directly to the here and now. (159).

This suggests the distinction between SF texts in this category and conventional genre SF which clearly foregrounds some kind of empirically-defined future world; this also suggests the alignment of such texts with "slipstream" varieties of postmodern SF. Ketterer includes Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), and Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961) among SF texts which are activated by this particular narrative topos.

Certainly, in some versions, postmodernity itself has functioned as a kind of philosophical apocalypse. This is implied, for example, in Jameson's analysis when he encourages his readers to "make at least some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress altogether" ("Cultural Logic" 86). And Jonathan Benison explains Baudrillard's position vis-à-vis the present in the following way:

It makes a fundamental difference to one's strategies whether one considers catastrophe to be imminent or immanent; the sf habit of extrapolating is attached to the first outlook whereas Baudrillard never ceases from trying to impress upon his readers that The Dreadful Has Already Occurred (and that, since most of us are still around, maybe it was not that bad after all . . .). (31)

This is in keeping, of course, with Baudrillard's dictum that it is neither necessary nor possible to write SF within the implosive context of postmodernity. It is also in keeping with my suggestion that, within this context, many SF texts are moving away from scenarios of the future into scenarios of the present; and this present, in many instances, is itself an apocalyptic moment. Examples include Anna Kavan's *Ice* and Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*, as well as post-apocalyptic narratives like *Ridley Walker* and *Heroes and Villains*. Perhaps the best known version of this view that "The Dreadful Has Already Occurred"—only it is pretty bad after all—is Beckett's play, *Endgame*, which appears as the forerunner of a series of dramatizations of apocalypse which includes Sam Shepard's short play, *Action* (1975), as well as Robert Wilson's "opera," *Einstein on the Beach* (1976). All, for all intents and purposes, are "set" in the present moment.

4. Science Fiction: Metaphor and Metonymy

As much of my previous discussion suggests, there are various ways in which we can characterize the relationship between the future postulated in the SF narrative and the empirical world which, according to Suvin's model, is defamiliarized by this future and to which the "future" world refers back in a cognitive fashion. Postmodernist SF presents itself in a different way than conventional definitions of the genre would lead us to expect; however, the function of genre SF is also more complex than it at first might appear. "The plausibility issue" to which Ketterer has referred (18, n.10), for example, is linked to SF's conventional representation as a literature of extrapolation; he points out that the SF author's "extrapolative structures rarely lend themselves to overt allegorical ends, because of the danger of jeopardizing the illusion of a surface verisimilitude" (18). In fact, however, Jameson reminds us that "the common-sense position on the anticipatory nature of science fiction as a genre is what we would today call a *representational* one" ("Progress versus Utopia" 243).

That is, in spite of the "commonsense" representation of SF as the "literature of extrapolation," it also, in fact, as Suvin's definition implies, always functions metaphorically. In "SF as Metaphor, Parable and Chronotope (with the Bad Conscience of Reaganism)," Suvin undertakes a detailed examination of the metaphorical function of the SF text, since, as he concludes, "the relationships in outer space

and/or farther time, the strange new chronotopes [time/spaces], *always* signify human relationships in the writer's here and now" (207).⁵¹ As Suvin explains, in fact the SF text constructs a fictional *paradigm* or *model*, so that it is possible to identify a "crucial coinciding between SF practice and contemporary semiotics: their simultaneous use of the concept, metaphor or model of *possible worlds*" ("SF as Metaphor" 197).

Mark Rose (among others) in his study, *Alien Encounters*, has noted that the metaphorical function in contemporary SF has become more overt, so that in many recent works it is the extrapolative tendency which has become de-emphasized. In his initial distinction between fantasy and SF, Rose discusses analogy and extrapolation in the following terms:

it may be useful . . . to conceive the opposition between fantasy and science fiction in terms of Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy as poles of literary behaviour. The changed worlds of fantasy are presented as literary substitutions for reality; they are related to the empirical world *paradigmatically* or *metaphorically* The changed worlds of science fiction, however, are presented as logical extensions of reality; they are related to the empirical world *syntagmatically* or *metonymically*. This is what is meant when science fiction is called an extrapolative form. (21-22)

Recognizing that "both principles are at work in science fiction as in all discourse" (22), Rose nevertheless notes a shift in emphasis from metonymy to metaphor in more recent SF, which has resulted in "a radical reinterpretation of the genre" (16). Rose does not, however, adequately analyze the reasons for this shift, which it is one of the purposes of this present discussion to trace. It is my contention that the relatively recent development of the postmodern world-view is one important determining factor in this shift from metonymy to metaphor in the SF text. As Alice Jardine points out, "the state of crisis endemic to modernity is experienced primarily as a loss, or at least a breakdown, of *narrative*." Thus, she continues,

The analogical link and mimesis of metaphor—the possibilities for difference and

resemblance—and the contiguity and syntax of metonymy—the possibilities for continuity and desire—have themselves become primary objects of modernity's passionate rethinking. (69)⁵²

Brian McHale's contention that SF as a genre is linked to postmodernism through its attention to ontological concerns—i.e., through its penchant for the creation of new worlds—is a somewhat simplistic reading, because SF does not create "new worlds" *tout court*. In Colin Manlove's words, "the science fiction writer throws a rope of the conceivable (how remotely so does not matter) from our world to his [or hers]" (7); that is, "empirical reality" and the fictional world remain—however tenuously—linked to each other through various narrative strategies of a metonymical nature, strategies of displacement; travels through space and time are only the most obvious of these strategies. Here again, we can see how SF maintains a delicate balance between realism and fantasy: while realism affirms empirical reality, positing it—on the literal level, at least—as a world always already there, fantasy cancels out or disregards that world, undertaking a kind of ontological negation. SF, however, finds itself involved in both empirical affirmation and ontological negation; as a result, neither function is ever absolute. It is important to note, however, that, moving between these two operations, the SF text is capable of taking a whole range of positions vis-à-vis empirical reality, from the extremes of extrapolation to the extremes of analogy, without, I would argue, ever absolutely abandoning the features which constitute it as a genre.

The differing functions of metonymy and metaphor have been most usefully examined by Roman Jakobson in his study of aphasic disturbances. Building on linguistic work undertaken earlier by de Saussure, Jakobson concludes that "any linguistic sign involves two modes of arrangement," which he describes as "selection" and "combination" (60). These operations he identifies with the operations of "metaphor" and "metonymy":

the development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another whether through their similarity or through their contiguity.

The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the

metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. (76)

It is clear that SF, in its most conventional representation as a literature which links present event in an orderly and contiguous chain to future (logical) possibilities, emphasizes the metonymic function. At this extreme of the continuum, which is the one most frequently represented in discussions of "traditional" SF, the SF narrative looks ahead to the future or to alternative futures, imagining the logical unfolding of events arising from present conditions. This tends to be the case, for instance, in most "hard" SF, represented, significantly, by many authors who are also scientists; examples would include Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke and, more recently, Gregory Benford and David Brin.⁵³ It is at the metonymic pole that the cause-and-effect logical structure of the SF narrative comes to seem most "natural." Not surprisingly, Jakobson notes "the . . . intimate ties of realism with metonymy" (81). This is one very obvious way in which SF is aligned to the realist novel.

If, as David Lodge explains in *The Modes of Modern Writing*, in the metaphorical text, "the text is the vehicle, the world is the tenor" (109), then we can say that, at the extremes of postmodernist SF, it is the imagined future which functions as the *vehicle*, while the present is the *tenor*.⁵⁴ Conversely, we can see how the extrapolative text parallels the workings of the realist text; in Lodge's words, "the metonymic text . . . seems to offer itself to our regard not as a metaphor but as a synecdoche, not as a model of reality, but as a representative *bit of reality*" (109), so that we can think of the extrapolative text offering itself as a bit of a possible future, rather than as a model of that future.⁵⁵

In a discussion which owes much to Suvin's identification of defamiliarization as the function of the SF text,⁵⁶ Jameson has argued that the work of SF is "not to give us 'images' of the future . . . but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*." For Jameson, the SF text aids us to capture a present which, more and more in recent years,

is inaccessible directly, is numb, habituated, empty of affect. Elaborate strategies of indirection are therefore necessary if we are somehow to break through our monadic isolation and to 'experience,' for the first and real time, this 'present' which is (after

all) all we have. ("Progress Versus Utopia" 244)

It is this present—which is all we have—which tends to become foregrounded in postmodern SF and SF-influenced postmodern texts.

5. The Field of Postmodern SF

It is my aim to explicate and illustrate the above theoretical discussion in the two subsequent parts of this thesis. In Part 1, I will examine both extrapolative and speculative postmodern SF texts. "Cyberpunk Deconstruction and Postmodernism" is an examination of cyberpunk as the most obvious postmodern exemplar of conventional, mass-market, hard SF. Cyberpunk was a "movement" in 1980s SF which produced a wide range of fictions exploring the technological ramifications of experience within late-capitalist, post-industrial, media-saturated Western society. Its most notable productions include the by-now-classic *Neuromancer* (1984), as well as Sterling's postmodern space opera, *Schismatrix* (1985), and Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991). Cyberpunk texts tend to be extrapolative, more concerned with near- than far-future scenarios, more or less conventional on the level of narrative technique, but innovative in their treatment of the fact noted by de Lauretis, that "technology is our historical context, political and personal" ("Signs of W[a/o]nder" 167).

It is also within this context of the struggle between the liberal humanist subject of realism and the pressures of the postmodern breakdown of concepts like the unified self that I will examine some of the complex interactions between postmodernism and a variety of SF feminisms, both within and outside the mass-market context. While feminism arguably has achieved the most radical revision of the genre since its inception, it has also, because of its own political requirements, tended to reject the enthusiasm for deconstruction which is one of the hallmarks of the postmodernist enterprise.

Feminist SF is involved in uneasy and frequently contradictory associations with both conventional SF and its more postmodernist forms. It demonstrates a tension between approaches which are more or less conventionally humanist and realist, such as those we can read in works like Nancy Kress's *An Alien Light* or Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country*, and those which are more or less committed to exploring less orthodox formal and ideological positions, for instance, Cadigan's *Synners*

or Wittig's *Les G  rill  res*. As a result of this complex web of associations, I will not relegate my study of feminist SF to only one section of this thesis. Feminist issues and texts cut across the boundaries I will be suggesting for the sake of critical convenience, and, given the heterogeneity of these issues and texts, it would be misleading to relegate feminist SF to any single chapter. For this reason—as well as to avoid the kind of inadvertent ghettoization which such a division might imply—I will introduce discussion of feminist texts throughout this thesis.

In "Demetaforming: Metaphors of the Postmodern in Contemporary SF," I will examine the ways in which SF functions as it begins to move consciously away from the extrapolative pole, away from the realist tendencies of genre SF, and outside the context of the mass market. Many postmodernist artists have incorporated the images and themes of SF, as a form of popular culture with particularly contemporary appeal, into their recent works as one version of the postmodernist rejection of the "  litism" of high modernism. Studies like McCaffery's and McHale's have pointed to the affinities between SF and postmodernist fiction and have called attention to the growing popularity of SF elements in many works of contemporary innovative fiction.⁵⁷ Thus any recent history of popular culture must take into account its transformations/appropriations by artists of both the contemporary mainstream and the contemporary vanguard (a term I use to distinguish these productions from the historical avant-garde of the first half of the century).

As my above discussion indicates, I will concern myself with two manifestations of this kind of "slipstream" SF. The first is speculative SF, specifically certain texts whose imagined futures may also be read as estranged visions of the postmodern condition itself. These are texts which, concerned as they are with issues of language and signification, tend to be deconstructive in their narrative techniques; they read the present in light of possible—frequently apocalyptic—future scenarios. Examples which I have already mentioned include Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, Hoban's *Ridley Walker*, Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*, and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The slipstream has also produced transformations of SF which, as indicated above, I will term "specular SF." In Part 2 of this thesis, particularly in "Specular SF: Postmodern Allegory," I argue that specular SF, functioning as it does at the extreme of metaphorical discursiveness, produces what we can

read as full-fledged allegories, and offers visions/versions of the present which are devoid of any interest in concurrently representing future possibilities.⁵⁸ While an element of allegory is more or less present in all works of SF—as noted, for instance, by Angus Fletcher in *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (275, n. 99)—the overall effect of specular SF is a fascinated, and sometimes horrified, pre-occupation with the present which occasionally tends to foreclose the future. At its least politically engaged, it produces versions of a universal human condition which threaten to negate both change and history. Works such as Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*, Kavan's psychological nightmare, *Ice*, and Pamela Zoline's classic "New Wave" story, "The Heat Death of the Universe" belong here. Also important is J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, a text especially privileged by Baudrillard in his discussions of the "implosion" of contemporary reality.

Within the terms of my discussion, the most important feature of specular SF is the complete dominance of the metaphorical function within these texts. Anna Kavan's *Ice* is only ostensibly "about" the end of the world in the grip of a new ice age. Like audiences at a production of Beckett's *Endgame*, anyone who reads *Ice* in the expectations of a causally-developed narrative in which events unfold in a logical fashion will read in vain. Narrative coherence, cause-and-effect development, linear logic—the "earmarks" of SF's conventional rhetoric—are all missing; what *Ice* offers are dream-like sequences of metaphorical similarity rather than logical sequences of metonymical continuity.

While, in many cases, these works offer significant readings of the present, some works of specular SF drain the genre of its potential for engaging with the present in any historically active way; in some theatrical instances, a tendency to rely on spectacle further weakens their potential for political engagement. It may be that the growing popularity of SF in the film and television "culture industries"—we might call it "the *Star Wars* syndrome"—has encouraged the incorporation of SF into contemporary theatre and performance art as part of the commercial reliance on spectacle for its own sake.

The last chapter of my examination of specular SF, "Playing (at) the End of the World," will look specifically at several examples of postmodern theatre which have appropriated themes and imagery from the SF mega-text, ranging from Beckett's *Endgame* to Sam Shepard's "punk" drama, *The Tooth of*

Crime, to Robert Wilson's "post-Wagnerian opera," *Einstein on the Beach*. This final section will undertake a more detailed examination of some of the complexities of representation within the postmodern context, since theatre, as noted above, is the cultural activity *par excellence* which undertakes to provide the illusion of *presence* within representation. It is also here that the postmodern apocalypse—as spectacular climax—reappears in what is certainly its most dramatic configuration. It seems ironically appropriate to end my examination of the intersections of SF and postmodernism with a closer look at the end of the world.

Endnotes

¹ In March 1993, an article in *Time* announced that the term "cyberpunk" now comprehends a whole range of cultural artifacts and practices: "with virtual sex, smart drugs and synthetic rock'n'roll, a new counterculture is surfing the dark edges of the computer age" (David S. Jackson 42). In fact, "cyber-" has become a familiar prefix for a whole range of neologisms, from "cyberspace" to "cybersex." This takes on a very real significance given, as I will argue in the following chapter, that cyberpunk SF is about the breakdown of certain previously clearly-delineated boundaries, especially those between humans and their machines.

² One new SF magazine, which premiered in November 1992, has even adopted this position as its title: *Science Fiction Age*. Its May 1993 issue includes an essay by long-time SF writer Robert Silverberg who observes that "To much of the rest of the world, America is Science Fiction" (22). This observation takes on added resonance in the context of a work like Baudrillard's *America* (see my discussion of this text in Chapter 4A). And Charles Platt, in a recent issue of *Science Fiction Eye*, points out that

The line between speculative fiction and speculative nonfiction is much more elusive [today], as Strange Science now looms over our lives. From superstrings to the Gaiia theory, from sociobiology to chaos, theorists have taken our everyday image of the world and distorted it into weird new forms. ("Upstream" 29)

³ See, for example, Slavoj Zizek's discussion of nostalgia, especially in reference to American *film noir* of the 1940s (111-116). Zizek argues that our fascination with these films arises, not from our ability to identify with them, but as the result of our fascination with "the gaze of the mythic 'naive' spectator, the one who was 'still able to take it seriously,' in other words, the one who 'believes in it' for us, in place of us" (112). At least some of the continuing popularity of SF writers like Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, as well as of films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of*

Doom, and the *Star Wars* series, may be attributed to the same kind of nostalgic fascination with a more 'innocent' world-view, one which properly belongs to the readers and writers of American "Golden Age" SF of the 1940s and 1950s.

⁴ It has long been acknowledged, of course, that *all* SF, no matter how future oriented, is, to a greater or lesser extent, also always "about" the present. For example, Darko Suvin's classic definition of the genre as a literature of cognitive estrangement emphasizes the fact that the estranged worlds of SF also function as commentaries/critiques of an author's own present moment (*Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* 7-10). This holds true no matter how extrapolatively-oriented a particular work of SF happens to be. As Carl Malmgren points out in *Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction*, "An SF world is . . . less a reflection *of* than a reflection *on* empirical reality" (11).

Elsewhere, Suvin writes that

significant SF is in fact a roundabout way of commenting on the author's collective context, often resulting in a surprisingly concrete and sharp-sighted comment at that. Even where SF sometimes strongly suggests a flight from that context, it is an optical illusion and an epistemological trick. In all such SF that is significant, the escape is to a better vantage point from which to comprehend the human relations around the author. ("SF and the Novum" 157-158)

And Robert Philmus notes that, in SF, "the fantasy based on some scientific, or pseudoscientific, hypothesis mythically displaces, and interpretatively deforms, areas of historical reality" (37).

⁵ Peter Fitting has argued that "[t]hose attempts to make SF respectable through its co-optation into some larger literary tradition effectively strip it of its specific or generic qualities" ("*Ubik*: The Deconstruction of Bourgeois SF" 41). It seems to me, however, that an examination of the historical and aesthetic context of a particular literary genre can serve also to elucidate exactly those "specific or generic qualities" that Fitting rightly believes are worth preserving. After all, "context is all."

As Roger Luckhurst suggests,

it is not a question of evacuating sites. The specificity of SF, its forms, temporality, and modes of enunciation, must be retained in order to say anything meaningful about it. Its generic status cannot be evaded. (365)

Marleen Barr's recent attempt, in *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*, to erase "feminist SF" as a separate textual practice—in order to conflate it along with other feminist writings into the larger umbrella category of "feminist fabulation"—is problematic precisely because it negates the "generic status" of feminist SF. As I will also point out in Chapter 2B, this erasure prevents Barr from distinguishing clearly enough between feminist and postmodernist textual practices.

⁶ Marc Angenot makes some telling remarks about the "pleasure" involved in reading the SF text, a pleasure based, in his model, upon the reader's (successful) attempts to decode the signs of the SF text in order to (re)create the fictional world implied by those signs (see his "The Absent Paradigm"). And Malmgren suggests that

part of the attraction of the genre rests in the fact that systems of correspondence between real and fictional worlds are generated primarily by the labor of the reader. The reader knows that he or she must work to achieve cognitive satisfactions. (11)

⁷ For a recent and comprehensive analysis of the function of extrapolation in SF, see David N. Samuelson's "Modes of Extrapolation: The Formulas of Hard SF." As Samuelson notes, "The bridge of extrapolation is familiar enough in SF that it became the name of the first academic journal devoted to critical and scholarly writing in the field" (200).

⁸ Malmgren goes on to argue that

Working metaphorically rather than metonymically, the speculative writer tries to inscribe a world whose relation to the basic narrative world is less logical than analogical or even anagogical; there are systems of correspondence between the two worlds, but they are not linear or one-to-one, and they are consequently more

problematic, more difficult to establish with certainty. (13)

As he points out, Darko Suvin distinguishes these two poles of SF as "extrapolative" and "analogical" in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (cf. 27-30).

⁹ As I hope will become clear in subsequent discussions, much (non-genre) postmodernist SF belongs to this category of texts, as does much feminist SF.

¹⁰ Broderick explains

Using a . . . strategy of *semiological compensation*, or redundancy and over-coding . . . the sf mega-text works by embedding each new work . . . in an even vaster web of interpenetrating semantic and tropic givens or vectors. (9)

Broderick's concept of an SF "mega-text" bears some resemblance to Michel Butor's idea—which appeared in 1971—of a "collective dream" developed by the last century or so of SF writings. Butor, however, bemoans the fact that this "collective dream . . . is a mythology in tatters" and argues that SF "must become a collective work, like the science which is its indispensable basis" (164), while Broderick takes a more open-ended approach to his notion of the "mega-text," which, for him, is a more or less heterogeneous world of icons, images, and ideas.

¹¹ Brooke-Rose herself borrows the concept of "megastory" or "parallel story" from Philippe Hamon's "Un discours contraint" (*Poétique* 16 [1973]: 411-45).

¹² These themes and tropes are available to readers as well, of course, and are directly related to a reader's competency in an individual genre. As Thomas J. Roberts points out,

Every story in any genre—vernacular or literary—is the product of a system. It is one realization of that system's potentialities—as each English sentence is its own unique realization of that underlying system we call the English language. In reading any single story, then, we are reading the system that lies behind it, that realizes itself through the mind of that story's writer. . . . Genre reading is system reading. That is,

as we are reading the stories, we are exploring the system that created them. (150-151)

Roberts also notes that "the system is always changing, and in reading the new stories the system is writing we are following the changes in the system" (151). Following the changes in the system of SF is one of my aims here.

¹³ One of the first analyses of the influence of SF on postmodern fiction is Teresa L. Ebert's "The Convergence of Postmodern Innovative Fiction and Science Fiction" (1980), in which she refers to SF-influenced postmodernist fictions as "metascience fiction." According to Ebert, this is SF

that moves beyond thematic extrapolation and formal mimesis in order to celebrate the fabulatory human imagination in-and-for-itself. In metascience fiction the entertainment or story-telling function that dominates traditional science fiction is backgrounded, and the literary and aesthetic functions are foregrounded. (92-93)

Ebert too attributes the rise of "metascience fiction" to the increasing influence "of the complex and multiple web of science and technology" which pervades contemporary Western culture (96).

¹⁴ It is not within the scope of this discussion to analyze the qualities of postmodern fantasy, especially as the generic boundaries of fantasy, unconstrained as it is by the necessity to stay within any particular logical system, are arguably much broader than those of SF. For a relevant discussion, however, see Lance Olsen's *Ellipse of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Postmodern Fantasy*, especially his introductory chapter, "Prelude: Nameless Things and Thingless Names" (1-23).

Jameson's discussion of "Magical Narratives" in *The Political Unconscious* also has interesting implications for any analysis of postmodern fantasy. He makes the point, for instance, that, with the onset of modernism, fantasy literature "circumscribes the place of the fantastic as a determinate, marked absence at the heart of the secular world" (134). Within the context of postmodernism, one might expect that the thematics of absence would be treated with a certain irony.

¹⁵ This is by no means an uncontested definition. In *The SF Book of Lists*, Maxim Jakubowski and

Malcolm Edwards include Suvin's definition as one among "Twenty Definitions of Science Fiction" (256-258). It is, however, the most critically accepted definition. Developed by Suvin in the 1970s, it provides a useful starting point for any discussion of the genre. Ultimately, however, my aim is to explore the margins of the field suggested by this definition, to examine some of the ways in which certain works of contemporary SF are blurring the boundaries of its outlines.

¹⁶ The vampires-as-aliens-from-outer-space who appear in Colin Wilson's *The Space Vampires* (1976) provide another well-known example of the domestication of the fantastic in SF.

¹⁷ Note, for example, the title of an early collection of essays edited by Thomas D. Clareson, *SF: The Other Side of Realism* (1971). See also Brooke-Rose's extensive analysis of the technical and formal parallels between SF and the realist novel in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (72-102). She observes, for example, that

One of the most striking features of much science fiction until fairly recently has been its lack of imagination with regard to narrative technique, as opposed to its imagination with regard to ideas. It took over wholesale the techniques of the realistic novel. (82)

¹⁸ Here it is necessary to distinguish between texts and contexts, as well as to situate the term "dominant" in a suitably postmodernist context. Jim Collins reminds us that

As a style . . . Post-Modernism can become "dominant" only in localized situations; Post-Modernism's recognition that culture has become a multiplicity of competing signs necessarily prevents it from asserting total stylistic "dominance"—to do so would violate one of the constitutive principles of the movement. *Diva* may be a Post-Modernist text, but the truly Post-Modernist context is one in which Beineix's film plays on Cinemax, while *Murder, She Wrote* and *Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer* runs [sic] on opposite network channels. (115)

It should be noted here that Collins demonstrates a certain élitism in his chosen examples.

¹⁹ As Hayles describes it, "chaos can be assimilated neither into order nor disorder. It names a new territory, designates previously unrecognized interactions, and relies upon different assumptions" ("Chaos as Orderly Disorder" 306).

²⁰ It is as a new paradigm that Andreas Huyssen, for example, approaches his analysis of postmodernity:

by new paradigm, I do not mean to suggest that there is a total break or rupture between modernism and postmodernism, but rather that modernism, avantgarde, and mass culture have entered into a new set of mutual relations and discursive configurations which we call "postmodern" and which is clearly distinct from the paradigm of "high modernism." (ix-x)

As the term suggests, postmodernism is both tied to, and a reaction against, the modernist paradigm, which itself is both a continuation of and a reaction against earlier paradigms. Of course, as this "evolutionary" model suggests, there is a sense in which postmodernism, opposed as it is to the narrative of progress, is perceived—at least by its proponents—as a kind of next logical step in some evolution of cultural sensibility. By the same token, however, to hold that postmodernism is more inclusive than the paradigm it replaces is, at least in a way, to reinstate a progressive position.

I also support the contention that postmodernism is an *historical* condition; while *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), the most frequently cited example of a "postmodern" text which appeared long before the historical moment of the postmodern, does indeed demonstrate many of the aesthetic and thematic concerns of the postmodern work of art, it may, of course, be argued that it is postmodernist only retrospectively, *avant la lettre*. In other words, it requires a postmodern perspective to interpret *Tristram Shandy* as a postmodern text.

²¹ While it would be a foolhardy undertaking to seek for the origin of the term, it is worth noting that some of the earliest discussions of postmodernism developed around architecture, rather than around literature or other cultural media. One frequently such analysis is Charles Jencks's *The Language of*

Post-Modern Architecture (1977).

²² See, for example, Alan Wilde's study, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*, as well as Linda Hutcheon's "'A Lightness of Thoughtfulness': The Power of Postmodern Irony." Wilde argues, for example, that

Modernist irony . . . expresses a resolute consciousness of different and equal possibilities so ranged as to defy solution. Postmodern irony, by contrast, is suspensive: an indecision about the meanings or relations of things is matched by a willingness to live with uncertainty, to tolerate and, in some cases, to welcome a world seen as random and multiple, even, at times, absurd. (44)

In her discussion of Wilde's analysis, Hutcheon develops his position as follows:

postmodern irony is the structural recognition that discourse today cannot avoid acknowledging its situation in the world it represents: irony's critique, in other words, will always be at least somewhat complicitous with the dominants it contests but within which it cannot help existing. ("A Lightness of Thoughtfulness" 69)

It is interesting, in this context, to note Northrop Frye's apparently prophetic observation in *Anatomy of Criticism* that irony is in the process of becoming the dominant mode of contemporary literature (238-239).

²³ Brian McHale discusses this aspect of postmodernism under a rubric first suggested by Gerald Graff, "the myth of the postmodern breakthrough" (cf. *Constructing Postmodernism* 21-41).

The prefix, "post," of course, suggests that the break with modernity is not such a clean break after all; Jameson, for example, concludes that

radical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuration of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that had been dominant again become secondary . . . ("Postmodernism and Consumer

Society" 123)

Harvey addresses himself to the same issues, noting that "the most startling fact about postmodernism [is] its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic" which haunted modernism:

real revolutions in sensibility can occur when latent and dominated ideas in one period become explicit and dominant in another. Nevertheless, the continuity of the condition of fragmentation, ephemerality, discontinuity, and chaotic change in both modernist and postmodernist thought is important. (44)

²⁴ See below for a discussion of Ketterer's concept of "philosophical apocalypse," which he introduces in *New Worlds for Old* (cf.16-17). It is not surprising that a certain fascination with a certain kind of apocalypse is characteristic of some postmodernist cultural productions, given postmodernism's sense of itself as the result of such a critical shift.

²⁵ Lyotard himself flirts with the construction of his own meta-narrative, something which has not been lost on subsequent theorists of the "condition." Dana Polan, for one, argues that

In its abstractness, Lyotard's scheme has its attractions, but this very abstraction makes it inadequate to deal with the complexities of culture in a particular historical moment. Against Lyotard's invocation of a postmodern condition, we might suggest the non-synchronous existence of a number of conditions, all of which necessitate specific analyses. ("Postmodernism and Cultural Analysis Today" 55)

It is for this reason that I am addressing myself to several aspects of postmodernism—which might as easily be identified as different postmodernisms—rather than attempting to construct a single coherent picture of a single, coherent "condition."

²⁶ These include, of course, the "voices" of popular cultural genres like SF.

²⁷ One of the first attempts to address feminist issues within the context of postmodernity is Craig Owens' "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism." Owens organizes his discussion around the fact of the "crisis of cultural authority" (57), a crisis in which both feminism and postmodernism are implicated. The fact that this early study is written by a male, rather than a female, theorist can be attributed, in part, to the long-standing distrust of the postmodern sensibility on the part of many feminist critics and theorists.

²⁸ Significantly, I think, Baudrillard also includes the "death" of the conventional theoretical enterprise in his discussion of the death of "the 'good old' SF imagination": "something else is beginning to emerge (and not only in fiction, but in theory). Both traditional SF and theory are destined to the same fate: flux and imprecision are putting an end to them as specific genres" ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 309). In Chapter 4A I will discuss Baudrillard's own particular *mélange* of theory and SF.

²⁹ Jameson also identifies

the effacement . . . of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories and contents of that very Culture Industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern, from Leavis and the American New Criticism all the way to Adorno and the Frankfurt School. ("Cultural Logic" 54-55)

³⁰ In his critical biography of James Blish, David Ketterer also takes up the question of fantasy's implication in the real, arguing that Blish's use of fantasy elements in his SF creates a kind of bridge between physics and metaphysics:

Blish saw to it that science fiction itself participated . . . in the process of conceptual breakthrough. At such moments of breakthrough, one becomes aware of the fantasy of reality and the reality of fantasy. (319)

On the other hand, Eric Rabkin, as a structuralist examining features of fantasy and fantastic literature, acknowledges the importance of fantasy but maintains its distinction from reality: "Fantasy represents a basic mode of human knowing; its polar opposite is Reality"

³¹ Perhaps the earliest study to examine SF within the context of the postmodern is Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz's *Science Fiction and Postmodern Fiction: A Genre Study*, which was originally published in German in 1986. Unfortunately, it appeared in English translation only in 1992; and developed as it was outside the context of later studies such as McCaffery's and McHale's, it appears much less relevant now that it would have done had it appeared earlier. Its belated English-language appearance only serves to demonstrate how rapidly this area of critical/theoretical work has developed over the past few years. However, even though it was written before the onslaught of cyberpunk, for example, Puschmann-Nalenz's commentaries on the creation of parallel worlds, simulacra, and manipulated realities demonstrate—before the fact, as it were—the postmodern character of cyberpunk and other recent SF texts which still emphasize these narrative elements.

³² While McHale's distinction between modernism and postmodernism tends to be both too simple and too sweeping, it does usefully identify certain emphases within these fields. It is worth noting here that Žižek also mentions parallels between the rise of modernism and the rise of the detective novel (48), although his discussion does not extend into postmodernism.

Given the relationship of SF to realism, however, I would argue that the rather easy alignment of SF with postmodernism in this McHale's study is somewhat reductive. It is significant, I think, that the SF texts he privileges here are works like J. G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) and Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975); Ballard and Delany are hardly typical genre writers. McHale's use of terms like "low" and "high" is also indicative of a tendency towards "modernist" élitism in this discussion of SF.

In his recent study, *Constructing Postmodernism*, McHale maintains his interest in SF as a significant genre in the postmodernist context. Indeed, the final section of the study, "At the Interface," comprises two chapters on cyberpunk. In his introduction, McHale writes that "my conviction has grown

that SF, far from being marginal to contemporary 'advanced' or 'state-of-the-art' writing, may actually be *paradigmatic* of it" (12).

³³ Blurred boundaries, however, do not amount to the same thing as the "death" of a genre. In fact, the same arguments can be mobilized to create the "death" of any genre. As Derrida observes in "The Law of Genre,"

As soon as the word "genre" is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity. (56-57)

From this perspective on the normative function of genre, works like *Endgame* are indeed "monstrosities."

³⁴ Like most of the writers originally identified with the "movement," Sterling claims no longer to write cyberpunk. See, for example, Lewis Shiner's "Confessions of an ex-Cyberpunk."

³⁵ Some bookstores—such as London, England's Forbidden Planet and Montreal's Nebula, which specialize in SF and fantasy—have already adopted Sterling's "slipstream" as a specific category of speculative fiction. And Charles Platt, in a recent issue of *Science Fiction Eye*, can assume the familiarity of his readers with this term when he discusses a kind of "speculative nonfiction" which he rather playfully names the "upstream" (33).

³⁶ See, for example, Patrick Bantlinger's discussion of the challenge to realist representation in *Crusoe's Footprints* (166-70), as well as Nash's extended analysis in the introductory chapter of *World-Games* (1-47).

³⁷ Foucault claims, for example, that

the human sciences, when dealing with what is representation . . . , find themselves treating as their object what is in fact their condition of possibility. . . . They proceed from that which is given in representation to that which renders representation possible, but which is still representation. (*The Order of Things* 364)

³⁸ This is not, of course, a new insight. In "The Epistemology of Metaphor," for example, Paul de Man discusses (and deconstructs) Locke's distrust of rhetorical language, which must be eschewed, as Locke states in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, "if we would speak of things as they are" (quoted in de Man 13).

And, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault writes of Saussure's "rediscovering the project of a general semiology . . . this is because he was in fact rediscovering the Classical condition for conceiving of the binary nature of the sign" (67).

There are differences, however, in the reception of such insights within the postmodern context. In the conclusion to his extended discussion of postmodernism, Jameson notes that "many of the basic postmodern features—self-consciousness, antihumanism, decentering, reflexivity, textualization—look suspiciously indistinguishable from the old modern ones" (*Postmodernism* 397). But he quotes from Richard Rorty's discussion of Derrida's work to point out one significant difference:

It is a mistake to think that Derrida, or anybody else, "recognized" problems about the nature of textuality or writing which had been ignored by the tradition. What he did was to think up ways of speaking which made old ways of speaking optional, and thus more or less dubious. (Richard Rorty, quoted in *Postmodernism* 397)

What also distinguishes the postmodern reaction to the unreliability of language is, in many cases, the realization that such unreliability can have positive repercussions (see, for example, my comments on Pat Cadigan's use of puns in Chapter 2B). The awareness and acceptance of linguistic unreliability also helps to account for the ironic nature of much postmodern discourse.

³⁹ It is useful to think of the modernist paradigm as one in which emphasis is placed on the (structuralist) sign at the expense of the referent, while, within the context of classical realism, the referent—the Real—is exactly that which grounds the text.

⁴⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure's insight into the arbitrary nature of the bond between sign and referent, his conclusion that "every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behaviour or—what amounts to the same thing—on convention" (68), helped to encourage various post-structuralist readings of the contingency and indeterminacy of these linguistic mediations. Post-structuralist linguistic theory assumes that experience of reality is always already interpretation, since, as Saussure taught, "without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language" (112).

⁴¹ The deconstruction of the unified subject also has its parallels in postmodern aesthetic theories. As Henry M. Sayre explains it, modernist poetics "sees in the 'present,' in the immediacy of experience, something like an authentic 'wholeness,' a sense of unity and completion that is the 'end' of art," while a postmodern poetics "defines the present as perpetually and inevitably in media res, as part of an ongoing process, inevitably fragmentary, incomplete, and multiplicitous" (175).

⁴² See, for example, Foucault's essay, "What is an Author?" And, in her examination of fantasy, Jackson discusses the notion of "character" as follows:

"Character" is itself an ideological concept, produced in the name of a "realistic" representation of an actual, empirically verifiable reality outside the literary text. Realism, as an artistic practice, confirms the dominant ideas of what constitutes this outside reality, by pulling it into place, organizing and framing it through the unities of the text. It presents its practice as a neutral, innocent and natural one, erasing its own artifice and *construction* of the "real." (83)

⁴³ Althusser developed the concept of "interpellation"—the calling-into-being, as it were, of the subject—during the course of his analyses of the nature and function of ideology (for example, in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"). As Paul Smith explains, "the effect . . . of Althusser's notion of interpellation is to construct 'subjects' that recognize—that are, indeed, predisposed to recognize—the call of ideological discourses" (16).

⁴⁴ See, for example, Paul Smith's *Discerning the Subject* and Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking*.

⁴⁵ This shift in orientation is discussed from a feminist perspective by Alice Jardine; see "Preliminaries" in *Gynesis* (13-28). And in a discussion of postmodern architecture, David Harvey also notes what he refers to as "the postmodern penchant for jumbling together all manner of references to past styles" (85).

⁴⁶ Ultimately, however, Malmgren's position is rather different from Jameson's, since he argues that new scientific paradigms—those detailing the immensity of the universe, the "silence" of the universe, the impossibility of an FTL [faster-than-light] drive—have taken space away again, eliminated it as a truly viable locus of estrangement for "pure" SF. We are stuck, it seems, with the Here of today and tomorrow. (175)

While this makes a case for a return to an emphasis on the axis of temporality in the SF narrative, it is a very narrow temporal "window" indeed which Malmgren describes as available to contemporary writers:

To be faithful to its scientific epistemology, such SF must turn its attentions [from] the frontiers of the solar system . . . to recent developments in technology (as has been the case in the appearance of cyberpunk), or to alternate society SF situated in the near future (as has been the case in recent fiction by Margaret Atwood and Suzette Haden Elgin). (175)

Certainly, it seems true that contemporary SF seems less concerned with far-future than with near-future

scenarios. Malmgren's "Here of today and tomorrow" is not much of a future, after all, and might be said, finally, to support Jameson's arguments rather than to refute them.

⁴⁷ To borrow a comment of Jameson's out of context, the future depicted in *Star Trek* is now "merely the future of one moment of what is now our own past" ("Progress versus Utopia" 244). For a fictional analysis of the same situation, in the context of 1920s and 1930s visions of the future—exemplified in the imagery mobilized for the 1929 New York World's Fair—see William Gibson's short story, "The Gernsback Continuum" (1981), which I will discuss in my chapter on cyberpunk.

⁴⁸ This can also help us to understand something of the nature of the historical novel within the context of postmodernity. Much postmodern SF implicitly juxtaposes present and future time (for example, through the construction of allegories of the future to comment on the present). In postmodern "historical" novels like *Hawksmoor* (1985) and *Chatterton* (1987), Peter Ackroyd juxtaposes present and past time-streams in ways which emphasize discontinuity at the same time as each period acts as a commentary on the other. Indeed, in *Hawksmoor*, the past literally invades the present as a series of murders committed in the eighteenth century is somehow precipitated into the twentieth century and must be investigated by a twentieth-century police inspector. See also McHale's very useful analysis of *The Name of the Rose* as postmodern historical fiction (*Constructing Postmodernism* 145-164).

⁴⁹ Jameson writes that

the schizophrenic will clearly have a far more intense experience of any given present of the world than we do, since our own present is always part of some larger set of projects which force us selectively to focus our perceptions. ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 119)

For Jameson, the condition of schizophrenia provides a kind of metaphor for the sense of a perpetual present which he identifies as one feature of postmodernity; he thus represents schizophrenia as a condition in which an individual's time-sense is confined entirely (and intensely) to the present moment,

to the exclusion of any viable sense of either past or future events: the schizophrenic

does not have our experience of temporal continuity . . . but is condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon. In other words, schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolate, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. (119)

And in Hayles' discussion of postmodernism, she suggests that

To live postmodernism is to live as schizophrenics are said to do, in a world of disconnected present moments that jostle one another but never form a continuous (much less logical) progression. The prior experiences of older people act as anchors that keep them from fully entering the postmodern stream of spliced contexts and discontinuous time. . . . The case could be made that the people in this country [the U.S.] who know the most about how postmodernism *feels* (as distinct from how to envision or analyze it) are all under the age of sixteen. (*Chaos Bound* 282)

⁵⁰ It is worth noting here that Ridley Scott's SF film, *Blade Runner* (1982), is depicted by Collins as a privileged example of this postmodernist interaction with history:

The distinctiveness of *Blade Runner's* vision of the future is this 'archeological' attitude toward the past, which exposes the layers of sedimented representations—the cityscape is simultaneously archaic, early Modern, and futuristic. (133)

⁵¹ Damien Broderick suggests the same conclusion in his observation "that sf writes . . . the narrative of the *same*, as other" (1).

⁵² Because her study was developed in France, Jardine uses the term "modernity" where North American theorists use "postmodernity" (14), something which has created occasional confusion in her readers.

Although Jardine's interest is in the development of European post-structuralist philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse, it seems to me equally valuable to think about SF within these terms as well. I will just suggest here one implication of Jardine's comments about continuity and desire, arising from Jameson's contention that we have lost a true historical perspective within the context of the postmodern, as well as from my own argument for the resurgence of the analogical impulse in postmodern SF: does this imply a certain (Baudrillardian) loss of our sense of the real so extreme that we have lost all desire for the future as well?

⁵³ As Malmgren warns, however, it is misleading to construct facile parallels between extrapolation and hard SF, and speculation and soft SF: "we should not confuse the mental operation employed with the sciences in which the *novum* is grounded" (14).

⁵⁴ For Lodge's discussion of metaphor and metonymy, see *The Modes of Modern Writing* (73-124). For a more recent discussion, see also Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction*.

⁵⁵ As Lodge explains, however,

it must always be remembered that we are not discussing a distinction between two mutually exclusive types of discourse, but a distinction based on dominance. The metaphoric work cannot totally neglect metonymic continuity if it is to be intelligible at all. Correspondingly, the metonymic text cannot eliminate all signs that it is available for metaphoric interpretation. (111)

⁵⁶ The theorists of Russian Formalism identified defamiliarization as the function of *all* literary texts; what is relevant here is SF's *specific* mode of defamiliarization; that is, its defamiliarization of the *present* historical moment and thus also its ineluctable ties to the historical novel. Patrick Parrinder discusses the function of SF estrangement within the context of the link between Russian Formalist theories of "*ostranenie*" and the dramatic theories of Bertolt Brecht in his *Science Fiction: Its Criticism*

and Teaching (72-76).

⁵⁷ See also the special issue of *Science-Fiction Studies* on "Science Fiction and Postmodernism" (November 1991).

⁵⁸ Within the terms of Malmgren's model, it should be noted, such works no longer belong within the genre, since they have, in his terms, "begun to take another look at the nature of the Here" (175); any obvious extrapolative impulse is all but invisible in these texts. Malmgren suggests that this kind of "reexamination" belongs more properly to "oxymoronic genres such as science fantasy and magic realism, both of which probe the limits of reality" (175). To be fair, he concludes that SF is probably in the process of redefining itself in order to undertake this "reexamination," a conclusion with which I am in agreement.

PART I

CHAPTER 2A CYBERPUNK DECONSTRUCTION AND POSTMODERNISM

What will we do now that the barbarians are gone?

Those people were a kind of solution.

(Cavafy, quoted in Shepard, "Waiting for the Barbarians" 118).

1. The "Movement"

The "fact" that postmodernism is our contemporary cultural dominant can help us to appreciate the growing influence of the various sub-genres of fantastic literature on mainstream fiction. Realism no longer seems to provide appropriate forms within which to express our experiences of life in the post-industrial West. Its characteristic attributes have lost much of their privilege in the postmodern environment of contingency, indeterminacy, ambiguity, and representation-in-crisis. Tom Wolfe's stirring call in his essay, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," for the creation of "the new social novel" certainly seems to provide evidence of this growing "infiltration" of mainstream literature by various forms of the fantastic. And this is related to the postmodernist "contamination" of "real" literature by the forms of "pop" literature, which has resulted in the occasional blurring—even if not quite the complete breakdown announced by some enthusiastic analysts—of previously sacrosanct (modernist) boundaries between "high" and "low" culture.

As I mentioned in my introductory discussion, Brian McHale suggests that the dominant concerns of both SF and postmodernist literature are ontological rather than epistemological, so that, in a sense, we can theorize science fiction as the "other" of postmodernist literature. It is well to recall here, however, that, while the commentaries of a critic like Larry McCaffery, for example, valorize conventional genre SF, McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* tends to privilege the forms of high culture, so that, in this particular study, SF never functions as much more than a kind of "low art" analogue to the postmodernist fiction which is the focus of his study.¹ In a more recent essay, "POSTcyberMODERN-punkISM," however, McHale revises to some extent the previous emphasis of his literary-historical narrative, observing that

Pop art models are assimilated by high art (and vice versa) more quickly now than ever before, and this has the further consequence of producing an ever more intimate interaction, an ever-tighter feedback loop, between high and low. (311)²

Postmodernist texts which rely heavily on the SF "mega-text" have proliferated since the 1960s and, arguably some of the most challenging SF of recent years has been produced by mainstream and vanguardist rather than genre writers. Not surprisingly, however, the specific concerns and aesthetic techniques of postmodernism have been relatively slow to appear in genre SF, which tends to pride itself on its status as a paraliterary phenomenon.³ Genre SF thrives within an epistemology which privileges the logic of cause-and-effect narrative development and it usually demonstrates a rather optimistic belief in the progress of human knowledge. When SF is enlisted by postmodernist fiction, however, it becomes integrated into an aesthetic and a world-view whose central tenets are an uncertainty and an indeterminacy which call into question the "causal interpretation of the universe" and the reliance on a "rhetoric of believability" which virtually define it as a generic entity (Ebert 92).

It is within this context of the tensions between genre SF and postmodernism that I will discuss cyberpunk, a mode of mass-market SF which has its visual analogue in films like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *The Terminator* (1984) and in the television series, *Max Headroom* (original British version produced in 1985).⁴ William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) was hailed as the centre-piece of what came to be known as the cyberpunk "movement"; and, although it is a movement which may already have had its day, it has left some ineradicable marks on contemporary SF.⁵

2. Genre SF and Anti-Humanism

Michael Swanwick's 1986 essay in *Asimov's*, "A User's Guide to the Postmoderns," divides contemporary SF writers into "humanists" and "cyberpunks."⁶ Since it is too reductive simply to arrange these differences on opposite sides of some kind of "postmodern divide," I want to map out what might more accurately be a kind of continuum. At one extreme is an SF which accepts without question the traditional values of liberal humanism; David Brin's *The Postman* (1985), which I will treat in more detail below, is one good example. At the other extreme is an SF which we might call "anti-humanist."

I find that a significant percentage of cyberpunk gestures toward this end of the continuum, although, as I will discuss below, this gesture is more often than not an incomplete one. We might recall here the nostalgic conservatism of a novel like Walter Jon Williams' cyberpunk revision of the Western, *Hardwired* (1986), in which cyberpunk's inherent scepticism is more or less overwhelmed by its equally strong propensity towards romanticism. My working assumption is that a too easy acceptance of at least *some* of the tenets of humanism, a taking for granted of the ideological baggage which pervades expressions like "human nature" or "universal human values," unnecessarily limits SF's potential to resist current conservative cultural representations of the human (representations, for instance, labelled "feminine" and "masculine" have had notoriously pernicious effects throughout the history of the West). And the restrictions of these totalizing representations, which produce us at the same time as we produce them, in turn limit our own development, both now and in whatever future we are moving towards.

At the present time, the post-industrial West is still largely in the ethical/philosophical (and therefore political) grip of a liberal humanism which valorizes the individual "subject;" the concept of the Cartesian "ego" or "self," unified, coherent, stable, and self-identical, is firmly ensconced as/at its ideological centre. As has been variously argued by post-structuralist theoreticians such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva, however, this "self" of liberal humanism is an illusion produced by and within language and ideology. Moreover, this "self" usually amounts to a white, middle-class, male "self," one which measures "himself" against others not of the same race, class, or gender. One of the results of such measurement has tended to be the marginalization of these others. For this reason (which ultimately has everything to do with power), cultural representations confined within the discourses of liberal humanism frequently close themselves off to new possibilities of social relations and to any really "new" representations of a future humanity defined through difference rather than identification.

The deconstruction of the concept of the individual subject as self-contained ego is therefore a powerful strategy against the ideologies of a too narrowly applied humanism. It corresponds in many ways to the deconstruction of the literary text, the "text itself" as discrete entity whose "meaning" is

singular and determinate. In other words, the text is seen as analogue of the self, as the site of multiple and often contradictory subject positions; rather than fixed entities, both text and self are shifting, unstable, constantly re-forming processes.

3. Cybernetic Deconstructions

In 1989, Lucius Shepard was already writing his elegy for cyberpunk: "Let's get back to the Cyberpunks. Defunct or not, they seem to be the only revolution we've got" ("Waiting for the Barbarians" 113). Cyberpunk was a product of the commercial mass market of "hard" SF; concerned on the whole with near-future extrapolation and more or less conventional on the level of narrative technique, it was nevertheless at times brilliantly innovative in its explorations of technology as one of the "multiplicity of structures that intersect to produce that unstable constellation the liberal humanists call the 'self'" (Moi 10). From this perspective, cyberpunk can be situated among a growing (although still relatively small) number of SF projects which can be identified as "anti-humanist." In its various deconstructions of the subject—carried out in terms of a cybernetic breakdown of the classic nature/culture opposition—cyberpunk can be read as one symptom of the postmodern condition of genre SF. While SF frequently problematizes the oppositions between the natural and the artificial, the human and the machine, it generally sustains them in such a way that the human remains securely ensconced in its privileged place at the centre of things. Cyberpunk, however, explores (with varying success) the breakdown of these oppositions. Indeed, it is this breakdown which provides much of the impetus behind Scott Bukatman's appropriately titled *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (1993), a study which, like McHale's *Constructing Postmodernism*, valorizes cyberpunk as the paradigmatic instance of postmodern SF.

This cybernetic deconstruction is heralded in the opening pages of *Neuromancer*, the cyberpunk "limit-text." Its first sentence—"The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (3)—invokes a rhetoric of technology to express the natural world in a metaphor which blurs the distinctions between the organic and the artificial. Soon after, Gibson's computer-cowboy, Case, gazes at "the chrome stars" of shuriken, and imagines these deadly weapons as "the stars under which

he voyaged, his destiny spelled out in a constellation of cheap chrome" (12). Human bodies, too, are absorbed into this rhetorical conflation of organism and machine. On the streets of the postmodern city whose arteries circulate information, Case sees "all around [him] the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market . . ." (16). The human world replicates its own mechanical systems and the border between the organic and the artificial threatens to blur beyond recuperation.

If we think of SF as a genre which typically foregrounds human action *against* a background constituted by its technology, this blurring of once clearly defined boundaries makes of cyberpunk one particularly relevant form of SF for the post-industrial present. Richard Kadrey, himself a (sometime) cyberpunk writer, has noted the proliferation of computer-based metaphors—"downtime," "brain dump," "programming," and "interface," for example—which are already being used to describe human interaction ("Simulations of Immortality" 75). We can read cyberpunk as an analysis of the postmodern *interface* between human and machine.

Common to most of the texts which have become associated with cyberpunk is an overwhelming fascination, at once celebratory and anxious, with technology and its immediate—that is, *unmediated*—effects upon human being-in-the-world, a fascination which sometimes spills over into the problematizing of "reality" itself. This emphasis on the potential interconnections between the human and the technological, many of which are already gleaming in the eyes of research scientists, is perhaps the central "generic" feature of cyberpunk. Its evocation of popular/street culture and its valorization of the socially marginalized—that is, its "punk" sensibility—have also been recognized as important defining characteristics.

Bruce Sterling, one of the most prolific spokespersons for the Movement during its heyday, has described cyberpunk as a reaction to "standard humanist liberalism" because of its interest in exploring the various scenarios of humanity's potential interfaces with the products of its own technology. For Sterling, cyberpunk is "post-humanist" SF which believes that "technological destruction of the human condition leads not to futureshocked zombies but to hopeful monsters" ("Letter" 5,4).

SF has traditionally been enchanted with the notion of transcendence, but, as Glenn Grant points out in his discussion of *Neuromancer*, cyberpunk's "preferred method of transcendence is through technology" (43). Themes of transcendence, however, point cyberpunk back to the romantic trappings of the genre at its most conventional, as does its valorization of the (usually male) loner rebel/hacker/punk who appears so frequently as its central character. Even Sterling has recognized this, concluding that "the proper mode of critical attack on cyberpunk has not yet been essayed. Its truly dangerous element is incipient Nietzschean philosophical fascism: the belief in the Overman, and the worship of will-to-power" ("Letter" 5).⁷

It is also important to note that not all the monsters it has produced have been hopeful ones; balanced against the exhilaration of potential technological transcendence is the anxiety and disorientation produced in the self/body in danger of being absorbed into its own technology. Mesmerized by the purity of technology, Gibson's Case at first has only contempt for the "meat" of the human body and yearns to remain "jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix" (5). And the protagonist of K.W. Jerome's *The Glass Hammer* (1987), which I will discuss in some detail below, experiences his very existence as a televised simulation. The postmodern anomie which pervades *The Glass Hammer* demonstrates that Sterling's defense of cyberpunk against charges that it is peopled with "futureshocked zombies" has been less than completely accurate.

4. Cyberspace and Other Technological Monstrosities

Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the first of a trilogy of novels which includes *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), is set in a near-future trash-culture ruled by multi-national corporations and kept going by black-market economies, all frenetically dedicated to the circulation of computerized data and "the dance of biz" (16) which is played out by Gibson's characters on the streets of the new urban overspill, the Sprawl.⁸ The most striking spatial construct in *Neuromancer*, however, is neither the cityscape of the Sprawl nor the artificial environments like the fabulous Freeside, but "cyberspace," the virtual reality which exists in simulated splendour on the far side of the computer screens which are the

real centre of technological activity in Gibson's fictional world. Bukatman describes cyberspace as "a new and decentered spatiality . . . which exists parallel to, but outside of, the geographic topography of experiential reality" ("The Cybernetic (City) State" 45). In a fascinating instance of feedback between SF and the "real" world, Autodesk, a firm researching innovations in computerized realities in Sausalito, California, recently filed for trademark protection of the term "cyberspace," which it plans to use as the name for its new virtual reality software (Ditlea 99).⁹ Jean Baudrillard's contention that now "It is thus not necessary to write science fiction" ("The Year 2000 Has Already Happened" 36) seems particularly appropriate in this context.

And along with the "other" space of cyberspace, *Neuromancer* offers alternatives to conventional modalities of human existence as well: computer hackers have direct mental access to cyberspace, artificial intelligences live and function within it, digitalized constructs are based on the subjectivities of humans whose "personalities" have been downloaded into computer memory, and human bodies are routinely cloned.

This is Sterling's post-humanism with a vengeance, a post-humanism which, in its representation of "monsters"—hopeful or otherwise—produced by the interface of the human and the machine, radically decentres the human body, the sacred icon of the essential self, in the same way that the virtual reality of cyberspace works to decentre conventional humanist notions of an unproblematical "real."

As I suggested above, however, cyberpunk is not the only mode in which SF has demonstrated an anti-humanist sensibility. Although radically different from cyberpunk (which is written for the most part by a small number of white middle-class men) feminist SF has also produced an influential body of anti-humanist texts. These include, for example, Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, Jody Scott's *I, Vampire*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, novels which also participate in the postmodernist revision of conventional SF. Given the exigencies of their own particular political agendas, however, these texts demonstrate a very different approach to the construction/deconstruction of the subject than is evident in the technologically-influenced post-humanism of most cyberpunk fiction.¹⁰

We can also include writers like J.G. Ballard and Samuel R. Delany within the project of anti-

humanist SF, although these writers are separated from cyberpunk not only by chronology but also by cyberpunk's increased emphasis on technology as a constitutive factor in the development of postmodern subjectivity. Darko Suvin also notes some of the differences in political extrapolation between cyberpunk and its precursors: "in between [Philip K.] Dick's nation-state armies or polices and Delany's Foucauldian micro-politics of bohemian groups, Gibson [for example] has—to my mind more realistically—opted for global economic power-wielders as the arbiters of peoples [sic] lifestyles and lives" ("On Gibson and Cyberpunk SF" 43).

It may be useful here to comment on a New Wave text like Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975), since *Dhalgren* too demonstrates a kind of punk sensibility through its central character, "the Kid," and through its emphasis on gritty urban street culture. As such, it stands out as one fairly obvious precursor of cyberpunk, while remaining distinct from it, although its anti-humanist treatment of subjectivity is also obvious. As Teresa L. Ebert explains in her discussion of Delany's depiction of "the Kid,"

The idea of a knowable, stable core of self that enables the coherent continuation of a consistent personality is questioned in a relativistic and indeterminate world, and Kid's chameleon character, with its personality shaped and molded by each situation, aesthetically acts out the ruptures of self in technotopia. (102)

In contrast, however, to the breathless *noir* style of Gibson's novel, Delany's narrative technique is consciously influenced by the experiments of modernism, invoking in its opening phrases—"to wound the autumnal city. So howled out for the world to give him a name. The in-dark answered with wind" (1)—both the language and the circular structure of *Finnegans Wake* (its final sentence breaks off so as to be completed by the opening fragment).

The identification of the New Wave as SF's "modernist moment" is a frequent, although not always convincing, attempt to impose upon this popular genre a literary "evolution" which parallels that of the mainstream novel. Fred Pfeil makes a strong case, however, when he remarks that

the moment of New Wave SF in the 1960s and early 1970s is characterizable as one in which science fiction briefly becomes modernist, just as European bourgeois

literature had done a half century earlier, when it too found itself caught in crisis between an "old" . . . which was dying, and a "new" which could not yet be born. In both cases, the escape route, the strategic displacement of anxiety and desire, lay in the direction of aesthetic self-consciousness and autotelic form. (86)

The "Shaper-Mechanist" conflicts around which the plot of Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1986) is structured are large-scale ethical/ideological conflicts over the various technological means humanity should take to effect its adaptations to a rapidly expanding and heterogeneous universe.¹¹ If we recall the body-tailoring which is so prevalent a concept in John Varley's SF stories, we can see how cyberpunk differs from some apparently similar SF texts which are, in fact, more closely aligned to humanist ideologies. In a story like "Options" (1979), for example, Varley explores sex-change technology and its probable effects on human beings, concluding, in a kind of comforting wish-fulfillment, that an individual's essential self will guarantee identity even in the face of such radical physical change. The central character is able to assure her/his husband: "It's no longer important how I was born. I've been both [female and male]. It's still me, on the inside" (487). *Schismatrix* wastes little time on such assurances; even the Shaper-Mechanist battles are doomed to become outmoded:

Life moves in clades. . . . A clade is a daughter species, a related descendent. It's happened to other successful animals, and now it's humanity's turn. The factions still struggle, but the categories are breaking up. No faction can claim the one true destiny for mankind. Mankind no longer exists. (183)

In this context, Delany's *Triton* (1976) is a particularly interesting text, one which seems to warn that not everyone is ready or able to negotiate the complexities of postmodernity. *Triton* is Delany's version of the postmodern utopia and, as such, is much closer in sensibility to cyberpunk than is *Dhalgren*, in spite of the latter's punk trappings. Its subtitle, "An Ambiguous Heterotopia," may well be a reference to the concept introduced by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*.¹² In the far-future world of *Triton*, sex-change is again an easily available option, an option chosen finally by Delany's protagonist specifically as an escape from an untenable reality, that is, the reality of life in the

postmodern utopia. Delany develops a deeply ironic contrast between the heterotopic environment of Triton and the deep-seated conservatism of his protagonist, Bron Helstrom, who, when s/he becomes a woman at the end of the narrative, undergoes absolutely not one jot of psychic transformation:

Here I am, she thought, as she had done from time to time ever since she'd come from Mars: Here I am, on Triton, and again I am lost in some hopeless tangle of confusion, trouble, and distress—. (329)

In this ironic treatment of the traditional notion of the "essential self," *Triton* can be read as a kind of post-humanist response to the deep-seated humanism of a story like Varley's "Options."

5. Post-humanist SF

Exploring the notion of posthumanism, Ihab Hassan suggests that

We need first to understand that the human form—including human desire and all its external representations—may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism. ("Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?" 212)

Sterling's *Schismatrix* is one version of "posthumanity" presented as picaresque epic. His far-future universe—a rare construction in the cyberpunk "canon"—is one in which countless societies are evolving in countless different directions; the *Schismatrix* is a loose confederation of worlds where the only certainty is the inevitability of change.

Sterling writes that

the new multiple humanities hurtled blindly toward their unknown destinations, and the vertigo of acceleration struck deep. Old preconceptions were in tatters, old loyalties were obsolete. Whole societies were paralyzed by the mind-blasting vistas of absolute possibility. (238)

His protagonist, a picaresque hero for the postmodern age,

mourned mankind, and the blindness of men, who thought that the Kosmos had rules

and limits that would shelter them from their own freedom. There were no shelters.

There were no final purposes. Futility, and freedom, were Absolute. (273)

Schismatrix is a future history different from many SF futures in that what it extrapolates from the present is the all-too-often ignored/denied/repressed idea that human beings will be different in the future and will continue to develop within difference. In this way, *Schismatrix* demonstrates a familiarly post-structuralist sensibility, in its recognition both of the potential anxiety and the potential play inherent in a universe where "futility, and freedom, [are] Absolute."

Sterling's interest in and attraction to the play of human possibility appears as early as his first novel, *Involution Ocean* (1977). In this story (which reads in some ways like a kind of drug-culture post-*Moby-Dick*), the protagonist falls into a wonderful vision of an alien civilization, in a passage which, at least temporarily, emphasizes freedom over futility:

There was an incredible throng, members of a race that took a pure hedonistic joy in the possibilities of surgical alteration. They switched bodies, sexes, ages, and races as easily as breathing, and their happy disdain for uniformity was dazzling. . . . It seemed so natural, rainbow people in the rainbow streets; humans seemed drab and antlike in comparison. (154)

This is a far cry from the humanist anxieties which have pervaded SF since the nineteenth century. Consider, for example, the anxiety around which H.G. Wells created *The Time Machine* (1895): it is "de-humanization," humanity's loss of its position at the centre of creation, which produces the tragedy of the terminal beach, and it is, to a great extent, the absence of the human which results in the "abominable desolation" (91) described by Wells's Time Traveller. Or consider what we might term the "super-humanism" of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), in which, finally, a kind of transcendental mysticism overshadows, if it does not overwhelm, visions of a future based on changing technologies, social conditions and social relations. Greg Bear's more recent *Blood Music* (1985) might be read, from this perspective, as a contemporary version of the same transcendental approach to human transformation, one based on an apocalyptic logic which displaces the possibilities for change in the

human condition *within history*. *Blood Music* is especially interesting in this context, because its action is framed by a rhetoric of science which would seem to repudiate any recourse to metaphysics. I tend to agree, however, with Suvin's argument that it functions as "a naïve fairytale relying on popular wishdreams that our loved ones not be dead and that our past mistakes may all be rectified . . ." ("On Gibson and Cyberpunk SF" 41).¹³

6. Postmodern Anxiety and the Deconstructed Self

In his Preface to *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, Sterling writes that

Certain central themes spring up repeatedly in cyberpunk. The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry—techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self. (xiii)

The potential in cyberpunk for undermining concepts like "subjectivity" and "identity" derives in part from its production within what has been termed "the technological imagination"; that is, cyberpunk is hard SF which recognizes the paradigm-shattering role of technology in post-industrial society. We have to keep in mind here, of course, that the Movement has become (in)famous for the adversarial rhetoric of its ongoing and prolific self-commentary which, in turn, functions as an integral part of its overall production as a "movement."¹⁴ We should be careful, for this reason, not to confuse claims with results. The anti-humanist discourse of cyberpunk's frequent manifestos, however, strongly supports de Lauretis's contention that "technology is our historical context, political and personal" ("Signs of W[a/o]nder" 167).

Thus, for example, the characters in Michael Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers* (1987) are subjected to constant alterations in personality as the result of programming for different skills or social roles—metaphysical systems grounded on faith in an "inner self" begin to waver. Human bodies in Gibson's stories, and even more so in Sterling's, are subjected to shaping and re-shaping, the human form destined perhaps to become simply one available choice among many—notions of a human nature determined by a "physical essence" of the human begin to lose credibility (for this reason, many

behavioral patterns defined by sexual difference become irrelevant in these futures). And Rudy Rucker can offer the following as a chapter title in *Wetware*: "Four: In Which Manchile, the First Robot-Built Human, Is Planted in the Womb of Della Taze by Ken Doll, Part of Whose Right Brain Is a Robot Rat."¹⁵

We must also recognize, however, that the subject of the subject at the present time has given rise to as much anxiety as it has celebration (anxiety from which the postmodernist theorist is by no means exempt). The break-up of the humanist "self" in a media-saturated post-industrial present has produced darker readings which cyberpunk also recognizes. Fredric Jameson, whose stance *vis-à-vis* the postmodern is at once appreciative and sceptical, has suggested that fragmentation of subjectivity may be the postmodern equivalent of the modernist predicament of individual alienation ("Cultural Logic" 63). Pat Cadigan's "Pretty Boy Crossover" (1985), for example, raises questions about the effects of simulated reality upon our human sense of self as complete and inviolable. In her fictional world, physical reality is "less efficient" than computerized simulation and video stars are literally video programs, having been "distilled . . . to pure information" (89, 88) and downloaded into computer matrices. Cadigan's eponymous Pretty Boy is tempted by the offer of literally eternal life within the matrix; and although he finally chooses "real" life, that reality seems to pale against the guaranteed "presence" of its simulation. Bobby, who has opted for existence as simulation, explains the "economy of the gaze" which guarantees the authenticity of the self in this world: "If you love me, you watch me. If you don't look, you don't care and if you don't care I don't matter. If I don't matter, I don't exist. Right?" (91). In a phrase which is repeated several times in Cadigan's recent novel *Synners* (1991), "Pretty Boy Crossover" offers a kind of formula for the age of the electronic spectacle: "First you see video. Then you wear video. Then you eat video. Then you *be* video" (82).

In K. W. Jeter's *The Glass Hammer*, being is *defined* by its own simulation. *The Glass Hammer* is one of the most self-conscious deconstructions of unified subjectivity produced in recent SF, and one which dramatizes (in the neurotic tonalities familiar to readers of J.G. Ballard) the anxiety and schizophrenia of the (technologically-produced) postmodern situation.¹⁶ In *The Glass Hammer* the

break-up of the "self" is narrated in a text as fragmented as its subject (subject both as protagonist and as story). Jeter's novel is a chilling demonstration of the power of simulated representation to construct "the real" (so that it functions like a cyberpunk simulacrum of the theories of Jean Baudrillard). It "narrates" episodes in the life of Ross Schuyler, who watches the creation of this life as a video event in five segments. There is no way to test the accuracy of the creation, since the self produced by memory is as unreliable a re-presentation as is a media "bio." As Schuyler realizes: "Just because I was there—that doesn't mean anything" (59).

The opening sequence of *The Glass Hammer* dramatizes the schizophrenia within the subjectivity of the protagonist:

Video within video. He watched the monitor screen, seeing himself there, watching.

In the same space . . . that he sat in now. . . .

He watched the screen, waiting for the images to form. Everything would be in the tapes, if he watched long enough. (7)

Like Schuyler himself, the reader waits for the images to form as s/he reads the text. Episodes range over time, some in the past(s), some in the present, some real, some simulated, many scripted rather than "novelized," until the act of reading/watching achieves a kind of temporary coherence. It is this same kind of temporary coherence which formulates itself in Ross Schuyler's consciousness, always threatening to dissolve again from "something recognizably narrative" into "the jumbled, half-forgotten clutter of his life" (87).

What takes place in *The Glass Hammer* may also be read as a deconstruction of the opposition between depth and surface, a dichotomy which is frequently framed as the familiar conflict between reality and appearance. Jeter reverses this opposition, dramatizing the haphazard construction of his character's "inner self" as a response to people and events, both real and simulated, over time. The displacement of an "originary" self from the text places the emphasis on the marginal, the contingent, the representations (in this case electronically produced) which actually create the sense of "self." Jeter's technique in *The Glass Hammer* is particularly effective: the reader watches the character, and watches

the character watching himself watching, as his past unfolds, not as a series of memories whose logical continuity guarantees the stability of the ego, but as an entertainment series the logical continuity of which is the artificial re-arrangement of randomness to *simulate* coherence.

7. All Surface and No Apocalypse

It is significant in this context that the "average" cyberpunk landscape tends to be choked with the debris of both language and objects; as a sign-system, it displays a kind of semiotic sedimentation, overdetermined by a proliferation of surface details which emphasize "outside" over "inside." Such attention to detail—recall Gibson's nearly compulsive use of brand names, for example, or the claustrophobic clutter of his streets—replaces the more conventional (realist) narrative exercise we might call "getting to the bottom of things"; indeed, the shift in emphasis is from a symbolic to a surface reality. Here, for example, is an early passage from *Neuromancer*:

Neo-Aztec bookcases gathered dust against one wall of the room where Case waited. A pair of bulbous Disney-styled table lamps perched awkwardly on a low Kandinsky-look coffee table in scarlet-lacquered steel. A Dali clock hung on the wall between the bookcases, its distorted face sagging to the bare concrete floor. (12)

In a discussion of *Neuromancer*, Gregory Benford observes that "Gibson, like Ballard, concentrates on surfaces as a way of getting at the aesthetic of an age" (19). This observation is a telling one even as it misses the point. Benford concludes that Gibson's attention to surface detail

goes a long way toward telling us why his work has proved popular in England, where the tide for several decades now has been to relish fiction about surfaces and manners, rather than the more traditional concerns of hard SF: ideas, long perspectives, and content. (19)

This reliance on tradition is perhaps what prevents Benford, whose own "hard SF" novels and stories are very much a part of SF's humanist tradition, from appreciating the approach of writers like Gibson and Jeter. The point may be that, in works like *Neuromancer* and *The Glass Hammer*, surface is content, an equation which encapsulates their critique—or at least their awareness—of our

contemporary "era of hyperreality" (Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication" 128).¹⁷ In this context, the much-quoted opening sentence of *Neuromancer*, with its image of the blank surface of a television screen, evokes the anxiety of this new era. Baudrillard writes: "With the television image—the television being the ultimate and perfect object for this new era—our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen" ("The Ecstasy of Communication" 127).

Like much anti-humanist SF, cyberpunk also displays a certain coolness, an ironically detached approach to its subject matter which, at least in theory, precludes nostalgia or sentimentality. This detachment tends to discourage recourse to the logic of orthodox apocalypse, which, whether positive (like Clarke's) or negative (like Wells's), is no longer a favoured narrative move. Indeed, in his introduction to Gibson's short-story collection, *Burning Chrome*, Sterling writes that one "distinguishing mark of the emergent new school of Eighties SF [is] its boredom with the Apocalypse" (xi).¹⁸

As I have already suggested, one reason for this tendency to abandon, or at least to modify, what has been a traditional SF topos may be the conviction, conscious or not, that a kind of philosophical apocalypse has already occurred, precipitating us into the dis-ease of postmodernism. Another reason may be the increased commitment of anti-humanist SF to the exploration of changes that will occur—to the self, to society and to social relations—in time; that is, they are more engaged with historical processes than attracted by the jump-cuts of conventional apocalyptic scenarios which evade such investment in historical change. Cyberpunk, in particular, has demonstrated a keen interest in the near future, an aspect of its approach to history which discourages resolution-through-apocalypse.¹⁹ It thus also demonstrates the potential for conventional SF extrapolation within the postmodern context.

8. Re-visioning the Gernsback Continuum

The recognition that, in fact, SF futures are all too often simply representations of contemporary cultural mythologies disguised under heavy layers of futuristic make-up provides part of the "meaning" of one of the stories in Gibson's *Burning Chrome* collection. "The Gernsback Continuum" humorously ironizes an early twentieth-century futurism which could conceive of no real change in the human condition, a futurism which envisioned changes in "stuff" rather than changes in social relations (historical

distance increases the ability to critique such futures, of course). In Gibson's story, the benighted protagonist is subjected to visitations by the "semiotic ghosts" of a future which never took place, the future, to borrow a phrase from Jameson, "of one moment of what is now our own past" ("Progress Versus Utopia" 244). At the height of these "hallucinations," he "sees" two figures poised outside a vast city reminiscent of the sets for films like *Metropolis* and *Things to Come*:

[the man] had his arm around [the woman's] waist and was gesturing toward the city. They were both in white. . . . He was saying something wise and strong, and she was nodding. . . .

. . . [T]hey were the Heirs to the Dream. They were white, blond, and they probably had blue eyes. They were American. . . . They were smug, happy, and utterly content with themselves and their world. And in the Dream, it was *their* world. . . .

It had all the sinister fruitiness of Hitler Youth propaganda. (32-33)

Gibson's protagonist discovers that "only really bad media can exorcise [his] semiotic ghosts" (33), and he recovers with the help of pop culture productions like *Nazi Love Motel*. "The Gernsback Continuum" concludes with the protagonist's realization that his dystopian present could be worse, "it could be perfect" (35).

Gibson's story is not simply an ironization of naive utopianism; it also, I think, warns against the limitations, both humorous and dangerous, inherent in any vision of the future that bases itself upon narrowly defined ideological systems which take it upon themselves to speak "universally," or which conceive of themselves as "natural" or "absolute." David Brin's idealistic *The Postman* (1985), for example, is a post-apocalyptic fiction which closes on a metaphorical note "of innocence, unflaggingly optimistic" (321), nostalgically containing itself within the framework of a conventional humanism. Not surprisingly, its penultimate chapter concludes with a re-affirmation of the "natural" roles of men and women:

And always remember, the moral concluded: Even the best men—the heroes—will sometimes neglect to do their jobs.

Women, you must remind them, from time to time. . . . (312).

Compare this to Gibson's description of the Magnetic Dog Sisters, peripheral characters in his first published story, "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981), also collected in *Burning Chrome*:

They were two meters tall and thin as greyhounds. One was black and the other white, but aside from that they were as nearly identical as cosmetic surgery could make them. They'd been lovers for years and were bad news in a tussle. I was never quite sure which one had originally been male. (2)

Another story in *Burning Chrome*, "Fragments of a Hologram Rose," uses metaphors of the new technology to express the indeterminate and fragmented nature of the self:

A hologram has this quality: Recovered and illuminated, each fragment will reveal the whole image of the rose. Falling toward delta, he sees himself the rose, each of his scattered fragments revealing a whole he'll never know But each fragment reveals the rose from a different angle (42)

Gibson's rhetoric of technology finally circumscribes all of reality. In his second novel, *Count Zero* (1986), there is an oblique but pointed rebuttal of humanist essentialization, a rebuttal which implicitly recognizes the artificiality of the Real. Having described cyberspace, the weirdly real "space" that human minds occupy during computer interfacing, as "mankind's unthinkably complex consensual hallucination" (44), he goes on to write the following:

"Okay," Bobby said, getting the hang of it, "then what's the matrix? . . . [W]hat's cyberspace?"

"The world," Lucas said. (131)

It is only by recognizing the consensual nature of socio-cultural reality, which includes within itself our definitions of human nature, that we can begin to perceive the possibility of change. In this sense, as Istvan Csicsery-Ronay suggests (although from a very different perspective), cyberpunk is "a paradoxical form of realism" ("Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism" 192).

9. Cyberpunk—an Incomplete Project²⁰

Cyberpunk seemed to erupt in the mid-1980s, self-sufficient and full-grown, like Athena from the forehead of Zeus. From some perspectives, it could be argued that this self-proclaimed Movement was nothing more than the discursive construction of the collective imaginations of SF writers and critics eager for something—anything—new in what appeared to be a very conservative and quite predictable field. Now that the rhetorical dust has settled, however, we can see cyberpunk as itself the product of a multiplicity of influences from both within and outside genre SF. Its writers readily acknowledge the powerful influence of 1960s and 1970s New Wave writers like Samuel R. Delany, John Brunner, Norman Spinrad, J.G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock, as well as the influence of "mainstream" postmodernists like William Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon. The manic fragmentations of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and the maximalist apocalypticism of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* would seem to have been especially important for the development of the cyberpunk "sensibility."²¹ In a move which neatly appropriates a "high" culture icon for the Movement, Richard Kadrey has even pronounced *Gravity's Rainbow* to be cyberpunk *avant la lettre*, "the best cyberpunk novel ever written by a guy who didn't even know he was writing it" ("Cyberpunk 101 Reading List" 83).²² On the other hand, Delany has made a strong case for feminist SF as cyberpunk's "absent mother," noting that

the feminist explosion—which obviously infiltrates the cyberpunk writers so much—is the one they seem to be the least comfortable with, even though it's one that, much more than the New Wave, has influenced them most strongly, both in progressive and in reactionary ways (quoted in Tatsumi 9)

Due in part to the prolific commentaries and manifestos in which writers like Sterling and Shirley outlined/analyzed/defended their project(s)—usually at the expense of more traditional SF—cyberpunk did at least help to generate a great deal of very useful controversy about the role of SF in the 1980s. At best, however, the critique of humanism in these works remains incomplete, due at least in part to the pressures of mass-market publishing as well as to the limitations of genre conventions which, more or less faithfully followed, seem (inevitably?) to lure writers back into the romantic power-

fantasies which are so common to SF. A novel like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, produced as it was outside the genre market, goes further in its deconstruction of individual subjectivity than do any of the works I have discussed here, except perhaps *The Glass Hammer*.²³

Gibson's third novel, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, although set in the same universe as *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, foregrounds character in a way which necessarily mutes the intensity and multiplicity of surface detail which is so marked a characteristic of his earlier work. Sterling's *Islands in the Net* (1988) is a kind of international thriller which might be read as the depiction of life *after* the postmodern condition has been "cured." In a future after the "Abolition" (of nuclear warfare), its protagonist, Laura Webster, dedicates herself to the control of a political crisis situation which threatens to return the world to a global state of fragmentation and disruptive violence that only too clearly recalls our own present bad old days. Sterling's "Net" is the vast information system which underlies and makes possible the unity of this future world and his emphasis is clearly on the necessity for such global unity. Although, in the final analysis, no one is completely innocent—Sterling is too complex a writer to structure his forces on opposite sides of a simple ethical divide—the movement in *Islands in the Net* is away from the margins toward the centre and the Net, the "global nervous system" (15), remains intact.²⁴

As its own creators seem to have realized, cyberpunk—like the punk ethic with which it was identified—was a response to postmodern reality which could go only so far before self-destructing under the weight of its own deconstructive activities, not to mention its appropriation by more conventional and more commercial writers. That final implosion is perhaps what Jeter accomplished in *The Glass Hammer*, leaving us with the image of a mesmerized Schuyler futilely searching for a self in the video-screens of the dystopian future. It is clearly this aspect of cyberpunk which leads Csicsery-Ronay to conclude that

by the time we get to cyberpunk, reality has become a case of nerves The distance required for reflection is squeezed out as the world implodes: when hallucinations and reality collapse into each other, there is no place from which to reflect. ("Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism" 190)

For him, "cyberpunk is . . . the apotheosis of bad faith, apotheosis of the postmodern" (193).

Here cyberpunk is theorized as a symptom of the malaise of postmodernism; but like Baudrillard's apocalyptic discourse on the "condition" itself, Csicsery-Ronay's analysis tends to underplay the positive potential for re-representation and re-visioning, which, if not achieved, are at least suggested in works like *Neuromancer* and *Schismatrix*. Bukatman, for example, argues that the function of cyberpunk "neuromanticism" is one appropriate to SF in the postmodern era: the *reinsertion* of the human into the new reality which its own technology is in the process of shaping. According to Bukatman,

to dramatize the terminal realm means to somehow insert the figure of the human into that space to experience it *for us*. . . . Much recent science fiction stages and restages a confrontation between figure and ground, finally constructing a new human form to interface with the other space and cybernetic reality. ("The Cybernetic (City) State" 47-48)

In the following chapter, I will discuss some of the interactions between cyberpunk and feminism, as well as some of the new human forms constructed by feminist SF writers.

Endnotes

¹ Roger Luckhurst develops a cogent critique of works like *Postmodernist Fiction* which, at the same time as they purport to demonstrate the breaking down of boundaries between "high" and "low" art forms in the context of postmodernism, in fact (and seemingly in spite of themselves) help to maintain exactly those boundaries (see his "Border Policing: Postmodernism and Science Fiction").

² McHale also warns, correctly I think, that

just because certain high culture texts happen to mingle high culture and popular culture elements, there is no reason to conclude that the boundaries between high and popular culture have been effaced in the culture at large. ("POSTcyberMODERNpunk-ISM" 309)

³ Samuel R. Delany, for example, has long contended that SF is paraliterature rather than literature. See, for example, his discussion of the "history" of the field in "The Semiology of Silence," especially 137-139. According to Luckhurst,

The strategies for legitimating SF as a genre "worth" studying have either been to validate SF in terms of categories perceived to constitute acceptance by the "mainstream," or else to argue a specificity for SF, its peculiar virtues and meaning-effects, and thus establish for it a value independent from the categories of the "mainstream." The first appeals to the values of the "outside," whilst the latter purports to uncover immanent value "inside." (358)

It seems clear that Delany is involved in the latter project, while a study like Ketterer's *New Worlds for Old* undertakes, to some extent, the former project. No doubt there are aspects of this present study which are implicated in both these projects, especially the former, although I have attempted to steer a course away from either position.

⁴ Brooks Landon writes of

the moebius-like relationship between cyberpunk writing's fascination with the themes and icons of electronic culture, at the same time as film, video, and TV are so obviously drawing from and/or paralleling the themes and icons of cyberpunk writing. *Max Headroom* provides the most obvious example of this interface, but it continues through *Robocop* (1987), [William] Gibson's writing the script for *Aliens III*, [John] Shirley's script for *Black Glass*, through a hefty percentage of music videos on commercial TV, and finally through experimental video, such as the Residents' *This Is a Man's World* and *Earth vs. The Flying Saucers*. ("Bet On It: Cyber/video/punk performance" 243)

Istvan Csicsery-Ponkó discusses cyberpunk as "a legitimate international artistic style, with profound philosophical and aesthetic premises," a style also represented by philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard. "[I]t even has, in Michael Jackson and Ronald Reagan, its hyperreal icons of the human simulacrum infiltrating reality" ("Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism" 269).

⁵ Michael Swanwick offers one version of the provenance of the term "cyberpunk" in a postscript to his 1986 "A User's Guide to the Postmoderns," an essay to which I will return later in this discussion. According to Swanwick (50-53), it was Gardner Dozois, in a review of John Shirley's *City Come A-Walking* (1980), who first mentioned the "punk" element in this kind of SF. Samuel R. Delany, however, suggests that the term was first used by Bruce Bethke, whose story, "Cyberpunk," was written in 1980, although it was not published until 1983 (see "On *Triton* and Other Matters" 324, n. 3).

Norman Spinrad, recognizing the importance of Gibson's first novel, suggested the name "Neuromantics" for the group of writers with whom Gibson rapidly became identified (see his "On Books: The Neuromantics"). *The Village Voice* discussed *Neuromancer* as "techno-punk," while the writers involved sometimes referred to themselves as "Mirrorshades Writers." Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner, for example, co-authored a memorable little story, "Mozart in Mirrorshades," which appeared in

Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology (1986), edited by Sterling.

See also the transcript published in *Science Fiction Eye* of the 1986 Science Fiction Research Association panel, "Cyberpunk or Cyberjunk?" The greater part of this first issue of *Science Fiction Eye* was devoted to interviews and discussions related to the cyberpunk movement. Interested readers can also refer to *Mississippi Review* 47/48 (1988), guest edited by Larry McCaffery, which contains both a "forum/symposium" on cyberpunk, a collection of fairly representative short stories, and several good essays on the subject. McCaffery later expanded this special issue into *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*.

⁶ In response to Swanwick's essay, John Kessel published "A Humanist Manifesto" in *Science Fiction Eye* which takes William Gibson's *Neuromancer* to task. He claims that *Neuromancer* "is basically a 'caper-novel,' exactly like an old *Mission: Impossible* script crossed with a hardboiled detective novel" (54). And so it is, of course—to a certain extent; the re-visioning and re-cycling of already established conventions within new contexts, that is, pastiche as technique, is very much an aspect of postmodern aesthetic production.

And pastiche is related to *détournement*, an adversarial technique championed, for example, by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*. See also Neil Nehring's discussion of *détournement* in "Revolt into Style: Graham Greene Meets the Sex Pistols." Nehring traces the concept of *détournement* back to Lautréamont's *Poesies* (1870), describing it as "the idea of systematic, contumacious plagiarism" (225). For a discussion of *détournement* as it appears in *Neuromancer*, see Glenn Grant's "Transcendence Through Detournement in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*." Grant describes *détournement* as "a method of jumping out of the system: to turn a product of that system against itself" (43). It is entirely appropriate, of course, that *Neuromancer* itself becomes material for *détournement* in Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*.

⁷ In Bukatman's terms,

The fusion with machines represents something other than a postmodern celebration of dissolving borders and boundaries, because they are often as much attempts to reseat the human (male) in a position of virile power and control. (*Terminal Identity* 308)

⁸ As a character observes at the beginning of Gibson's most recent novel, *Virtual Light*, "business as usual, world without end" (2).

⁹ According to Jaron Lanier, founder and CEO of VPL Research, "In virtual reality, the entire universe is your body and physics is your language. . . . We're creating an entire new reality" (quoted in Ditlea 97-98). And Howard Rheingold, in his lengthy study, *Virtual Reality*, points out that although it sounds like science fiction, and the word "cyberspace" in fact originated in a science-fiction novel, virtual reality is already a science, a technology, and a business, supported by significant funding from the computer, communications, design, and entertainment industries worldwide. (17)

The contemporary "science-fictionalization" of reality is particularly interesting in the context of cyberpunk; Sterling notes, for example, that

The number of references to cyberpunk as a literary phenomenon are now outnumbered by its use as a synonym for computer criminal. . . . If you go out, two years from now, and look in a university card-catalogue under "cyberpunk," you're going to see books about computer crime. (Fischlin et al. 5)

¹⁰ I will discuss *I, Vampire* and *The Handmaid's Tale* in more detail in my chapters on metaphorical SF.

¹¹ Sterling has also published several short stories whose plots unfold against the conflict between "Shapers" and "Mechanists"; these have been collected in *Crystal Express* (1986).

¹² According to the distinction outlined by Foucault,

Utopias afford consolation *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that . . . because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to "hold together." (*The Order of Things* xviii)

For a useful discussion of *Triton's* development of the concept of heterotopia within the tradition of utopian literature, see Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible* (15~195).

¹³ To be fair, it is worth noting that Bukatman's reading of *Blood Music* is a more recuperative one, emphasizing as he does Bear's knowledgeable treatment of the biological sciences and the novel's presentation of "the passage beyond the flesh—beyond the human—as a significant and legitimate evolutionary step" (*Terminal Identity* 270).

¹⁴ Dick Hebdige's commentary on punk in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) is of particular interest in the context of this discussion of cyberpunk. Hebdige, for example, draws a significant parallel between punk and SF which perhaps suggests a certain inevitability about the infiltration of the SF field by the punk "ethos":

the punks dislocated themselves from the parent culture and were positioned instead on the outside: beyond the comprehension of the average (wo)man in the street in a science fiction future. They played up their Otherness, "happening" on the world as aliens, inscrutables. (120-121)

Hebdige also warns about taking "the subculture's own prodigious rhetoric" at face value: "it may say what it means but it does not necessarily 'mean' what it 'says.' In other words, it is opaque: its categories are part of its publicity" (115-116).

¹⁵ These technologically-defined alterations in the human form are clearly related to the long-standing theme of shape-changing in both fantasy and SF.

¹⁶ Jeter's early writing was strongly championed by Philip K. Dick, himself the creator of many memorably paranoid fictions about breakdowns in the subject and in objective reality (see, for example, *The Man in the High Castle*, *Martian Time-Slip*, and *Ubik*). Jeter's first SF novel, *Dr. Adder*, languished for over ten years before finding an American publisher; it appeared finally in 1984, with a brief Afterword supplied by Dick. Both *Dr. Adder* and *The Glass Hammer* (part of a loose trilogy completed by *Death Arms*) contain characters closely based on Dick: KCID in *Dr. Adder* and Bischofsky in *The Glass Hammer*. For a rare overview of Jeter's work, see James Cappio's "A Long Guide to K.W. Jeter."

¹⁷ Fred Pfeil also identifies the foregrounding of surface detail as a significant feature of much contemporary SF, which he interprets as essential to its deconstructive character: "it also tries on the new post-industrial, cybernetic sensorium in which all the old certainties about self/other, inside/outside, body/world are increasingly decentered and dissolved." Pfeil goes on to note that, in novels like *Neuromancer* and *Schismatrix*, "the rushing forward movement of the relentless, pulpy plot, swift as it is, is nonetheless constantly impeded to the edge of dissolution by what we might call our 'lateral' fascination with the novels' ceaselessly shifting and absorbing decor . . ." (87).

¹⁸ This, as mentioned in Chapter 1, is supported by Douglas Robinson, in his study *American Apocalypses*, when he concludes that "antiapocalypse—not apocalypse, as many critics have claimed—is the dominant topos of American postmodernism" (xvi). In a discussion of Derrida's discourse on apocalypse, Robinson argues that "the apocalyptic imagination fascinates Derrida precisely as the 'purest' form, the most mythical expression or the most extreme statement of the metaphysics of presence" (251; n. 1). I will return to the question of apocalypticism in my chapter on postmodern theatre; there, I will also explore some of the implications of Derrida's alignment of the apocalyptic imagination with the metaphysics of presence.

¹⁹ It is significant, for example, that while *Neuromancer* concludes with a reference to intelligent transmissions from Alpha Centauri, which in another context might appear to be the unequivocal

preliminary to a paradigm shift of apocalyptic proportions, Gibson's protagonist reacts hardly at all to the news: "'Oh,' Case said. 'Yeah? No shit?'" (270).

²⁰ I owe this heading to the title of Jürgen Habermas's essay, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project."

²¹ McHale notes some very specific "borrowings" from *Gravity's Rainbow* in texts like Williams' *Hardwired*, for example ("POSTcyberMODERNpunkISM" 315-316).

²² In a 1976 essay on "Science Fiction and Allied Literature," David Ketterer already noted the tendency of some SF critics and theorists to appropriate such high-culture icons as *Gravity's Rainbow* into the genre (64). Ketterer's essay is a study of what he refers to as genres "related" to SF. I would suggest that the genre boundaries of SF are not as clearly delineated now as they were two decades ago, although Ketterer's point is well taken.

²³ It is worth noting here that hard SF, in particular, has never been noted for the complexity of its delineation of character. As part of the hard SF tradition which can be situated within the postmodern context, cyberpunk seems occasionally to have turned this tendency to downplay character into a deconstruction of the very notion of character as traditionally defined. In this sense, cyberpunk seems less to be moving into a new area of textuality than simply to be pushing a long-standing feature of hard SF to its (postmodern) extreme (this point is raised by Brooke-Rose [102], and reiterated by McHale [*Constructing Postmodernism* 254-255]).

²⁴ In her discussion of chaos theory and its intersections with literature, N Katherine Hayles makes a comment about Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* which points to a significant difference between Pynchon's early-1970s paranoia about the potential of a global information network and Sterling's depiction of such a network in the late 1980s as the key to global community. She notes that

chaotic fluctuations . . . offer the liberating possibility that one may escape the informational net by slipping along its interstices. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example,

chaos reigns supreme in the 'Zone,' the free-floating, anarchical space that was Western Europe for a brief time at the end of World War II. (*Chaos Bound* 6)

Unlike Sterling's Laura Webster, whose freedom and integrity are actually safeguarded within the "Net," Pynchon's Tyrone Slothrop must escape into the Zone in order to avoid the networks of control represented by characters like the Pavlovian Edward Pointsman.

CHAPTER 2B
HOPEFUL MONSTERS: FEMINIST SF AND CYBERPUNK

Why aren't there any women in cyberspace? (Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity* 314)

Jane Flax identifies what seems to be an inherently anti-humanist tendency in contemporary feminism when she suggests that

feminists, like other postmodernists, have begun to suspect that all such transcendental claims [those which valorize universal notions of reason, knowledge, and the self] reflect and reify the experience of a few persons—mostly white, Western males. These transhistoric claims seem plausible to us in part because they reflect important aspects of the experience of those who dominate our social world. (626)

Flax's comments are well taken, although her conflation of all feminisms with postmodernism tends to oversimplify the very complex and problematical interactions of the two. In fact, much feminist SF tends to support rather than undermine the tenets of liberal humanism, although "changing the subject" of that humanism (to borrow the title of a study by Nancy K. Miller). This is due, at least in part, to the fact that, as Sarah Lefanu points out, "the radical, or transgressive aspects of the structuralist subversion of the subject do not allow for an analysis that shows 'woman' never to have been the subject in the first place" (98).

Patricia Waugh also examines some of the extremely important differences between the projects of feminism and the theories of postmodernism. Discussing the rise of the postmodernist "sensibility" in the 1960s, for example, she notes that

At the moment when postmodernism is forging its identity through articulating the exhaustion of the existential belief in self-presence and self-fulfilment and through the dispersal of the universal subject of liberalism[,] *feminism* (ostensibly, at any rate) is assembling its cultural identity in what appears to be the opposite direction. . . . As male writers lament its demise, women writers have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity,

a history and agency in the world. (6)

The first full-length study to take into account feminist speculative fiction within the context of postmodernity, Marleen S. Barr's *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction* (1992), displays, like Flax's essay, a too-easy conflation of feminism and postmodernism, which weakens considerably the force of Barr's important arguments for the inclusion of texts by feminist writers into the postmodernist canon.¹ Jenny Wolmark takes a more useful position in her recent study, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism*, when she suggests that "the intersection between [feminism and postmodernism] can . . . best be characterised as a 'shared theoretical moment' in which more open-ended and provisional accounts of the subject and of social relations generally have emerged" (20).²

In her discussion of the dearth of postmodernist feminist writing in "Feminist Fiction and the Postmodern Challenge,"³ Bonnie Zimmerman makes the point that "the genre most popular with feminist writers, as with many postmodern male writers, is speculative fiction" (180). Certainly, the creation of "new human forms" (to recall Bukatman's words) has long been a concern of feminist SF writers, all of them the progeny, in one way or another, of the Creature who disrupts the human world of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).⁴ The last thirty years have seen the introduction of numerous such creations into women's SF, although earlier examples—such as Deirdre, the woman/robot of C.L. Moore's classic early story, "No Woman Born" (1944)—are also part of this "tradition." Examples include the androgynes of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969); the "female man" of Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975); the "constructs" of Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy (1987-89), genetic hybrids produced through the inter-breeding of humans and aliens; the alien/vampire of Tanith Lee's *Sabella, or The Bloodstone* (1980); the women/clones of James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" (1976), Gwyneth Jones' *Divine Endurance* (1984) and Fay Weldon's *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989); and the psions of Joan D. Vinge's *Psion* (1982) and *Catspaw* (1988).

In every case, these "monsters" represent the breakdown of conventional ways of being-in-the-world; they raise questions about what it means to be both female and human; and they suggest definitions which, in the terms of Teresa de Lauretis's discussion of the potential of SF for feminist

writers, "were previously invisible, untold, unspoken (and so unthinkable, unimaginable, 'impossible')"
("Feminist Studies/Critical Studies" 11).

Most of the aliens, clones, cyborgs, and psions imagined by these writers do not, however, move through the near-future landscapes of cyberpunk, but exist in far-future, frequently post-apocalyptic, worlds which are vastly different from our own. This is hardly surprising, given the unlikelihood that there will be any real change in the present dystopian nature of gender relations anytime soon. Lucie Armitt indicates one reason for this (as well as suggesting reasons for the popularity of SF for feminist writers) in her introduction to the appropriately titled *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction*:

Women are not located at the centre of contemporary culture and society, but are almost entirely defined from the . . . negative perspective of "otherness" or "difference." As such, the need to *escape from* a society with regard to which they already hold an ex-centric position is clearly an irrelevant one. More appropriate perhaps is the need to *escape into*—that is, to depict—an alternative reality within which centrality is possible. (9)

Certainly, feminist reactions to cyberpunk indicate that, while its various deconstructive activities might have much to offer the feminist post-structuralist agenda, in fact cyberpunk has not, within this context, offered much of a solution at all to the relative sexual/political conservatism of recent genre SF. In Fred Pfeil's words, "much of the new SF written by men, for all the boundary erosions and breakdowns it dramatizes, remains stuck in a masculinist frame" (88).⁵ While Samuel R. Delany's attempt to reinsert what is virtually an absent feminine into cyberpunk is laudable, the extent to which cyberpunk negates the influence of feminist SF is (to say the least) disturbing.

One rare attempt to recuperate the cyberpunk agenda for feminism is Joan Gordon's "Yin and Yang Duke It Out," which argues that characters like Molly Millions (*Neuromancer*) and Deadpan Allie (Cadigan's *Mindplayers* [1987]) offer an alternative to conventional feminist SF images of women as "passive, gentle, nurturing, peaceful" figures with a marked anti-technological bent (196). Gordon

believes that cyberpunk demonstrates the possibilities inherent in creating "a vision of the world which is both a logical extension of the 1980s and a radical departure from the essentially nostalgic view of feminist science fiction" (199). From this perspective, cyberpunk offers a "hard SF" example which might usefully be integrated within the feminist SF agenda.

Nicola Nixon's recent essay, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?", is probably the most cutting feminist attack mounted against cyberpunk to date. Nixon is sceptical not only about its adversarial rhetoric, but also about its apparently "liberated" treatment of women characters. Deploying a body of writing virtually ignored in Gordon's essay, she argues that feminist SF texts such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as Zoë Fairbairns *Benefits* (1979) and Suzette Haden Elgin's *The Judas Rose* (1986), in fact constitute a far more politicized body of SF than cyberpunk, providing "active critiques of political trends which surfaced in the early 1980s . . ." (230).⁶ Moreover, Nixon demonstrates how the favoured tropes of cyberpunk contain a particularly phallogentric tendency. Most telling is the computer matrix itself, figured "as feminine space" waiting to be penetrated by jacked-in console cowboys (226):

Constituting both what is fascinating and generative about the matrix itself and the means of accessing its secrets, the feminine is effectively the "soft" ware, the fantasy (and world) that exists beyond the "hard" ware of the actual technological achievements realized in the silicon chip. (227)⁷

According to Nixon, in cyberpunk "political potential is . . . lost in the iconography of all that Reagan himself represented" (231). In her final analysis, there is very little difference between the console cowboys of Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the cowboy who occupied the American White House for the greater part of the 1980s.

As if to confirm such critiques of cyberpunk, Lewis Shiner published his "Confessions of an Ex-Cyberpunk" in 1991, concluding his repudiation of the field thus:

I find myself waiting—maybe in vain—for a new literature of idealism and compassion that is contemporary not only on the technological level but also the emotional. It

would show the price that must be paid for our solutions to our problems; it would see the computer neither as enemy nor god but as a tool for human purposes. (A17)

Two recent genre novels, Emma Bull's *Bone Dance* (1991) and Pat Cadigan's *Symmers* (1991), are relevant here. Each explores the ramifications of contemporary technology from a (post-structuralist) feminist perspective which also demonstrates the kind of compassionate (anti)humanism suggested in Shiner's complaint. Thus each indicates some of the ways in which the deconstructive "legacy" of cyberpunk can be incorporated into contemporary feminist SF.

Bull's novel, subtitled "A Fantasy for Technophiles," is set in a post-apocalyptic future whose hardboiled tonalities and textures owe much to the futures delineated by Gibson and Sterling. Here, for example, is the second paragraph of the novel:

The customer sat behind his desk, in a chair so tall and wide it could have hidden two bodyguards. He leaned away from the light, and it from him. Maybe he'd read somewhere that hiding one's face made for psychological advantage in business transactions. He was welcome to think so. He already had the only real advantage: money. All the rest was costume and props. (3)

The protagonist of *Bone Dance* is a small-time trader who makes a living scavenging, repairing, and selling the products of earlier, pre-apocalyptic technologies, and the narrative voice is as toughly *noir* as anything in earlier cyberpunk novels. In contrast to the committed extrapolative "realism" of a novel like *Neuromancer*, however, the events in Bull's novel unfold against a background of Tarot readings, and voodoo is a consensual belief-system which works effectively on events in the material world.⁸ The generic indeterminacy of the novel is paralleled by the sexual indeterminacy of the protagonist, Sparrow, who is perceived by other characters as sometimes female and sometimes male. As one character tells her/him:

When i figured out that you were both or neither [female or male], I started watching for it. You do a chameleon thing—maybe it's not even conscious—that makes you seem female when you're with a woman, and male when you're with a man. Like you

take on the local coloring. In a mixed group you kind of shift around. I was still trying to figure out if you were natural or technological when the Horseman showed up. (143-144)

Sparrow is a genetically-engineered *cheval* created to be "ridden" by the Horsemen, themselves customized products of military technology who are able to insert their minds into the bodies of other individuals who are helpless against their invasions. As such, s/he is a neutral body, one which can appear either female or male, one which is simultaneously "natural" and "technological." In the fictional world of *Bone Dance*, Sparrow is a kind of "monster," a *cheval* who has developed individual consciousness. S/he is a figure who escapes labels, who unsettles expectations, who demands new approaches to the establishment of the identification of the self both from the novel's other characters and from its readers. *Bone Dance*, a novel which interweaves hard SF and fantasy, is an anomaly in its postmodern play with generic conventions, just as Sparrow is an anomaly in Bull's construction of the postmodern gendered subject.⁹

Cadigan's *Synners* is one of the most detailed explorations of computer and virtual-reality technologies written to date, delineating various realities of which the empirical world represents only one possibility. *Synners* reads like an attempt to explore the question posed by one of the central characters: "Un-fucking-real. The real real and the real unreal and the unreal real—just how high up in the stupidsphere are we, and how much higher are we going to go?" (361).

Cadigan's fictional world is inhabited by "denizens of the [computer/information] net. Homo datum" (386), and one of her central concerns is the necessity for human beings to "change for the machines" (a phrase repeated throughout the novel). "Change for the machines" is only one example of the many puns inserted by Cadigan into her stories and novels, demonstrating a play with language which is unusual in conventional SF writing. Puns, of course, take their force from doubleness and indeterminacy, and as such, are a device particularly suited to postmodernist writing. One of the most effective puns in *Synners* is embedded in its title, which suggests both human responsibility for its technology—as Gina tells Gabe: "Every technology has its own original sin. . . . Makes us all original

synners. And we still got to live with what we made" (435)—at the same time as it gestures towards the "synthesized" realities increasingly surrounding human beings in the environments of these technologies.¹⁰

Synners' exploration of new forms of human/machine interactions and interfaces—including artificial intelligences such as the A-I, Art Fish, and individuals whose personalities have been downloaded into information banks—is, in effect, the creation of a fictional space in which the various forms of intelligence produced within the environment of computer technologies can co-exist and interact with human beings to form new kinds of community. It is, finally, co-operation and community which are the values privileged in Cadigan's future world, as demonstrated, for example, on the level of narrative technique by the way in which (as so frequently in Dick's novels) the narrative perspective is shared among a relatively large group of characters, both human and non-human. This is in sharp contrast to the valorization of the loner/cowboy/hacker who figures at the centre of so much "first-generation" cyberpunk fiction.

The postmodern condition has required that we revise SF's original trope of technological anxiety—the image of a fallen humanity controlled by a technology run amok. It has become necessary to deconstruct the conventional human/machine opposition and begin to ask new questions about the ways in which we and our technologies "interface" to produce what has become a *mutual* evolution. It is at this point that various feminist and postmodernist positions come together, in

a new non-totalized vision of politics, and a radical critique and revalencing of the old, essentialist categories of alienation and selfhood, which now appear in mutated form in the new poststructuralist emphases on deconstruction, decentering, *différance*. (Pfeil 88)

It is thus hardly surprising that one of the most brilliant visions of the potential of cybernetic deconstructions is introduced in Donna Haraway's merger of SF and feminist theory, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," which takes the rhetoric of technology towards its political limits: "Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate," writes Haraway; "in our

present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling" (179).¹¹

In the "final" analysis, I would argue that cyberpunk and feminist SF have more in common than might immediately meet the eye, that both Delany and Gordon, while perhaps overly optimistic, are nevertheless correct in their perceptions of at least a *potential* détente between these two modes of SF. The success of this détente is suggested in novels like *Bone Dance* and *Synners*.¹²

It is worth recalling here Sterling's description of the characters populating the cyberpunk landscape—products of the breakdown of borders between the human and the machine—as "hopeful monsters." It is no coincidence, I think, that Haraway's "Manifesto" is also very much concerned with the creation of monsters. Haraway has recently observed of her theoretical writing:

Inhabiting my writing are boundary creatures—simians, cyborgs, and women¹³—all of which have had a destabilizing place in Western evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives. These boundary creatures are, literally, *monsters*, a word that shares more than its root with the verb *to demonstrate*. Monsters signify. . . . The power-differentiated and highly contested modes of being of monsters may be signs of possible worlds—and they are surely signs of worlds for which "we" are responsible.

("The Actors are Cyborg" 21-22)

In fact, we can read "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" as an example of *feminist/cyberpunk theory*, which is itself a kind of monstrous hybrid that combines the seriousness of socialist-feminist theory with what Alan Wilde terms "generative irony," "the attempt inspired by the negotiations of self and world, to create, tentatively and provisionally, anironic [sic] enclaves of value in the face of—but not in place of—a meaningless universe" (148).¹⁴

Endnotes

¹ See my "A New Alliance of Postmodernism and Feminist Speculative Fiction" for a more detailed critique of *Feminist Fabulation*. Jenny Wolmark also warns against too hastily subsuming the feminist project into postmodernism (cf. 16-20), and offers her own specific arguments against Barr's erasure of feminist SF as a separate category of women's speculative fiction (25).

² Wolmark has borrowed the phrase, "shared theoretical moment," from Laura Kipnis's essay, "Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism?" (150).

³ Referring to Harold Bloom's theory of "the anxiety of influence," Zimmerman dramatizes the position of women writers: "In the Bloomian battle between representational fathers and experimental sons, the daughters cried out, 'What do you mean, realism is dead? Whose reality? Not mine—I haven't had a chance yet to define it!'" (176).

⁴ It is worth noting that Shelley's Creature is initially described (thanks to Percy Shelley's revisions) in apparently "feminine" terms: according to Victor Frankenstein, "His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. . . . [H]is hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness . . ." (42). I will discuss *Frankenstein* in more detail in chapter 3B.

⁵ Bukatman suggests that, "in feminist science fiction, this desire to merge with the machine is viewed as aberrant, and is often presented as an act of surrender rather than empowerment" (316). He offers a detailed reading of James Tiptree, Jr.'s "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" (1973) as a story occasionally identified as "proto-cyberpunk," which, nevertheless, differs markedly from cyberpunk in its treatment of the human/machine interface (*Terminal Identity* 314-320). C. L. Moore's "No Woman Born" is an earlier, and equally disturbing, exploration of the breakdown of human/machine boundaries, whose final image is of "the distant taint of metal" in the voice of the protagonist who is both woman and robot (288).

⁶ It is this body of writing which Gordon ignores in her characterization of feminist SF as "organic" and "anti-technological."

⁷ It is useful here to recall the way in which Gibson's protagonist yearns to exchange the world of the material body (the "meat") for the bodiless world of cyberspace. The rather obvious mind/body split thus (re)introduced into the apparently deconstructive world of Gibson's novel seems to be in keeping with a similar turn away from the physical body in postmodernist discourse, described by N. Katherine Hayles as "the postmodern orthodoxy that the body is primarily, if not entirely, a linguistic and discursive construction" ("The Materiality of Informatics" 147).

For feminism, a project centrally concerned with the material experiences of physical "embodiment" (to use a term deployed by Hayles), the body is one of the ineluctable grounds of both political theory and practice. In contemporary SF, the desire to transcend the physical is, more often than not, a male-inscribed desire.

⁸ Voodoo is also a presence in Gibson's novels, especially in *Count Zero*, but Bull's treatment is significantly different. Whereas in *Count Zero* voodoo functions as a kind of metaphorical system through which characters explain to themselves the workings of the computer intelligences which have come to inhabit cyberspace, in *Bone Dance* voodoo remains a literally spiritual (or at least otherworldly) system which functions on its own terms.

⁹ Bull's Sparrow recalls Ursula Le Guin's Gethenian androgynes, of course, but, here again, the difference is a significant one: Gethenian individuals can be both female and male, but, at any given time, they are *either* female *or* male. Sparrow's gender identity is *both* female *and* male, depending more upon the preconceptions of observers than upon any actual physical state. Not for nothing does Derrida, in "The Law of Genre," ironically identify gender as "a biological genre" (56); in both instances, as he ironically reminds us, the result of "cross[ing] a line of demarcation" is "monstrosity" (57).

¹⁰ Cadigan exerts the same playfulness in her demonstration of the potential lack of differentiation between virtual and empirical realities. Chapter 4 describes Gabe's "virtual" adventure with the computer constructs, Marly and Caritha, in such a way that it takes the reader several pages before she realizes that Gabe's experiences are not (materially) real (34-40).

¹¹ Constance Penley describes

the role of the Cyborg Manifesto [as] the "reinvention of nature." One of the most striking effects of the Cyborg Manifesto was to announce the bankruptcy of an idea of nature as resistant to the patriarchal capitalism that had governed the Euro-American radical feminist counterculture from the early 70s to the mid-80s. ("Cyborgs at Large" 6)

In her examination of the interactions between cyberpunk and feminist SF, Wolmark points out that feminist writers have tended

to utilise the metaphor of the cyborg rather than that of cyberspace to examine the relationships of power that are concealed within and disguised by cybernetic systems. (127)

I will discuss "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" in more detail in my chapter on Specular SF.

¹² One recent non-genre novel is also worth noting here. Marge Piercy's latest utopian novel, *He, She and It* (1991) is directly influenced by both William Gibson and Donna Haraway, as Piercy herself explains in her Acknowledgements (431-432). At the centre of the narrative is the figure of the cyborg Yod. "Programmed" to display both feminine and masculine character traits, Yod both is and is not human. *He, She and It*, however, is a not completely successful attempt on the part of a "literary" poet and novelist to produce an SF text which incorporates feminist utopian theory into the landscape of cyberpunk; much of it remains unconvincing to the genre reader. Nevertheless, it is certainly a significant effort within the context of the present discussion (see Wolmark's fairly positive comments [131-134], and Sherry Coldsmith's very critical review).

¹³ *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* is the title of a collection of essays published by Haraway in 1991.

¹⁴ In his analysis of cyberpunk, Peter Fitting identifies one important "enclave of value" developed in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs":

Haraway's argument stands as a warning that it is no longer a question of condemning the technoculture brought to us by postmodernism. We must understand and pay attention to it; we must look for ways to subvert and turn technology to new liberatory uses. ("The Lessons of Cyberpunk" 308)

CHAPTER 3A
DEMETAFORMING: METAPHORS OF THE POSTMODERN IN CONTEMPORARY SF

"Demetaform."

Metaphor meaning, they meant; I considered all likely interpretations, deciding upon one that personally pleased. (Jack Womack, *Elvissey* 10)

1. Speculative SF: The Metaphorical Axis

In my introductory chapter, I called attention to conventional SF's commitment to what David Ketterer calls "the plausibility issue" (*New Worlds for Old* 18, n.10), and to his contention that the SF author's "extrapolative structures rarely lend themselves to overt allegorical ends, because of the danger of jeopardizing the illusion of a surface verisimilitude" (18). The result of SF's traditional attention to "surface verisimilitude" is that the metonymical operation of its discourse has tended to overshadow whatever elements of metaphor are embedded in the narrative.

From this perspective, activating the figure in the carpet of these texts goes against the grain—to mix my own metaphors—of the reading protocols which, it has sometimes been argued, the conventional SF text invites us to follow. Samuel R. Delany is probably the foremost proponent of the theory that the discourse of SF "has a very literal quality to it that, even though we would be hard put to call it referential, is nevertheless quite the opposite of metaphor" ("On *Triton* and Other Matters" 296-297). Not all SF writers, however, are in agreement with Delany. In her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Ursula K. Le Guin writes:

This book is not extrapolative. If you like you can read it, and a lot of other science fiction, as a thought-experiment. . . . The purpose of a thought-experiment . . . is not to predict the future . . . but to describe reality, the present world. (n.p.)

Darko Suvin also makes use of the concept of the thought-experiment when he argues, in an essay which examines the metaphorical axis of SF, that "the SF universe of discourse presents syntagmatically developed possible worlds as models (more precisely as thought-experiments) or as totalizing and thematic metaphors" ("SF as Metaphor" 198).¹ Suvin concludes that it is this aspect of the SF text

as thought-experiment, as heuristic model, which accounts for the function of SF as a cognitive literary genre, in its creation of fictional worlds which function as estranged paradigms of empirical reality. SF "re-describes the known world and opens up new possibilities of intervening into it" ("SF as Metaphor" 189).

From this perspective, it can be argued that *all* SF texts—like all narratives in general—are available for metaphorical interpretation, no matter to what extent the details of their "surface verisimilitude" discourage such interpretation. Even *Neuromancer*, the exemplar of contemporary extrapolative SF, has been praised for "its ability to create a powerfully resonant metaphor—the cyberspace of the computer matrix . . . where human memory is literalized and mechanized . . ." (McCaffery, "An Interview with William Gibson" 264).

This argument, however, is both reductive and incomplete, and it leaves us unable to distinguish among what we might term the "degrees of metaphoricity" of various SF texts. Certainly, Suvin's emphasis on the metaphorical function of SF is not intended to be reductive, nor is he aiming to prove that all SF texts are overtly allegorical. His aim is to examine the paradigmatic function of the SF text, the axis of metaphoricity which has tended to be neglected in critical examinations of the nature of SF as a literary genre. In the process, he develops an interpretive model which can usefully be applied to those SF texts in which metaphor is indeed the predominant feature of the narrative function. Many such texts, not surprisingly, have been poorly served by critical approaches based on theories of extrapolation. Suvin concludes his essay with a reading of Cordwainer Smith's short story, "The Lady Who Sailed *The Soul*" (1960), demonstrating the obvious, but easily ignored, fact that not all texts are equally available to any one interpretive methodology.

It is one of my aims in this study to examine the ways in which postmodern SF texts tend to align themselves along the metaphorical axis of discourse, in contrast to conventional SF's representation as an extrapolative literary genre. In the following chapter, I will focus on certain slipstream texts whose metaphoricity is such a dominant feature of their discourse that they can most usefully be read as what Suvin terms "macro-metaphors" ("SF as Metaphor" 198), that is, as full-fledged allegories; so pronounced

is their allegorical function that it puts into question their identification as "real" SF. For all their indebtedness to the SF mega-text, these texts operate at the extreme margins of the genre.²

In this chapter, I will examine speculative SF texts, in particular those whose fictional worlds are also metaphorical representations of specific aspects of postmodernity itself.

Carl Malmgren explains speculative SF in this way:

Working metaphorically rather than metonymically, the speculative writer tries to inscribe a world whose relation to the basic narrative world is less logical than analogical or even anagogical; there are systems of correspondence between the two worlds, but they are not linear or one-to-one, and they are consequently more problematic, more difficult to establish with certainty. (13)

SF's extrapolative tendency is obvious in a text like Gregory Benford's time-travel novel, *Timescape* (1980), which emphasizes the interrelationships among present, past, and future in very direct ways, concerned as it is with the short-term effects of ecological irresponsibility. On the other hand, the analogical tendency is apparent in a speculative SF story like James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" (1976) in which time travel is used both to literalize Tiptree's critique of contemporary sexual chauvinism and to demystify the signifying coerciveness of concepts like "feminine" and "masculine." Significantly, her fictional future is relatively discontinuous with contemporary reality, functioning more as a *substitute* for the present than as the displacement of it which we see in Benford's text.

It is important to realize that both tendencies have always been potential in the genre, even though the penchant for extrapolation has been more apparent in the fiction produced during the years which saw the most rapid development and popularization of (American) SF.³ While H.G. Wells constructed the first time-travel narrative on the basis of a perception of time as linear and uni-directional, that is, on the basis of an extrapolative impulse, it is much less clear that the "mother of SF," Mary Shelley, had a similar intention in mind when she wrote *Frankenstein*. *Frankenstein* is a text notoriously open to allegorical readings.⁴ In fact, Rosemary Jackson identifies it "as a key text behind the modern

fantastic" (102); as such, she reads it as a text which functions outside the "legalized" constraints of the conventional SF narrative. A "history" of SF which includes *Frankenstein* as one possible point of "origin"⁵ will already alert us to SF's potential for disrupting its own conventional figuration as a genre which develops along the axis of the diachronic, the syntagmatic, the metonymic, and the extrapolative. In a sense, then, as Suvin's analysis of the metaphorical nature of the SF text indicates, the "transformation" I am identifying in this analysis is rather a shift in emphasis towards something which was always already present as a function of the SF text, even though it has not been the direction which, in fact, the genre emphasized for many decades.⁶

In fact, we see this metaphorical potential continuously activated throughout the history of SF. We can read it, for example, in the fiction of Cordwainer Smith which, appearing in the 1950s at the end of the "Golden Age" of "hard" SF, was frequently characterized as anomalous and unorthodox. We also see this tendency in the category of alternate-history narratives. In this type of narrative, historical fiction is *substituted* for historical fact, in a way which demonstrates the contingency of historical development.

At the analogical pole of SF, then, the present is *projected* onto the future, that is, the future becomes—to some extent—a substitute for the present, so that their relationship begins to function in a more obviously paradigmatic way.⁷ The texts which interest me at present, however, are more obviously postmodern in that their figural constructions are aimed at exploring features of "the postmodern condition." In these texts it is postmodernism itself which is the *tenor* of various metaphorical constructions.⁸ These are fictions which maintain a balance between the representation of extrapolated future worlds, such as the clearly delineated post-apocalyptic future England of Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, and their function as metaphorical descriptions, as representations of "possible worlds" which are, in fact, models for the dis-ease of postmodernism. Thus, for example, the characters in Hoban's future world find themselves caught up in dilemmas of reading and interpretation which are also singularly contemporary, so that *Riddley Walker* also demands to be read as a commentary on our present moment.⁹ It is such an activity of "demetaforming"—to use again the term introduced in my epigraph from Jack Womack's recent alternate-history novel, *Elvissey* (1993)—which is the aim of this present

chapter. As Le Guin suggests about her own fiction, readers are free to interpret speculative SF texts both as extrapolations and as thought-experiments; here I have chosen to read certain speculative SF texts for their metaphorical descriptions of the "reality" of the present (postmodern) world.

As Wayne C. Booth suggests, one of the criteria by which we can measure the success of particular metaphors is their appropriateness "to the task in hand" (55). The "science-fictionalization" of the present in the popular imagination makes of SF a particularly appropriate tool with which to map our contemporary cultural context.

2. Alternate and Parallel Worlds

One of the most obvious techniques through which speculative SF undertakes its metaphorical mapping of empirical reality is the creation of fictional worlds which appear as obvious parallels or alternatives to that reality. Brian McHale includes a brief discussion of parallel- and alternate-world stories in his study, *Postmodernist Fiction*, as an example of the way in which some genre fiction—like much postmodern fiction—explores the notion of multiple, equally valid, although sometimes conflicting realities. Parallel- and alternate-world fictions undermine the legitimacy of the meta-narrative of History, that is, the representation of history as a single, inevitable series of events linked by logical causality. As such, they provide their own kind of parallel or alternate version of the problematization of history which is so often identified as a feature of postmodernism. In a comment which recalls Suvin's notion of "the metaphor or model of *possible worlds*" ("SF as Metaphor" 197), McHale suggests that

such a story invites the reader to compare the real state of affairs in our world with the hypothetical state of affairs projected for the parallel world; implicitly it places our world and the parallel world in confrontation. (*Postmodernist Fiction* 61)¹⁰

McHale's exemplary text in this context is Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), a classic alternative-world fiction in which the Axis Powers have won the Second World War. Dick's problematization of history, otherwise no more than an ingenious version of a rather common SF narrative convention, is given a postmodern turn through the *mise-en-abyme* effect of its final narrative ploy. The fictional status of the alternate world is emphasized from *within* that narrative world itself,

which is balanced against another version of reality (delineated in an imaginary novel entitled *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*) which is almost—but not quite—the reality of the readers of Dick's novel.

For all that we can characterize some of Dick's discourse as postmodern, however, his novels sometimes demonstrate a commitment to humanist notions of subjectivity and the essentialization of human nature. Like many of his other fictions, *The Man in the High Castle* is centrally concerned with issues of originality, authenticity, and integrity, and thus anticipates the treatment of exactly these concerns within the context of postmodernity. However, the irony with which it treats these notions is mixed together with a kind of sincerity which sometimes verges on nostalgia. The moment which reveals the "textual" nature of the fictional reality in *The Man in the High Castle*, for example is associated with the Chinese hexagram "Inner Truth" (246). In Dick's metaphorical worlds, there is always hope—however compromised our perceptions and however confused our reality—that something fundamentally "real" still exists, if only we can see through the illusions of twentieth-century existence. This is also apparent, for example, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), a text which steadfastly maintains the distinction between the human and the machine, between the real and its simulacrum. This is precisely the distinction, of course, which has been problematized so enthusiastically in so much cyberpunk fiction.

A rather different treatment of the theme of authenticity can be read in Womack's *Elvissey*, an ironic *hommage* to the continuing power of Elvis Presley's hold on the popular imagination. In Womack's future, the majority of the population belong to various sects of the C of E—the Church of Elvis—and they await "His" return as the new Messiah who will spiritually "regood" their decaying world. Womack's protagonists are sent by Dryco, the megacorporation which is the major economic and political power in this future, to an alternate 1950's world to kidnap its version of Elvis Presley in order to give the believers their Messiah; but this is an alternate Elvis, very different from the "authentic" one, who, in any case, is "always already" the construction of his believers.¹¹

Ironically, Dryco's motto for world renewal is "DO GOOD. FEEL REAL" (208). "Regooding," Womack's text suggests, is in the eye of the beholder, and not dependent upon the authenticity of the

Messiah beheld. *Elvissey* also examines our tendency to romanticize the past. As the imaginative construction of a human representational system known as History, its attractions are more likely than not to be spurious; and Womack's text warns against imposing our own readings upon it: "Nostalgia's worse than any drug" (57).

One of the most interesting alternate-history novels of recent genre fiction—which is simultaneously an historical novel—is William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1991), the action of which unfolds in a Victorian London shaped not only by the forces of the "real" Industrial Revolution, but also by the early invention and dissemination of computer technology.¹² Thus, we can read *The Difference Engine* as a thought-experiment which examines the fundamental influence of computer technology on the present through imagining its effects on an earlier moment in our own history.¹³

In its self-reflexive narrative technique, as well as in its concerns with the effects of rapidly expanding communications technologies upon human life, *The Difference Engine* is a singularly postmodern SF text. Its "conclusion" is the scene of awakening consciousness of the Artificial Intelligence who, as we retroactively realize, is the narrator—the "Narratron," the "Eye"/I—of the characters and events which make up *The Difference Engine*. In this way, through its identification of characters and events as the products of computer intelligence, the text also calls attention to its own status as a computer-generated product.¹⁴ Thus *The Difference Engine* foregrounds textuality, emphasizing the signifier over both the signified and the referent.

3. Paradigms of Postmodernism

At this point I want to re-introduce Marc Angenot's theoretical concept of "the absent paradigm." In an essay of the same name which was one of the first to examine the function of the SF text from a semiotic perspective, Angenot argues that the reader of the SF text uses the signs of "otherness" embedded in the text to imaginatively construct an estranged fictional world—a paradigm—which, because it is not linked metonymically to the author's empirical world, remains of necessity forever absent.¹⁵

I want to suggest here that "reading" the speculative SF text for its metaphorical tenor—demetaforming it—rather than for its literal vehicle, serves to make one form of the "absent paradigm" present. On the metaphorical level, the world suggested by the details embedded in the speculative text is, in fact, the world of empirical reality from a different perspective; and through interpreting it as such, we (re)construct our own world, as the paradigm which lies behind the details given in the fictional text. It is our own world—in however estranged a form—which we make present through the activity of demetaforming.

In the case of two works of speculative SF which I will discuss here, the absent paradigm is a world which is also a text, a world of signifiers in which meaning is elusive, indeterminate, ambiguous—and sometimes absent altogether. This is, in fact, the world of the postmodern, the "absent paradigm" which is implied by the foregrounding of the textual nature of reality in Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980). And in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the absent paradigm is a world in which self itself is text, in which subjectivity and identity are "composed" in much the same way as texts are composed—and decomposed.

3.1. "Ordeal by Imagery": *Heroes and Villains*

The fictional world of Carter's post-apocalyptic novel, *Heroes and Villains*, resembles the more crisis-oriented versions of postmodernism, in that it is defined by its loss of the past.¹⁶ Cut off from the world which existed before the nuclear holocaust, its inhabitants either devote themselves to obsessive attempts to re-construct their lost history or, like the schizophrenics of postmodernism theorized by Fredric Jameson, live in an eternal present of chaotic formlessness. The Professors, descendants of the ancient intelligentsia, remain walled up in their fortress-like enclaves, facing backwards towards the past; the Barbarians, nomadic tribes of wandering survivors, remain embedded in an eternally static present moment. Neither group has any sense of a future time which might serve to extricate it from the temporal paralysis which defines its very existence. Not for nothing does Carter's novel open and close with images of time at a standstill. Marianne, daughter of the Professor of History and Carter's protagonist,

never felt that time was passing for time was frozen around her in this secluded place where a pastoral quiet possessed everything and the busy clock carved the hours into sculpture of ice.

(1)

After she runs away to explore the world of the Barbarians, she realizes that, "if time was frozen among the Professors, here she lost the very idea of time . . . so the day was a featureless block of action and night of oblivion" (41). Finally, she and her lover, Jewel, find the remains of a city which is almost completely covered by the sea:

prominent among the minarets, spires and helmets of wrought iron which protruded from the waters was an enormous clock whose hands stood still at the hour of ten though, [sic] it was, of course, no longer possible to tell whether this signified ten in the morning or ten at night.

(138)

The loss of history has precipitated these characters into a world filled with such incomprehensible signifiers, signs and portents of a past which they are no longer capable of reading. If meanings exist in this world, they are "memories which nobody remembered" (138). In a sense, these characters are involved in an effort to (re)construct the paradigm of a past reality which, because of the literal (nuclear) discontinuity between past and present in their future world, is doomed to remain forever absent. Reading the metaphors of postmodernism in *Heroes and Villains*, therefore, means engaging in the same task as its characters, although with more chance of a happy outcome to our textual activities. On the other hand, like Carter's characters, postmodern readers of the "real" are doomed to the same failure: the postmodern world of signs everywhere overlays the Real, which is, to recall Lacan's definition, "that which is impossible" (quoted in Sheridan, x). Like ironic exaggerations of ourselves, Carter's characters have been precipitated into a kind of parodic Symbolic order composed entirely of signifiers bereft of signifieds.

All that remains for them—as it does for us—is the world of signs, that is, the world of appearances. Marianne asks: "What can I trust if not appearances?" (125). For Carter's characters, as for ourselves, appearances have *become* reality, or at least all the reality which is available to them

In the world of appearances, however, signs become oppressive, a burden composed of all the weight and obscurity of a past which is irretrievable. A central scene which enacts such oppression is Marianne's wedding. Forced by the Barbarians into a marriage ceremony with Jewel, she recognizes that she has become the victim of an "ordeal by imagery" (81). Dressed in the crumbling ruins of an ancient wedding dress, she is compelled to represent a bride, but she is a sign with no referent in the present, "the sign of the memory of a bride" (72). As the groom, Jewel too is reduced to a sign without a referent; resplendent in an ancient Bishop's robe, he becomes

a fantastic dandy of the void whose true nature had been entirely subsumed to the alien and terrible beauty of a rhetorical gesture. His appearance was abstracted from his body, and he was wilfully reduced to sign language. He had become the sign of an idea of a hero (72)¹⁷

Like many other scenes in Carter's flamboyant fiction, the wedding scene displays all the extremities of the Gothic mode, set as it is in a ruined chapel and peopled by hordes of exotically-dressed primitives surrounding the bizarre figures of bride and groom—a grim parody of the ideal wedding. The ironic extremity of Carter's depiction results finally in an utter subversion of Western notions of romantic love as it emphasizes the entirely artificial and empty re-enactment of human ritual.¹⁸

Just as Marianne and Jewel are "bride" and "groom"—that is, just as they exist within the quotation marks of these now-meaningless roles—so all the characters in Carter's text exist within quotation marks. They are all empty signs. Jewel and his people are not Barbarians; rather, they are "Barbarians," consciously playing out their roles as the only available means of self-definition in their future world. They are post-historical "Barbarians," rather than pre-historical Barbarians, a community as completely artificial as that of the Professors. Donally, the tribal "shaman," busily occupies himself trying to invent a new religion—which is, in fact, only one more version of Judeo-Christianity; finally, Donally too, like his totem snake, "signifies nothing" (126), except perhaps the human will to make meaning.

Jewel in particular is as carefully constructed as any fashion model, self-consciously putting

himself together for the war-path: "Fetch my jars of paint, watch me turn into the nightmare" (145). More so even than other characters, he has no reality of his own, taking on whatever roles Donally, Marianne, or his family impose upon him. In this sense, he is the living icon of the textualization of the "real" in *Heroes and Villains*, a character whose signification constantly shifts and changes, while he himself is nothing, and *means* nothing.¹⁹ Marianne fears that, when he washes his face, "all his features might come off with the paint and he would raise a smooth, eyeless egg of flesh towards her" (77).

It is against such a reduction to meaningless textuality that Marianne struggles during the course of the novel, but even she is forced to submit at the end, although she retains enough power to choose her own role: "I'll be the tiger lady and rule them with a rod of iron" (150).

Heroes and Villains can thus be read as a fictional version of postmodernism's reduction of reality to textuality, depicting as it does a reality which is "always already" mediated through the language and codes by which Carter's characters interpret it to themselves and to each other; it is a reality which is never immediate in any meaningful sense. Not surprisingly, self-conscious characters like Marianne and Jewel are particularly ironic about the validity of their attempts to interpret the world around them, since the only tools at their disposal are the systems of language, literature, and cultural codes which they have inherited from an earlier historical period, and which are no longer able to account for the "truth" of their own present time.

Jewel, for example, bears a tattoo of "The Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden," but the Judeo-Christian meta-narrative is irrelevant to the experiences which he and Marianne are forced to undergo. His invitation to her to "Pretend you're Eve at the end of the world" (124) is heavily ironic. And not for nothing is Marianne's father a Professor of History—"He reconstructed the past; that was his profession" (8)—and not for nothing is he dead. The meta-narratives of Science and History no longer function to interpret the world in any meaningful way.

Marianne seems to speak for all of us when she states:

When I was a little girl, we played at heroes and villains but now I don't know which is which any more, nor who is who, and what can I trust if not appearances. Because

nobody can teach me which is which nor who is who because my father is dead.

Jewel's reply is perhaps the only one possible under the circumstances: "You'll have to learn for yourself then. Don't we all" (125).

3.2. "Strapping the lates": *Riddley Walker*

Like *Heroes and Villains*, *Riddley Walker* is a kind of postmodern *bildungsroman*: the narrative recounts the growth and entry into maturity of twelve-year-old Riddley as he negotiates his way through a post-apocalyptic world cut off from its past. Once again, nuclear apocalypse functions as a kind of metaphor for the loss of history. Set 2400 years in the future, Riddley's people, somewhat like Jewel's, are nomadic hunter-gatherers, "neo-barbarians" travelling through the primitive wasteland which used to be England.

Riddley Walker is also an overtly self-referential text which explores the importance of storytelling as a means of giving shape to the human situation, indeed, as a means of creating meaning. Written in what Hoban extrapolates to be the language of such a far future, the novel is Riddley's self-conscious construction of his own story, filled with his comments on the act of writing itself: "Walker is my name and I am the same. Riddley Walker. Walking my riddels where ever theyve took me and walking them now on this paper the same" (8).

The central narrative event in Hoban's novel is the rediscovery of gunpowder, representative of the technological "cleverness" which led to nuclear war sometime in the 1990s. As Peter Schwenger suggests, "*Riddley Walker* is about a hermeneutic activity rather like Lévi-Strauss's. . . . [T]he novel follows the efforts of its protagonists to return, in various ways, to that point of origin [the "catastrophic nuclear war"] (254).

Even more overtly than in Carter's text, characters in *Riddley Walker* struggle to rediscover and/or to produce meaning through signs which are either largely unreadable or no longer capable of successful articulation. The reader, of course, is also implicated in this struggle for meaning, not only through her identification with the situation of Hoban's characters, but even more obviously through having also to struggle with a text which, as signifying system, does not readily yield to decoding. As

Schwenger notes of the language in *Riddley Walker*, "Quasi-illiterate, largely phonetic, it slows us to the pace of an oral culture, defamiliarizing the act of reading itself so that this process too becomes an unriddling" (254).

As extrapolation, this nearly illiterate language serves to characterize the post-catastrophe world at the immediate level of the words on the page.²⁰ As metaphor, however, the language re-capitulates the action of the narrative, inviting the reader to participate in Riddley's quest for meaning—ironically represented by him as an exercise in extrapolation, or "strapping the lates" (197)—through involvement in the difficulties of decoding an almost completely foreign sign system. Hoban's future English is also richly studded with puns, which, as I have already mentioned in the context of Pat Cadigan's *Synners*, serves to emphasize the potentially unstable relationship between signifier and signified and the consequent instability of meaning itself.²¹

Like Marianne, Riddley is an orphan who must make his own way in the world. Not for nothing does he inherit his father's role as "connexion man" in his community, a kind of shaman whose purpose is to read the unreadable "and get a good look at how the woal thing ben bilt" (57). The quest for such a totalizing meaning, however, is one of the targets of the novel's satire, since the meta-narratives which once served to explain the world are exactly those which have been definitively discredited—one is tempted to say exploded—through the nuclear destruction of a world which once invested in them. The reinvention of gunpowder at the novel's conclusion suggests, however, that history tends to repeat itself—whether for good or ill remains unclear.²²

Like many postmodern novels, *Riddley Walker* presents its readers with a text in fragments; the main narrative is intertwined with legends and stories told by and to Hoban's protagonist. As an oral culture, Riddley's people use myths and legends as the narrative means through which to explain their present reality in this grim future. This is yet another way in which the text repeats—at the level of narrative—its own work of estrangement, since we might argue that *Riddley Walker* itself, on the level of metaphor, is itself a narrative attempt to explain aspects of contemporary reality. "The Eusa Story," which combines the legend of St. Eustace with a highly allegorical version of the invention and

proliferation of nuclear weapons, is this culture's central narrative:

Wen Mr. Clevver wuz Big Man uv Inland [England] they had evere thing clevver. . . Eusa was a noing man vere qwik he cud tern his han tu enne thing. He wuz werkin for Mr. Clevver wen thayr cum enemes aul roun & maykin Warr. Eusa sed tu Mr. Clevver, Now wevl nead masheans uv Warr. Wevl nead boats that go on the water & boats that go in the ayr as wel & wevl nead Berstin Fyr. (28)

According to this legend, Eusa finds "the Littl Shynin Man the Addom" (29) and pulls him in two, which releases the forces which eventually destroy the world.²³ Such disunity is one of Hoban's central motifs, representing the "fallen" state of this future world. From this perspective, Riddley's quest is as much for a kind of spiritual renewal as it is for any technological knowledge.

The Eusa Story, then, functions as a kind of "fallen" or degraded meta-narrative which highlights the loss of historical memory and the shifting and dispersal of historical fact which has trapped this culture in the stasis of its present dystopian moment. The struggle at the centre of the text might be described as this culture's attempt to regain a past in order to regain its sense of a future.²⁴ Riddley's efforts to rediscover the meaning of things in this far-future world, however, have been described by Dowling as "a deconstructionist nightmare" (183). From one perspective, as Dowling points out, there is *too much* meaning, which, as the proliferation of puns suggests, "replicate and mutate dizzily even as he [Riddley] contemplates them" (183).²⁵

It is here, perhaps, that *Riddley Walker* differs most interestingly from *Heroes and Villains*, although it is a difference which also points to the problems of reading and interpretation in the postmodern context. In Carter's novel, signs of the old world are everywhere present, but either they are impossible any longer to read, or her protagonists are aware of their irrelevance to a world which, in its difference, is virtually completely other. In Hoban's novel, signs and portents are also everywhere; indeed, Riddley's task as shaman is one of endless interpretation. In this world, however, characters remain convinced of the relevance of signs: it is their own lack as readers which, from their perspective, hampers them. They lack both the "cleverness" of the age of technology and "the 1st knowing" — a kind

of mystical awareness—which was lost "when they got the cleevverness and now the cleevverness is gone as wel" (17). In different ways, then, both *Heroes and Villains* and *Ridley Walker* dramatize how the struggle to understand the present is hampered by the loss of historical context; in each, history is turned into myth and narratives of the past function also as riddles which may never be solved.

3.4. The In/Authentic Self: *The Handmaid's Tale*

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is one of the most consciously deconstructive of recent speculative SF texts, at the same time as it demonstrates the importance of what we might think of as a kind of strategic essentialism in its construction of a strong central narrative voice.²⁶ It focuses on both the composition and decomposition of the subject and of identity within the context of postmodernism.

On the extrapolative level, the novel delineates a near-future world in which fundamentalist religion in combination with ecological disaster and a falling birth-rate—not to mention a kind of resolutely blind post-feminism—have resulted in the establishment of a patriarchal dystopia in which women have (once again) become defined through their bodies. The fundamentalist totalitarian state of Gilead allocates roles to women which it is death to refuse to perform; those who will not or cannot play these roles are condemned by the State to work at toxic waste disposal sites—a sure sentence of death—and relegated to the category of Unwomen, a decomposition of identity which is rather more than "merely" theoretical.

In fact, we might characterize Gilead as the bastion of a kind of right-wing humanism whose subjects are white, heterosexual males. Atwood's narrative responds to the negation of the female subject in two very different, although equally significant, ways: it deploys a humanist-feminist strategy through its construction of the forceful female subjectivity around which the narrative develops, and, simultaneously, it undertakes an anti-humanist deconstruction of this subject, problematizing her very existence through the supplemental rhetoric of the "Historical Notes."

As depicted by Atwood's narrator, all aspects of women's lives in the Republic of Gilead are circumscribed by stultifying formalizations, especially, of course, those having to do with sex and

reproduction. Women are denied access to language and knowledge; reading and writing have become forbidden activities and even casual conversation unfolds within a sterile series of rote responses, exemplified in the dialogue between Offred and Ofglen while they shop for groceries (19-20). Atwood's protagonist is stripped of her name, forbidden the use of language outside of strictly determined boundaries, and identified solely in terms of her biological function as a potential bearer of children.

On the metaphorical level, Atwood's novel is as concerned with the nature and function of narrative and textuality as are *Heroes and Villains* and *Ridley Walker*.²⁷ Here these concerns are expressed as an inquiry into the operations of representation-as-construction, since Offred's method of resisting her situation is through both a refusal of the patriarchal "text"²⁸ and her own concomitant self-(re)creation.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrative voice is disembodied, reaching us "from a distant place" (10) where personality has all but disintegrated under the weight of dystopian conditioning. Ironically, however, it is suggested that, even before the Gileadean regime stripped her of her sense of self, she—like other educated liberals who avoided political involvement—had already been living a kind of negation of the self. Recalling her own past, she admits that

We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. . . . We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edge of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories. (53)

It is especially interesting that the first section of the narrative, which contains descriptions of the Handmaids' "training," also emphasizes a kind of negative selfhood. "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (24). This "freedom" includes freedom from choice, from power, from knowledge, since "What you don't know won't hurt you" (50). Atwood's satire on what we might think of as a kind of negative feminism is both amusing and horrifying: "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. . . . To be seen—to be *seen*—is to be—her voice

trembled—penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable" (28).

Even sex is written in the negative now, as in this description of the Ceremony during which the Handmaid is forced to fulfil her "duty":

What's going on in this room, under Serena Joy's silvery canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire (89)

The narrative suggests two responses to this life of pure negation: the dual operation of refusal of the patriarchal "compact" and a concomitant self-(re)creation.

For all Gilead's attempts to strip women of language, Offred provides the novel's sole narrative voice. Her voice is that of the silenced woman, carefully undertaking the task of self-definition while equally carefully performing the role prescribed for her within the borders of Gilead's misogynist society. Not surprisingly, this double task is couched in apophatic terms: "I am trying not to tell stories, or at any rate not this one" (47). But, of course, she does tell her story, to an audience which is both present and absent: "I'll pretend you can hear me. But it's no good, because I know you can't" (38).

Self-construction is a painful enterprise undertaken in the night hours of privacy and loneliness, the negative spaces of time, narrated in tones of ironic sincerity: "I wait. I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (62). Here the text both insists on the importance of such self-composition and calls attention to its artificiality. For Atwood's Handmaid, active resistance to oppression only becomes possible through this act of self-construction.²⁹

The Handmaid's Tale then proceeds ironically to unravel the subjectivity whose meticulous construction has provided its narrative impetus. The "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*," a brief segment appended to the narrative proper, succeeds in casting doubt upon the very existence of the subject of the preceding narration.

These Notes, which construct a partial narrative frame for the Handmaid's story, are composed, for the most part, of the text of an academic conference paper—entitled "Problems of Authentication in

Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*—which is presented long after the Republic of Gilead has disappeared. Thus, while the narrator of the tale is the central presence in her own story, it turns out that she has always been an absence within the text-as-a-whole. Among other "facts," this report establishes that the narrative sequence of the story we have just read is to some extent artificial, organized long after the voice which described its events has disappeared into the past: "all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research" (284). Every attempt to establish the identity of the narrator has failed and it is even possible that "the tapes might be a forgery" (284). The "Historical Notes" ends on a note of mystification which obliterates the specificity of the narrative voice and (re)constructs it within the terms of a universal myth of Woman:

We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer, and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees. (293)

Here is Atwood's sardonic portrayal of the mystery of the feminine. The Handmaid's story may or may not be authentic; in any case, she herself manages to elude all attempts to identify/define her, that is, to reduce her once again to a textual representation. And even if her narrative should prove to be genuine, it remains unsatisfactory: "She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy" (292). The "Historical Notes" satirize an undertaking aimed at containing the narrator and her story within a carefully delimited framework and a properly academic discourse.

Atwood's self-conscious mimicry of academic analysis is a performance comparable to the mimicry of femininity undertaken by her protagonist. In similar fashion, it functions as a supplement—at once superfluous and constitutive—to an "originary" text/self. Atwood's Handmaid both exists and does not exist, maintaining a contingent presence in the play/space between the narration which composes her and the Notes which undermine that composition. Thus, as I argued in my discussion of cyberpunk SF, *The Handmaid's Tale* metaphorically undertakes a much more extreme deconstruction of the traditional subject of humanism than do any of those more "spectacular" texts. At the same time, however, it has

succeeded in constructing a strategically contingent subject capable of choice and action. Within the context of postmodernity, this kind of contingent construction takes account of theories of the "death of the subject" even as it avoids supporting the essentialism of a discredited liberal humanism.¹⁰

4. Speculative SF: Figures of the Postmodern

In *Telling Stories*, Steven Cohan and Linda Shires point out that while metonymy operates according to a principle of contiguity, metaphor operates according to a principle of resemblance (28-29). This, in brief, helps to explain the effect produced by the operations of the speculative SF text. In each of the texts I have discussed above, whatever their extrapolative constructions, much of the impact of their narratives is the result of our recognition of the *resemblances* between certain aspects of their fictional worlds and analogous aspects of our "real" world. One of the most powerful effects of speculative SF is, therefore, as Darko Suvin suggests, the estrangement of our own world through its delineation in alternate terms.

Here we see the extremely different impact of speculative SF from that of extrapolative SF. Since metonymy privileges difference, it is through the predominantly extrapolative text that SF is enabled to construct those versions of the future—such as Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*—which assure us that the future will indeed be different from the present. Thus, extrapolative SF privileges change and movement. The speculative SF text, on the other hand, as Cohan and Shires imply, is involved to a certain extent in denying the difference of the future from the present, since its predominantly metaphorical function foregrounds similarities between future and present.

On the one hand, this helps to explain the interest of many feminist SF writers in speculative SF since the fictional worlds created by these writers often serve also as analogies of the present which it is their aim to analyze and criticize. On the other hand, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 4A, it also indicates that, when pushed to the extremes of metaphorical discourse, SF texts cease to envision any future at all, since at this extreme, imagined future worlds serve almost completely as allegorical descriptions of the present *tout court*.

Endnotes

¹ In other terms, Damien Broderick defines SF as "mimeticism in the service of imagination"; as he points out, this "suggests that *sf* operates metaphoric strategies via metonymic tactics" (8).

² In Malmgren's words,

SF rigorously and systematically "naturalizes" or "domesticates" its displacements and discontinuities. This scientific grounding . . . is built into the narrative ontology of the genre; without it, . . . SF metamorphoses into adjacent narrative forms. (6)

It is not my intention in this study to argue whether any particular text is or is not SF, however; such arguments are ultimately self-defeating and require a too-rigid—and legalistic—alignment to generic principles that can more usefully be employed as guidelines rather than as "laws of genre" (to recall Derrida's phrase).

³ It is interesting to note that it was in 1960 that editor John W. Campbell changed the name of the SF magazine *Astounding Stories* to *Analog*; this is also the period in which the New Wave began its challenge to the SF "establishment."

⁴ So, of course, is *The Time Machine*, which readily lends itself to interpretation as an allegorical fable of class difference and conflict; nevertheless, as I have argued in "Deconstructing the Time Machine," Wells depicts time as linear and uni-directional, that is, he avails himself of a Newtonian reading of time in order to propel his Time Traveller into the far future.

⁵ In his history of SF, Brian Aldiss, for one, argues for *Frankenstein* as the first true SF novel. See his chapter "On the Origins of Species: Mary Shelley" in *Trillion Year Spree* (25-51).

⁶ In his examination of the two principles of metonymy and metaphor as they appear in the extrapolative and the speculative modes of SF writing, Malmgren also recognizes that they exist in a synchronic rather than diachronic relationship. Both modes have been equally available to the SF writer throughout

the history of the genre; "one can construct a valid history of SF around the genre's oscillations between those two poles" (15).

⁷ As I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, much feminist SF operates at this pole.

⁸ Here I am following Suvin in proposing "to call *vehicle* the metaphoric expression as a whole taken literally and *tenor* the meaning it conveys" ("SF as Metaphor" 190).

⁹ It is imperative here to note that—in spite of my interest in its metaphorical function—there is no necessarily correct way to choose one method of reading Hoban's text over another, since *Riddley Walker* maintains a fine balance between the two discursive poles of metonymy and metaphor.

¹⁰ Or, as Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin explain,

The alternate time stream at its most serious raises questions about history and progress that are not so accessible to any other fictional form. Above all, this form emphasizes the way that the actual events of history have shaped cultural values which we sometimes take to be absolute. (177)

¹¹ *Elvissey* is an ironically self-reflexive text, which reminds its readers on a regular basis of its own generic status. The alternate Elvis, for example, extremely befuddled by the chaotic reality of the world into which he has been kidnapped, can find no other means of expressing his confusion than to conclude that "It's all science fiction" (248). The Dryco executives who wish to manipulate "E"'s power over his followers have already concluded that his penchant for pulp SF "contributes nothing to the image" (171).

¹² The "difference engine" of the title refers to the computing machine conceived by nineteenth-century scientist Charles Babbage. The "real" Babbage never succeeded in actually building such a machine; Gibson and Sterling's fictional Babbage is successful, and is therefore responsible for the hyper-industrialization of their fictional Victorian England.

McHale points out that, as a hybrid SF/historical novel, *The Difference Engine* corroborates

Jameson's analysis, "according to which SF is the successor and functional equivalent of historical fiction" (*Constructing Postmodernism* 238; see also my remarks on postmodern historical fiction in Chapter 1, section 3.4, "The 'End' of History").

¹³ In a 1992 interview, Sterling, no proponent of metaphorical readings, admits that *The Difference Engine* "is about the 1990s, let's face it" (Fischlin et al., "The Charisma Leak" 6).

¹⁴ The "literal" text of *The Difference Engine* was computer-generated in a way which we can also read as particularly postmodern. As Gibson explains, during the course of the collaboration, "We used the word processor as an aesthetic engine. There were no drafts of the book. We never printed anything out. We just kept swapping floppies." The completed text is also the result of a kind of "literary sampling." Gibson describes it as "an enormous collage of little pieces of forgotten Victorian textual material which we lifted from Victorian journalism, from Victorian pop literature." Sterling suggests that "The effect is quite extraordinary because it [the appropriated textual material] still carries a bizarre kind of authenticity" (Fischlin et al., "The Charisma Leak" 8-9).

¹⁵ Angenot uses as his chief example the "alien" languages which occasionally appear in SF texts; in such instances, a few "alien" words presuppose the absent paradigm of a complete alien language "without which no utterance would be possible. The verisimilitude is invested in the presuppositions of the text, in what the text itself *implies* without attempting to *show* it extensively" (14).

¹⁶ Like Hoban's *Riddley Walker, Heroes and Villains* is a postmodernist "slipstream" text which envisages the future in unremittingly bleak terms. Both novels are included in McHale's list of postmodernist texts whose futures

are grim dystopias—as indeed most science-fiction worlds of the future have been in recent years. The motif of a world after the holocaust or some apocalyptic breakdown recurs. (*Postmodernist Fiction* 67)

As I hope to make clear in this present discussion, the "apocalyptic breakdown" dramatized in these texts

can be read metaphorically as the "philosophical" apocalypse of postmodernism itself. (See Chapter 1, section 3.5, for a discussion of some aspects of apocalypticism within the context of postmodernity.)

¹⁷ In this scene we can read ironic echoes of Jameson's observation that "we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 118).

¹⁸ One of the epigraphs to *Heroes and Villains*—taken from Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*—suggests the function of Carter's appropriation of Gothic conventions: "The Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of grotesqueness" (n.p.). In this particular instance, the assault is on the clichés of romantic love. (For a more detailed analysis of this aspect of Carter's novel, see Sarah Lefanu's discussion in *In the Chinks of the World Machine*, 78-83.)

Michelle A. Massé offers a useful feminist/psychoanalytic analysis of Gothic conventions in *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* (1992). Massé reads Gothic masochism as a kind of psychological/textual space within which a certain representation of the feminine has been constructed, and certainly it is against such types of coercive representation that Marianne is forced to contend in her fictional world.

¹⁹ It is significant that Donally has spent years tattooing Jewel's body, which is thus literally transformed from physicality into textuality.

²⁰ *Ridley Walker* purportedly took over five years to write; the first page alone was rewritten fourteen times (Dowling 181). Hoban's efforts to imagine what language might be like in a far-future, post-apocalyptic England in which most of the population is illiterate has been the object of several studies. See, for example, David J. Lake's "Making the Two One: Language and Mysticism in *Ridley Walker*."

²¹ See David Dowling's "Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*: Doing the Connections" for a lucid examination of the way in which Hoban's punning serves various thematic uses in his novel.

²² As Lake points out, *Riddley Walker* bears more than a passing resemblance to Walter M. Miller's classic post-apocalyptic novel, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959): "the preservation of preholocaust tradition and the revival of technology are at the core of Miller's plot also" (158).

²³ "The Littl Shynin Man the Addom" functions also as one of Hoban's principal puns: it contains references both to Adam, the original human, and to the Christ who was crucified for the sins of humanity (cf. Dowling 164-165).

²⁴ From this perspective, the reinvention of potentially destructive weapons is a deeply ironic conclusion.

²⁵ Schwenger discusses *Riddley Walker* and the difficulties of interpretation faced by Hoban's characters in deconstructive terms:

Sameness and difference are represented . . . by the "1" and the "2," whose relation is summed up by a line in the Eusa myth: "Lukin for the 1 yu wil aul ways fyn thay 2" (29). The 1 that is unity, presence, and stability splits continuously into difference, indeed into *différance*. The endless deferral, substitution, and movement that result are akin to play, and all the more so if in play 2s may in turn become 1s. (256)

²⁶ Essentialism as a political strategy is discussed and recommended by Diana Fuss in her *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (cf. 18-21). As she points out, in certain contexts, "The risk of essence may have to be taken" (18).

²⁷ Jenny Wolmark attributes the "vagueness" with which Atwood has delineated the Gileadean dystopia to the fact that "the narrative is more concerned with the metaphoric content of Gilead than with any concrete realisation of the nature of the new state" (105). Wolmark reads *The Handmaid's Tale* as

an intervention into those discourses of the new right which are organised so powerfully around the family, heterosexuality and gender identity, and which are constituted in dystopian terms in the imagined state of Gilead. (106)

My own interest here, however, is in Atwood's metaphorical treatment of more specifically postmodern concerns; these concerns, of course, do intersect with the novel's treatment of "those discourses of the new right."

²⁸ Atwood appends a literal patriarchal text as epigraph to her novel, one which Gilead uses to justify the establishment of the role of "Handmaids":

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (*Genesis*, 30:1-3)

²⁹ From this perspective, Offred is involved in what Teresa de Lauretis describes as "the epistemological shift effected by feminism," which results in

The emergent conception of a gendered and heteronomous subject . . . in the two senses of the term: both subject-ed to social constraint and yet subject in the active sense of maker as well as user of culture, intent on self-definition and self-determination."

("Feminist Studies/Critical Studies" 10)

Diana Fuss writes of the "risks" inherent in embracing such an epistemological shift: "What is risky is giving up the security—and the fantasy—of occupying a single subject-position and instead occupying two places at once" (19).

³⁰ In the "reduction" of its protagonist to pure textuality, *The Handmaid's Tale* bears some

resemblance to Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which ends by reducing its protagonist, Connie Ramos, to a medical case history; she herself disappears into the depths of the "System's" medical machine. The effect created by Atwood's novel seems to be less pessimistic than Piercy's, however. Atwood's develops the sense of an escape from coercive representation, while Piercy's functions to emphasize the overwhelming of individual identity as it is "written over" by the discourse of dystopian institutions.

CHAPTER 3B
BREAKING UP THE SUBJECT: FEMINIST SPECULATIVE SF

Parody, rewriting, re-presenting woman is one option which postmodernism offers feminist artists in general (Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 156)

It is within the area of speculative SF that feminist writers have produced the majority of their most powerful fictions. As my earlier discussion of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests, speculative SF provides a means by which feminist writers can create fictional worlds which simultaneously contain critiques of "real" social and gender relations. Jenny Wolmark's recent *Aliens and Others*, a study of "science fiction, feminism, and postmodernism," focuses for the most part on works of feminist speculative SF, including novels by Octavia Butler, Vonda McIntyre, C.J. Cherryh, and Sheri Tepper.¹ In many of these texts, it is the resistance to systems of coercive representation which forms the site at which, for Wolmark, feminist writing and postmodern theory intersect.²

From this perspective, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* may be read not only as a possible point of origin—I deploy the concept of "origin" here as a useful heuristic fiction—for SF as a genre, but also as a point of origin for feminist speculative SF's subversive treatments of conventional patriarchal humanism and its constraining systems of representation. *Frankenstein*, like many works of fantastic literature, dramatizes the fundamentally fragmented nature of the Self.³

It is obvious, for example, that, in many ways, Frankenstein's Creature is also himself, as he recognizes in passages such as this:

I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror . . . nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me. (61)

It is equally rewarding to read the Creature as a manifestation of the fragmentation of the feminine in Shelley's text, a feminine whose most obvious representatives are characters like Victor's mother, Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein, who dies before the main events in the novel occur, and Victor's fiancée, Elizabeth Lavenza, whom the Creature famously murders on her wedding night.

Frankenstein is so apparently committed to the painstaking "performance" of conventional femininity that Shelley implicates even herself in this masquerade.⁴ Her circumspect delineation of female authorship prepares the reader for the equally conventional portraits of the women characters in *Frankenstein*. It is thus not surprising to find that these women take no part in the multi-voiced narration of the events of the story. It can be argued, however, that the monstrous Other whose recital forms the nucleus of Shelley's text in part speaks to/for their silence.

One instance which strongly suggests the identification of the Creature with the "good women" in *Frankenstein* is Victor's description of the dream which he experiences immediately following his successful creation of life:

I thought I saw Elizabeth [H]er features appeared to change, and I thought that I beheld the corpse of my dead mother in my arms I started from my sleep with horror when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. (43)

The fragmentation of femininity within Shelley's text functions to construct versions of Woman which are acceptable; at the same time it hints at aspects of the feminine which are unrepresentable within the terms of its cultural moment, aspects related to violence, aggression, and destruction. It is not surprising, from this perspective, to note that the havoc wrought by the Creature destroys precisely those realms of the domestic most closely associated with conventional femininity. Thus, for example, the Creature murders Victor's young brother, as well as his new bride, and his closest friend, Henry Clerval. In the final chapters, Victor's obsessive pursuit of the Creature to whom he is inextricably bound wrenches him from the warmth and comfort of family life to his death amid the icy wastes of the far North.

Frankenstein demonstrates the potential for the subversion of coercive (mis)representation which lies at the heart of feminist SF. The weight of such (mis)representation is not easily cast off, however,

and what we might term "the anxiety of otherness" can be traced in much SF by women, even as explorations of otherness remain a favourite narrative motif. This is the kind of anxiety which informs C.L. Moore's classic story, "No Woman Born" (1944), a kind of rewriting of *Frankenstein* in which the "monster" is clearly a woman. While "No Woman Born" is far from being a critique of orthodox humanism, it nevertheless demonstrates an intriguing ambivalence, devoted as it is to conventional notions of unified subjectivity, while at the same time it raises questions, almost in spite of itself, about the role of the female subject within this discourse.

At the centre of Moore's story is Deirdre. As "the loveliest creature whose image ever moved along the airways" (236), she is the quintessential object of the male gaze (it is entirely appropriate that images of sight are so recurrent in the discourse of this story). When Deirdre's career as a star performer is destroyed in the same fire that destroys her body, she sets out to rebuild it using the machine-body which has been created to house her still-living brain.

"No Woman Born" creates a whole network of conflicting images and forces. Deirdre is both subject and object in this story: while the action concerns *her* life, the point of view is that of one of her male colleagues who plays stand-in, not only for the reader, but also for all the off-stage characters who make up her audiences. Her new body, like that of Frankenstein's Creature, is the creation of a male scientist even as she seeks to mold it to her own ends. The story's main concern is whether or not Deirdre is *still* Deirdre, whether this object of desire still exists in her new body as herself, as a woman, as human.⁵ The alternative is a being both more and less than human, "a sort of mutation halfway between flesh and metal" (286). This, to the other (male) characters in the story, is the nightmare evoked by "the distant taint of metal already in her voice" (288), which is the image with which Moore ends her story. As Deirdre moves from object to subject, she risks becoming both monster and superwoman.

The narrative ends ambiguously and Moore's discourse is equally ambivalent. The text offers, finally, not unified meaning, but difference and contradiction in its exploration of the role of woman-as-subject. I would suggest, therefore, that texts like *Frankenstein* and "No Woman Born" anticipate, to some degree, the tension between humanist and poststructuralist readings of the subject which we see

so consciously played out within a postmodernist text like *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Not surprisingly, however, most feminist speculative SF texts are more or less humanist, representational, and realist in narrative content and strategy. They are engaged in exploring new representations of women unconstrained by the realities of our own history, while, at the same time, suggesting that the future may be different.⁶ This, I would argue, is the main reason for the humanist and, for lack of a better word, realist commitment of so much feminist SF, since humanist realism is the fictional mode most conducive to suggesting the unity and wholeness of the subject and its experiences.

However, as a text like *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates, humanist realism can only go so far. Sarah Lefanu suggests the potential of a postmodernist feminist SF when she writes of

an apparent contradiction . . . that is potentially of enormous importance to contemporary women writers: it [science fiction] makes possible, and encourages . . . the inscription of women as subjects free from the constraints of mundane fiction; and it also offers the possibilities of interrogating that very inscription, questioning the basis of gendered subjectivity. (9)

Both the construction of the subject and its deconstruction are necessary and effective strategies in the discourses of feminist SF.

At this point, it is appropriate to consider in some detail Jody Scott's *I, Vampire* (1984), a text which may be said to parody—in the sense contained in Linda Hutcheon's comment which provides the epigraph for this chapter—both traditional vampire narratives and traditional SF treatments of the alien invasion story. As Hutcheon notes in her study of the forms and functions of parody, "the presuppositions of both a law and its transgression bifurcates the impulse of parody: it can be normative and conservative, or it can be provocative and revolutionary" (*A Theory of Parody* 76).⁷

While Scott's novel was published by Ace Books under the SF rubric, it plays fast and loose with generic boundaries. Although it peoples its narrative world with aliens from outer space, it makes very little effort to explain the anomalous occurrence of the figure of the vampire-protagonist within its fictional world.⁸ Among the ironically surreal events which take place in *I, Vampire*, there are no fewer

than two alien invasions: the background conflict of the novel is between the benevolent race of Rysemians, who are determined to drag humanity up the evolutionary ladder in spite of itself, and the sinister Sajorians, for whom humanity provides a booming market in intergalactic slaves. Scott's vampire, however, is neither human nor alien: a kind of link between the two, Sterling O'Blivion remains an inexplicable phenomenon inhabiting a narrative world which can accommodate both "semi-mythological creature[s]" like herself (22) and genuine SF aliens. Scott's vampire thus functions to disrupt conventional categories of human and alien, just as her text disrupts the conventional generic distinctions between SF and fantasy.

I, Vampire is a satiric attack on the repressive nature of social and discursive representations of the other, accomplished through the delineation of Sterling O'Blivion's struggles against "readings" which attempt to situate/appropriate her both as a woman and as a vampire. Benaroya—the repulsively fish-like Rysemian "anthropologist" who pursues her study of humanity disguised as Virginia Woolf—addresses this problem directly at the end of the narrative: "What is a vampire? Who projected that image onto you? My guess is, the people of Transylvania created you out of boredom and frustration" (210).

Even before this realization, however, Sterling refuses to rationalize or to justify her existence: "if my actual history sounds like outtakes from a tacky B movie, or worse. well, that's not my problem. I am what I am, as God and Popeye both say when you wake them out of a sound sleep" (13). After centuries of keeping a low profile, Scott's vampire finds herself enlisted by the Rysemians in their battle against the Sajorians. More importantly, courtesy of Rysemian lessons in "psychic evolution," Sterling overcomes her craving for blood, repudiating, within the terms of Scott's fictional world, the limitations projected onto her by the representations of others ("What is a vampire? Who projected that image onto you?").

In his consideration of "fantasy antagonists," R.E. Foust recalls Freud's theory of the *doppelgänger* and his postulation of the "phenomenon of the 'double'" (442). From this perspective, the Other is a projection of certain undesirable aspects of the self, a "monstrous adversary" (443) constructed

out of repressed psychological material. As such, it is a source of fear and loathing whose return threatens to overcome the forces of Consciousness and Culture (the forces in whose interests it has been repressed in the first place). "The fantasy conflict," Foust concludes, "is structured upon an implicit assumption of the binary, rather than the unilateral relationship between nature and culture" (445).

Sterling O'Blivion is a victim of the kind of binary thinking which defines the Other as evil. She sets out to explode "a few pernicious myths" (31) about vampires, pointing out that all she takes from her own victims is "six skimpy ounces [of blood]. Less than they take at the blood bank. Cheap, selfish bastards! . . . and for this I suffered the curse of excommunication and was enrolled among the damned" (32). She also warns that "Only a fool sets out to kill any living creature. You don't know what forces you are releasing" (42). The target of Scott's sometimes vicious satire is that very humanity which has forced the vampire to live in the shadows for 700 years. The Rysemians bluntly inform Sterling that the human race is psychotic, that it will have to be quarantined or destroyed if it cannot evolve into a fit inhabitant of the universe beyond its own borders. *I, Vampire*, as it casts humanity as a dangerous life-form, thus effects a satiric inversion of the Wellsian alien-invasion plot.⁹

I, Vampire is also extremely successful in its deconstruction of the human/other opposition. Sterling becomes involved in a passionate love affair with Benaroya, who has temporarily abandoned her own alien body in order to infiltrate the human community disguised as Virginia Woolf. On the one hand, Sterling is not only a vampire, but a lesbian vampire, and one who has made love "out of [her] species" (77). On the other hand, as Benaroya assures her, there are no limits to what the mind can create out of the physical universe, "or P.U., as we call it" (53). She also makes it clear that, from the perspective of the Rysemians, "there are no aliens" (63), or, as she revises Terence, "nothing alien is alien to me" (76). *I, Vampire* ultimately acknowledges the nature of reality as a social and linguistic construction. Any logocentric dependence upon "the thing itself" is thoroughly undermined in this postmodern universe of continuously shifting bodies and perspectives.

Any attempt to return Scott's narrative to the dramatization of binary thinking breaks down because of the shifting relationships among the terms of her three-term system: vampire, alien, human.

These relationships emphasize complicity rather than opposition. The human cannot remain antithetical to the vampire in the presence of the alien; nor can the human/alien opposition hold up in a narrative which interposes the figure of the vampire between these two conventionally opposed terms.

In his discussion of the "crisis" of representation, Brian Wallis argues that it is the role of critical theory to address

the fact that while the rational *surface* of representation—the name or image—is always calm and whole, it covers the *act* of representing which necessarily involves a violent decontextualization. (xv)

In texts like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *I, Vampire*, feminist speculative SF writers undertake this same kind of critical project, uncovering and ironizing the coercive potential of the *act* of representation. In the process, they re-contextualize the tropes of conventional SF narratives, situating them within the projects of feminist narrative.

Endnotes

¹ In my chapter on "Specular SF," I will discuss more obviously postmodernist vanguardist feminist fictions, such as Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*. Many of these texts have been rather surprisingly neglected in recent feminist/theoretical studies of SF, even those rare studies which, like Wolmark's, claim to examine issues of postmodernity as well. To be fair, it should be noted that Wolmark does include at least include some discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Barr's *Feminist Fabulation*, subtitled *Space/Postmodern Fiction*, is also quite conservative as far as the feminist SF texts it chooses to read are concerned.

² Patricia Waugh usefully identifies some other points of intersection in *Feminine Fictions*:

In literary terms, both [feminism and postmodernism] have embraced the popular, rejecting the elitist and purely formalist celebration of modernism established in the American academy Both movements celebrate liminality, the disruption of boundaries, the confounding of traditional markers of "difference," the undermining of the authorial security of the "egotistical sublime." (3-4)

³ See, for example, Jackson's analysis (99-102) as well as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's detailed reading in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (213-247).

⁴ In her Introduction to the revised (1831) edition of *Frankenstein*, Shelley is careful to represent herself as a version of the Woman author acceptable within the terms of her early Victorian moment. Writerly ambition, for example, she attributes to Percy Shelley: "My husband . . . was from the first very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage and enrol myself on the page of fame" (xxii). She pictures herself as "a devout but nearly silent listener" to the scientific conversations between Byron and Shelley and, carefully distancing herself from the nightmarish content of her most famous literary production, she attributes the idea for her novel to the inspiration of a dream. According to this

construction, the novel is completed only because "Shelley urged me to develop the idea at greater length" (xxv).

⁵ We can read here the same concern about preserving an authentic and essential humanity as is evident in Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* However, in Moore's story, this concern sometimes appears to be less than whole-hearted, perhaps because the "subject" of the narrative's anxiety is a woman, and women historically have had very little control over the development of notions of what it might mean to be human.

⁶ The project of this feminist SF is, in Teresa de Lauretis' words, "the telling of new stories so as to inscribe into the picture of reality characters and events and resolutions that were previously invisible, untold, unspoken (and so unthinkable, unimaginable, 'impossible')" (*Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* 11).

⁷ For a discussion of a "parodic" vampire text which is both "normative and conservative," see my analysis of Colin Wilson's *The Space Vampires* in "The Vampire and the Alien: Variations on the Outsider."

⁸ Scott includes a throwaway reference to a defective gene (1), in a kind of ironic attempt to situate her vampire within the scientifically rational world conventionally depicted in SF texts.

⁹ A discussion of Scott's parodic inversion of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is not relevant to this present study of SF; suffice it to say that she develops a particularly effective subversion of the sexual politics of Stoker's paradigmatic vampire tale.

PART II

CHAPTER 4A SPECULAR SF: POSTMODERN ALLEGORY

It all goes along together. Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms.
Mapping on to different coordinate systems (Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's
Rainbow* 186)

1. Specular SF

In one of his best-known short fictions, Jorge Luis Borges writes of Pierre Menard, whose "admirable ambition was to produce pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes" (*Ficciones* 48-49). While Menard's *Don Quixote* remains unfinished at his death, Borges' narrator assures us that "The text of Cervantes and that of Menard are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer" (52). Because Menard's *Quixote* is the product of a contemporary consciousness, it resonates with complexities and ironies which are absent from its seventeenth-century "original." "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote" (1939) is an allegorical demonstration of the ways in which context is a vital feature of the "meaning" of any text.¹ It is one of the aims of this thesis to examine some of the new "meanings" of the SF mega-text within the context of postmodernism. In this chapter, I will examine some of the ways in which that "text" has been reinterpreted within the specific context of the contemporary resurgence of allegory.

As extrapolation, SF operates to construct a kind of *supplement* to time present; its movements into the future produce additions to history—and here we might recall Baudrillard's contention that "SF adds [to the universe of the production era] by multiplying the world's own possibilities" ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 310). As SF develops within the context of postmodernism, however, the way in which it signifies tends to move to the axis of metaphor. At its most extreme—or in Baudrillardian terms, its most "implosive"—this leads to the production of SF-as-allegory in which the effect of supplementarity becomes radically deconstructive; that is, rather than *adding* to time present, the supplement becomes *constitutive* of it. It is at this pole that we perhaps reach "the end of SF," dramatized, for example, in the static catastrophe of a work like Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*.

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson notes "the return and the revival, if not the reinvention in some unexpected form, of *allegory* as such, including the complex theoretical problems of allegorical interpretation" (*Postmodernism* 167). Jameson is only one among several theorists of the postmodern who have identified what Craig Owens terms "the allegorical impulse" in postmodern aesthetic production. Brian McHale also discusses "the resurgence of the practice of allegory in our time," citing John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There* (1971), Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and "any text by William Burroughs" as important examples of postmodernist literary allegory (*Postmodernist Fiction* 140-141).

As these studies make clear, "the romantic prejudice against allegory has been lifted and it has once again become possible to call a work allegorical without being pejorative" (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 140). The most important document in the case of the "rehabilitation" of allegory is probably Walter Benjamin's study, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), the concluding section of which, "Allegory and Trauerspiel," is a lengthy meditation on the allegorical nature of German baroque drama. Benjamin's work on allegory has influenced contemporary theorists such as Craig Owens and Paul de Man,² with the result that the allegorical nature of much postmodernist aesthetic production has not only been recognized, but has met with growing critical appreciation.³

The popularity of allegory as a postmodern mode, combined with the increasing influence of SF on experimental writers working within the "slipstream," has resulted in a significant group of allegorical fictions recognizably shaped by the themes and images of the SF mega-text. Although the "allegorical impulse" in these texts places them at the margins of the genre, it is nevertheless the case that they indicate an important direction taken by SF—or a direction that has overtaken SF—within the context of postmodern vanguardist writing, which includes such influential fictions as *Gravity's Rainbow* and works by Burroughs such as *The Ticket That Exploded* (1967)—a text which Burroughs' narrator self-reflexively refers to as "a science fiction book called *The Ticket That Exploded*" (5).

Taking my cue from cultural analysts like Jean Baudrillard and Arthur Kroker, and in the spirit of a contemporary critical climate susceptible to the charms of neologisms—the power of language to

create reality being one of the crucial tenets of post-structuralist thinking—I have named the particular combinations of SF and allegory which are my focus here "specular SF," in part to indicate their ambiguous generic status. According to the *OED*, "specular" refers to that vision which is "obtained by reflection only; not direct or immediate." Specular SF is a "simulation" of SF, a "reflection" of SF; is not quite the "real thing."⁴ It is not immediate. Rather, what specular SF accomplishes in nearly all instances is the construction of a version of the present which is mediated by its "reflection" as the future. In its simulation of what we might already consider a simulacrum⁵—after all, what is the nature of the "reality" which conventional SF sets out to "mirror"?—specular SF produces an "SF effect."

This, of course, may be theorized as one aspect of the postmodern response to the crisis of representation, a turning away from realism as a consequence of realism's failure to overcome exactly this "fact" of the mediated nature of art. This crisis of representation may also help to explain a kind of allegorical appropriation of SF into critical/theoretical projects as well. As I will demonstrate in this chapter as well as in the following chapter on feminist specular SF, important parallels to specular SF fictions can be found in the writings of cultural theorists like Baudrillard and Donna Haraway.

Among the many texts which I would place in the category of specular SF are Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1956; trans. 1962), an ironic revision of the SF alternative-world narrative in which an invented world is in the process of replacing the narrator's empirical world; Samuel Beckett's drama, *Endgame* (1958), which presents its audience with the familiar scenario of survivors in a shelter as a commentary on *this time* rather than some time in a (post)apocalyptic future; Burroughs' *Nova Express* (1964), which characterizes contemporary life in the West as a conspiracy of addiction on the part of the "Nova Mob" whose goal is to exercise total control over human life; Anna Kavan's novel, *Ice* (1967), in which a new ice age—Kavan's metaphor for both heroin and the decay of the human personality—is bringing about the end of the world; Pamela Zoline's classic New Wave short story, "The Heat Death of the Universe" (1967), in which the theory of entropy provides an allegorical reading of the life of a housewife slowly going mad under the growing chaos of her life; Richard Brautigan's counter-cultural utopian novel, *In Watermelon Sugar* (1968), which surrealistically represents a new

world of communal "peace and love" replacing the bad old world of violence and death; Monique Wittig's lesbian-feminist utopia, *Les Guérillères* (1969), which offers a politicized vision of a world in which ideologically-constructed gender differences have been overcome; J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973), an exercise in pornography and violence in which our human dependency on the machine has become obsessively sado-masochistic; Joseph McElroy's *Plus* (1976), in which an "interplanetary monitoring platform" arrives at full individual consciousness, a development paralleled by the changing language of McElroy's text; and Kathy Acker's devastating *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), a narrative pastiche of sex and violence set in a "near-future" world wrecked by disease and terrorism, which is, of course, our own world.⁶

While the marked differences among these texts make it difficult to generalize in any but the most tentative ways about what they have in common, I will argue nevertheless that, in all instances, SF themes and tropes function—frequently parodically—as allegorical components in narratives which are *not* about the future or about alternate or other worlds. *Crash*, *Plus*, and *Empire of the Senseless*, for example, are descriptions of the present (postmodern) situation; in *Ice*, the end of the world provides an extended metaphor for a Kafkaesque obsession with the dissolution of the individual self. For these texts, SF functions as pre-text within the context of postmodernism.

2. SF and Allegory

In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*,⁷ Peter Bürger, whose analysis of allegory is directly based upon Benjamin's writings, suggests that the material appropriated by makers of allegory is "just that, material. [The allegorist's] activity," he continues, "initially consists in . . . killing the 'life' of the material, that is, in tearing it out of its functional context that gives it meaning." The material of allegory thus becomes, according to Bürger, an "empty sign" (70). What we see in specular SF is SF as "empty sign": its conventional imagery comes to stand in for "the end" (*Endgame*), or "addiction" (*Ice*), or "an exploration of our contemporary death wish" (*Crash*), or "a vision of the sixties counter-culture" (*In Watermelon Sugar*), and so on. It becomes clear, then, that writers of specular SF, as Bürger's analysis (making use of terms introduced by Benjamin) concludes, are dealers in "fragments" (69),⁸ that various

elements of the SF mega-text are "torn out" of their conventional contexts and inserted into new ones, with the result that they both acquire new meanings and require new interpretations.

Bürger also notes an isomorphism between the "technique" of allegory and the formal features of the avant-garde allegorical text, one which we can note also in many postmodern allegories. In his critique of George Lukács' description of the realist text as an organic and unified work of art, Bürger writes that

The organic work of art seeks to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made. The opposite holds true for the avant-gardiste work: it proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artifact. To this extent, montage may be considered the fundamental principle of avant-gardiste art. (72)

We see this feature of "constructedness" clearly in the vanguardist texts which are my focus here. "The Heat Death of the Universe," for example, is written as a series of fifty-four "fragments" of narrative, each of them numbered as if in a kind of ironic effort to impose order on the increasingly entropic "reality" of Zoline's protagonist. We also see this formal fragmentation in *In Watermelon Sugar*, which is composed of multiple brief "chapters" whose cumulative effect is less the construction of linear narrative than the accumulation of interrelated images. And the text of Wittig's *Les Guérillères* is broken up into brief segments of prose and lists of women's names, interspersed among which are pages marked with "zero," in Wittig's lexicon the symbol of the feminine. In every case, these texts formally subvert the linear cause-and-effect structure of the conventional narrative, both SF and realist.

Most of these texts, however, do not function as allegories in any traditional—or "classic"—sense. Instead, what we can see in them is a tendency or, to use Owens' term, an "impulse" towards allegory which clearly situates their narrative discourse along the axis of metaphor.⁹ Gay Clifford identifies one crucial way in which contemporary allegory differs from earlier productions when she notes that

all modern allegories . . . either demand fewer and less complex acts of interpretation of their readers, or make the demand ironically. Ironically, because the assumptions

that there is "a meaning" independent of the vagaries of readers' comparative judgments, that it has practical consequences, are viewed with scepticism. (52)

This is a perfectly postmodern *différance*, of course, arising out of the current lack of faith in any possibility of "total" interpretation and the consequent characteristically ironic nature of the hermeneutic enterprise within the postmodern context. Indeed, Clifford reads texts like "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* as "essentially burlesques of allegory and its methods, and of the notion that there is an irreducible core of meaning in any book" (48). It is entirely appropriate, for instance, that Pynchon breaks off Oedipa Mass's story just as she is (perhaps) drawing closer to an answer to the mystery of "Trystero."

Owens speculates "that the allegorical impulse that characterizes postmodernism is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading" (223).¹⁰ Such a concern is evident in many of these works of specular SF in which the referential function of language is of less concern than its nature as signifying system.¹¹ McElroy's *Plus*, for example, transforms the discourses of science—biology, neurophysiology, systems theory—into a kind of poetry, so that the text, as Christine Brooke-Rose points out, "deconstructs in paradox and self-cancellation the very words it uses" (286). In *Les Guérillères*, Wittig's focus is on the power of ideological "languages" such as fairy tales and myths to create social/political reality—rather than simply to "mirror" an "always already" constituted Real. In these texts, therefore, we can see a subversion of the conventional use of language as system of reference shared by both genre SF and realist fiction.

While allegory has appeared in many different guises over the course of the history of literature, certain functions seem to hold true for most allegorical narratives. Owens notes that, "in rhetoric, allegory is traditionally defined as a single metaphor introduced in continuous series" ("The Allegorical Impulse" 208). He goes on to discuss how allegory "implicates *both* metaphor and metonymy" (208), since "allegory is revealed to be the projection of the metaphoric axis of language onto its metonymic dimension"; it "superinduces a vertical or paradigmatic reading of correspondences upon a horizontal or syntagmatic chain of events" (208). That is, in allegorical narrative, the extended metaphor is embedded

in a sequential structure.¹²

Obviously, a propensity to shift into a full-fledged allegorical mode is not at all foreign to SF. In fact, Angus Fletcher routinely includes references to science fiction in his study, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. For Fletcher, SF is an allegorical mode of narrative *tout court* (see, for example, his comment on Wells's *The Time Machine* [275, n. 99]). While such an approach completely obscures SF's extrapolative function and is thus a radically reductive reading of the genre, Fletcher is nevertheless clearly responding to a feature of SF which is potential in its rhetorical nature.¹³

Rosemary Jackson's comments on SF and allegory point to another important similarity between the two: she writes that SF narratives "have a tangential relation to the 'real,' interrogating its values only retrospectively or allegorically. . . . The basic relation is a conceptual one, a linking through ideas and ideals" (43). Jackson thus bases her distinction between SF and the "pure" fantastic on a notion of SF which recalls its popular characterization as "a literature of ideas."

Allegory is also conventionally characterized as a conceptual mode. In his discussion of the distinctions drawn by Romantic theorists between symbol and allegory, for example, Benjamin quotes from Friedrich Creuzer's *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (1819) as follows:

The latter [allegory] signifies merely a general concept, or an idea which is different from itself; the former [symbol] is the very incarnation and embodiment of the idea. In the former a process of substitution takes place . . . In the latter the concept itself has descended into our physical world, and we see it itself directly in the image. (quoted, 164-165)

In other words, for theorists like Creuzer, allegory is an intellectual (cognitive), rather than a metaphysical (transcendent), mode of approaching the "real." Its focus is on ideas, rather than on the (Romantic) Idea.¹⁴

While these correspondences might suggest why SF lends itself to allegorical treatments, a crucial distinction exists between the two in terms of their orientations towards time and history. One

of genre SF's most distinctive features is its ability to historicize the present. As Jameson observes, "its multiple mock futures serve the . . . function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come"; in other words, SF "apprehend[s] the present as history" (245, 246). As such, and in spite of its obvious shortcomings as a literature of extrapolation, it may certainly be read as a "literature of the future," whose thrust is determinedly metonymic and whose philosophical and structural propensities parallel those of the realist novel.

When SF is appropriated into allegorical narratives, however, future time is subsumed in present time; images of the future are simply images, never encoded in the text as literal extrapolations in the manner of conventional SF.¹⁵ They function implosively to "reduce" the future to an extended metaphor for the present. In other words, while the SF function of "estrangement" serves to foreground *difference* between empirical present and imagined future, specular SF frequently subverts this function, foregrounding *sameness*, emphasizing resemblances.¹⁶ As I will discuss below, such a subversion sometimes results in putting the future itself "under erasure," as in various of Baudrillard's cultural commentaries or Ballard's fictions.¹⁷

3. Baudrillard in "America": The Imploding Universe

In his discussion in "Allegory and Trauerspiel," Benjamin characterizes allegory as the product of "the gaze of melancholy" (183); he argues that, for the allegorist, history "assume[s] the form . . . of irresistible decay" (178). Revising Benjamin, I would suggest that, in some works of specular SF, the allegorist is driven less by melancholy for a history in ruins than by a kind of anxious fascination with a future in ruins, that is, with a present which seems to have subsumed and foreclosed both past and future. Nowhere, perhaps, is the force of this fascination more memorably evoked than in the writings of Jean Baudrillard, in which we also find one of the more influential versions of postmodernism as critical condition so far constructed; and nowhere in fiction, perhaps, has Baudrillard's version of postmodernism been more dramatically anticipated than in the writings of J.G. Ballard.

In "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard theorizes that our present moment is defined by the fact of the reduction of the Real to a series of simulacra, "a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.

. . . *The desert of the real itself*" (2). Baudrillard also examines the implications for SF of this "desertification" which is not surprising when we recall that he himself has frequently appropriated SF as "material" for his commentaries on our "era of hyperreality." In fact, Baudrillard's texts can themselves be read as a kind of specular SF and his commentaries on SF within the postmodern context function also as virtual descriptions of his own cultural analyses.

Contemplating "the smooth operational surface of communication," for example, Baudrillard announces that "[t]he era of hyperreality now begins. . . . Here we are far from the living room and close to science fiction" ("The Ecstasy of Communication" 127, 128). For Baudrillard, SF is no longer necessary (or possible) because the future has already happened, that which we dreaded has already come to pass and, like Beckett's characters in *Endgame*, we are living in the midst of an apocalypse-as-endless-present—even as we still await its dreadful "truth"—even as we are already its survivors. This is the paradox of postmodernism as "critical" condition. In this particular brand of specular SF, we can also see the features of the "schizophrenic" world-view of postmodernism, an intense fascination with the present and its plethora of images which has come to displace SF's more conventional function as the site of both (future-oriented) utopian desires and dystopian fears.

Jonathan Benison—perhaps the first English critic to discuss Baudrillard's interest in SF—explains that Baudrillard "uses the repertoire of sf in his speculations to arrive at a theoretical model of 'the form of the catastrophe innate to the era of simulation'" (28); in other words, SF provides Baudrillard with the allegorical material for his own particularly apocalyptic diagnosis of the postmodern condition. In the process, he transforms SF itself into a kind of simulacrum, a simulation of itself.

It is not surprising to discover that Ballard's *Crash* is especially privileged by Baudrillard, nor that an article in *The New York Review of Books* identifies "echoes from the more chiliastic passages of J.G. Ballard's science-fiction writing" (Hughes 31) in Baudrillard's *America* (1989). In his "Introduction to the French Edition of *Crash*," Ballard himself suggests that "To document the uneasy pleasures of living within this glaucous paradise [i.e., our own present reality] has more and more become the role of science fiction" (5).¹⁸ From the perspective of a postmodernism as ongoing crisis, it is indeed no

longer necessary (or possible) to write SF, since the future has already arrived. Given a certain ironic twist, it is now the imagery of "the literature of the future" which seems most appropriate to a description of the present. Baudrillard's writings on SF are themselves allegorical descriptions of the hyperreal.

In "Simulacra and Science Fiction"—written in the late 1970s— Baudrillard meditates upon the ways in which the three orders of simulation, previously outlined by him in "The Precession of Simulacra," function also as fields for the production of different modes of speculative fiction.

According to Baudrillard, the first order of simulation is the product of a kind of "realist" imagination, that is, it is produced within a system of representation in which sign and referent function in harmonious correspondence with each other. For Baudrillard, this is the system which corresponds to the imaginative field of utopian fiction. The first order of simulation encompasses "natural, naturalistic simulacra: based on image, imitation, and counterfeiting. They are harmonious, optimistic, and aim at the reconstitution, or the ideal institution, of a nature in God's image" ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 309). The evocation of theological imagery is no accident. Because, for Baudrillard, it is this system of representation which is no longer possible, we have lost the "real" which it was capable of evoking through the purity of its mimesis. For this reason, it is precisely the "real" which has become utopia for us. Utopia in this context is thus not some better world waiting to unfold some time in the future; it is, rather, a kind of Garden of Eden vanished forever into a more innocent past.

The second order of simulacra corresponds to the imaginary of "SF in the strict sense," or what I have been referring to as conventional genre SF:

productive, productionist simulacra: based on energy and force, materialized by the machine and the entire system of production. Their aim is Promethean: world-wide application, continuous expansion, liberation of indeterminate energy . . . ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 309)

It is the third order of simulacra which, for Baudrillard, is the order of the postmodern, "an order of simulation simulacra: based on information, the model, cybernetic play. Their aim is maximum operability, hyperreality, total control"(309).¹⁹ It is the operation of this third order which suggests

the end of representation, not only the "pure" system of representation of the first order, but also the imaginatively expansionist system of the second order.²⁰

In the rhetorical tone of one whose reply is already prepared in advance, Baudrillard asks,

is there yet an imaginary domain which corresponds to this order? The probable answer is that the "good old" SF imagination is dead, and that something else is beginning to emerge (and not only in fiction, but also in theory). Both traditional SF and theory are destined to the same fate: flux and imprecision are putting an end to them as specific genres. ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 309)²¹

In fact, it is in Baudrillard's own writing, described by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay as "cybercritique" ("The SF of Theory" 390), that we can see one result of this metamorphosis of both "traditional SF and theory."

As Csicsery-Ronay explains,

In the hyperreal, the gap [between the real and the imaginary] disappears altogether. There is no need to differentiate the imaginary from the real; indeed, the relationship between them is inverted, and the real derives from the model This leaves no room for fictional anticipations, nor for any sort of transcendence. Fiction disappears, since it no longer has a dialectical other. (390)²²

Baudrillard proposes that

True SF [i.e., SF corresponding to the third order of simulacra] . . . would not be fiction in expansion, with all the freedom and 'naïveté' which gave it a certain charm of discovery. It would, rather, evolve implosively, in the same way as our image of the universe. It would seek to revitalize, to reactualize, to rebanalize fragments of simulation—fragments of this universal simulation which our presumed 'real' world has now become for us. ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 311)

This is an apt description of Baudrillard's own specular SF, an implosive response to "this universal simulation which our presumed 'real' world has now become for us." Significantly, Baudrillard insists that "SF of this sort is no longer an elsewhere, it is an everywhere: in the circulation of models here and

now, in the very axiomatic nature of our simulated environment" ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 312). Not for nothing does he cite Ballard's *Crash* as "the first great novel of the universe of simulation, the world that we will be dealing with from now on . . ." (319).

Inevitably, if not only the real, but even second-order simulation has disappeared—effectively putting an end to "the 'good old' SF imagination"—then the utopian imagination, function of the field of the first order, can be nothing more than a trace of a memory of a now-impossible interaction with the real. Thus, Baudrillard's conclusion that "it is the real which has become our true utopia—but a utopia that is no longer a possibility, a utopia we can do no more than dream about, like a lost object" ("Simulacra and Science Fiction" 310).²³

Within the context of this commentary on the erasure of the utopian imagination, it becomes possible to read Baudrillard's *America*, a kind of travelogue through "post-utopia," as itself an example of specular SF, an allegory in which a present-day America, the land of simulacra, is poised to overwhelm the "reality" of Europe; for Baudrillard, in America Europe's future is already present.

Within a decade of writing "Science Fiction and Simulacra," Baudrillard is no longer merely dreaming about utopia; he is actually driving through his own radically skewed version of the "lost object"—through America—which, for him, as Andrew Wernick has written, is the "real geo-political referent" of "the triumph of third order simulation" (n.p.). America is also, paradoxically, "utopia achieved" (*America* 77), that is, the profoundly disappointing concretization of utopian desire. Thus, a reading of *America* as specular SF also indicates the collapse of utopian desire in the universe of the simulacrum.

America, the book, is a kind of post-romance, with Baudrillard taking on the role of the post-romantic quest-hero, searching for "the finished form of the future catastrophe of the social" (*America* 5). He finds it in the postmodern utopia, the concretized dream of social perfection, "the primitive society of the future" (*America* 7) which is America. The achievement of utopia is a contradictory achievement, however, at once a triumph and a calamity, for "America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality . . ." (*America* 28). Its tragedy is exactly "the tragedy of a utopian dream made reality"

(*America* 30), in which "every last vestige of a heroic sense of destiny has disappeared" (46).

What seems to be a source of some chagrin to Baudrillard is that America remains so resolutely unconscious of its own tragedy. For America is "naive and primitive; it knows nothing of the irony of concepts, nor the irony of seduction" (*America* 97). Irony, Baudrillard implies, is for Europeans. America is inherently incapable of appreciating itself as the scene of tragedy; only Europe, site of the *failed* utopian dream of Enlightenment, can read the signs of this territory of hyperreality where the hyphenated space between self and consciousness—the space of the postmodern—has disappeared, erased like the distance between the territory and the map, or between the referent and the sign—or between the real and utopia.²⁴

In Baudrillard's America there is only empty space: there seems to be no one there; only Ronald Reagan, J. Paul Getty and Walt Disney are mentioned by name. At the same time, America teems with people who, like Disney camp-followers or like the characters in some SF catastrophe novel written by Ballard, are both the perpetrators and victims of "a general cryogenization of the emotions" (*America* 34). He writes of New York, for example, that "with the marvellous complicity of its entire population, [it] acts out its own catastrophe as a stage play" (*America* 22). The play, of course, is a tragedy, but it has no audience; everyone is up on stage and the distance between actors and roles has imploded, so that they are deprived of that critical detachment necessary for them to appreciate their own performances.²⁵

In Baudrillard's vision, America is tragic because it does not perceive its own tragedy; it is unforgivable because it refuses to acknowledge any need for forgiveness. It is the ultimate hyperreal utopia; and, unlike most fictional utopias, it requires no defenses from the rest of the world, since it is also the map which is slowly but surely covering *all* the territory, the ultimate simulacrum, the model which is *all there is*. Like the landscape of technological disaster unfolded in *Crash*, America embodies "the universe of simulation, the world that we will be dealing with from now on . . ." (319).²⁶ America—the place—is thus a kind of postmodern speculative fiction become, not real, but simulacrum—more real than real.²⁷ It is a "desert forever" (*America* 121) or, to recall a phrase from "The Precession of Simulacra," "the desert of the real" (2). *America*—the book—is specular SF, an allegory

of the death of the real, an expression of the schizophrenic intensity of the post-utopian imagination.

Post-utopia, of course, is unlikely to be "the reconstitution, or the ideal institution, of a nature in God's image" ("Science Fiction and Simulacra" 309); rather, in Baudrillard's analysis, it is the ideal institution of the circulation of signs, the perfection of the hyperreal which "displays all the characteristics of fiction" (*America* 95). In America, in fact, there is no space for nature, because here there is only the desert, which "only appears uncultivated" and which "has nothing to do with nature" (*America* 3). "[T]he extensive banality of deserts" is matched by "the equally desert-like banality of a metropolis" (*America* 9); for Baudrillard, "everything . . . suffers from the same desertification" (*America* 29) and "the whole of America is a desert" (*America* 99).

If, as Ruth Levitas has suggested, utopianism in all its forms is the expression of desire (8), then it is not surprising that, in the America of Baudrillard's post-utopian imagination, the desert functions also as the sign of the *disappearance* of desire: "No desire: the desert," as he concludes (*America* 123).

What is left is

an absolute fascination—the fascination of the very disappearance of all aesthetic and critical forms of life in the irradiation of an objectless neutrality. Immanent and solar. The fascination of the desert: immobility without desire. Of Los Angeles: insane circulation without desire. The end of aesthetics. (*America* 124)²⁸

4. Ballard in "America": After the Fall

"What you have to do," Baudrillard advises all who would travel in America, "is enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction. It is, indeed, on this fictive basis that it dominates the world" (*America* 29). Baudrillard certainly takes his own advice in *America*, but Ballard was there before him, publishing the literal fiction which is *Hello America* in 1981, creating what I read as both the chronological prequel and the imaginative sequel to Baudrillard's meditation. Ballard's text blazes the trail through post-utopia, through "the desert of the real," and as an act of fiction, is able to achieve a kind of ironically appropriate resolution unavailable to even the most dedicated *philosophe* of hyperreality. *Hello America* is the fictional analogue of Baudrillard's postmodern travelogue.

For Baudrillard, the predicament facing America is precisely "the crisis of an achieved utopia, confronted with the problem of its duration and permanence" (*America* 77). This is, of course, a crisis of moral dimensions:

If America were to lose [its] moral perspective on itself [he writes], it would collapse. This is not perhaps evident to Europeans, for whom America is a cynical power and its morality a hypocritical ideology. We remain unconvinced by the moral vision Americans have of themselves, but in this we are wrong. (*America* 91)

Ballard's depiction of the future collapse of America is couched in terms that bear more than a passing resemblance to this vision of a specifically American catastrophe. Once again it is the desert which comes to cover all of America; but in Ballard's text, America is literally "desert forever," a future wasteland created through the exhaustion of its resources and the desertion of its populations. And once again, physical energy and the circulation of the commodity figure as essential components of America's psychic energy. Describing the slow decay of the achieved utopia, Ballard writes that,

as the traffic drew finally to a halt in the first months of the year 2000 . . . the whole nation seemed to lose its vitality, its belief in itself and its future. The sight of millions of abandoned vehicles seemed a last judgment on the failure of a people's will. (47)

Both traitor to and victim of its own achievement, America is now "the failed continent" (42).

Just as Baudrillard does, Ballard positions Europe and America in a relationship of alterity; each is the other's "other." And just as Europe originally read America as the new world, as the blank page, as the empty site of desire, so Ballard's characters, who return from Europe to "the failed continent" in 2114, enact the post-apocalyptic version of this European quest for utopia. This is how seventeen-year-old Wayne, whose perspective is central to the narrative, describes his journey to himself: "Like his unknown ancestors centuries before him, he had come to America to forget the past, to turn his back on an exhausted Europe" (14).

Ballard's fiction is set *after* the fall, however, and the American "desert forever" is no blank page. Rather it is the site of what in Baudrillardian terms we recognize as the third order of simulacra,

a geography inhabited by the images of a popular imagination which were never circumscribed by the real and so are free to continue their endless circulation. Like Baudrillard, Wayne and his fellow travellers "enter the fiction of America" and discover a desert whose surface is already so deeply inscribed by this interminable flow of imagery that from the beginning it traps them in a kind of Baudrillardian fascination with the hyperreal.

Even before their arrival, Ballard's explorers are already caught in this web of enchantment. It is not for them to imprint the stamp of their own desires on the blank page of an empty continent; their dreams have already been conditioned by this lost world, and they come searching for "that vision of the United States enshrined in the pages of *Time* and *Look*, and which still existed somewhere" (51).

In a perverse kind of way, America is once again all potential; its promise is symbolized by the "glittering welcome" (10) waiting for them in New York, which is covered by a fine sand and gleams in the sunlight. Thus the first line of Ballard's text is an ironic *hommage* to utopian desire: "There's gold, Wayne, gold dust everywhere! . . . The streets of America are paved with gold!" (7). Wayne's ambition, appropriately enough for a young man newly arrived in America, is to become the next President of the United States; he is convinced that "All I need is ten years to make this country great again" (157). On their journey from New York to Las Vegas, Ballard's travellers are repeatedly confronted by the still-living images of the lost "America," "the desert [which] has at last got inside our heads . . ." (94). At Dodge City, for example, Wayne sees a "mirage of the Great American Desert":

the enormous figure of a cowboy. Two huge spurred boots, each the height of a ten-story building, rested on the hills above the town, while the immense legs, clad in worn leather chaps and as tall as skyscrapers, reached up to the gunbelt a thousand feet in the air. The silver-tipped bullets pointed down at Wayne like a row of aircraft fuselages (101)

This proves to be, in fact, a gigantic hologram of John Wayne, who is joined by Henry Fonda as Wyatt Earp, the Gary Cooper from *High Noon* and the Alan Ladd of *Shane*. Gradually, however, "America as fiction" takes on a much darker coloration. In Las Vegas, "the electric paradise" (121), Wayne awakes

to find himself "surrounded by Presidents," the robot creations of the mysterious Dr. Fleming, who has constructed "a pantheon of popular Americana" (175)—insane fragments of American cultural history—in his workshop:

Huckleberry Finn and Humphrey Bogart, Lindbergh and Walt Disney, Jim Bowie and Joe Di Maggio, lay stiffly across each other on the floor like drunks. Bing Crosby stood golf club in hand, throat exposed to reveal his voice synthesiser. Muhammed Ali posed in boxer shorts, the stumps of his wrists trailing veins of green and yellow wires. Marilyn Monroe smiled at them as they hurried past, her breasts on the floor at her feet, open chest displaying the ball-joints and pneumatic bladders that filled the empty spaces of her heart. And last of all there were the Presidents, a jumble of arms, legs and faces lying on the work-benches as if about to be assembled into one nightmare monster of the White House. (175)

Most disturbing of all, however, is Wayne's discovery of the "real" president of this post-apocalyptic America, the madman who has set himself up in Las Vegas and who, like Wayne, dreams of rebuilding the "failed continent." President Manson—as his name implies—pays his homage to a darker side of America's lost culture. Manson controls the last remaining cruise missiles on the continent and, recognizing Wayne's ambitions, he takes him on as his vice-president.

Trapped in Las Vegas by Manson's insane destructiveness, Wayne seems finally to break free of his fascination with America, insisting that "These dreams were dead a hundred years ago! All we've done here is build the biggest Mickey Mouse watch in the world. I'm not a real American . . ." (218).

In a kind of dramatization of Baudrillard's theory of third-order simulacra, however, Ballard's text makes it clear that these "dreams" have taken on a life of their own. There is a wonderful incongruity in the fact that *Hello America* provides Ballard's readers with a very rare "happy" ending. Manson is killed—by the robot Presidents—and Wayne is rescued by his friends, who point out to him that "you've just become President of the United States" (228). The party continues its journey, pressing on to "the safety of California and the morning gardens of the west" (234) and the text ends with Wayne

dreaming "new dreams, worthy of a real tomorrow" (236). These are, in fact, very old dreams, centered around his certainty that "he would enter the White House one day" (236).

It seems to me that the almost saccharine closure of *Hello America* functions in a deeply ironic way, demonstrating the inextricable estrangement which "the fiction of America" exerts over Ballard's European travellers; their journey to California signals their final disappearance into the geography of the simulacrum, the territory of the hyperreal. From this perspective, Ballard's fiction enacts Baudrillard's prophecy in "Simulacra and Science Fiction," that "when there is no more virgin ground left to the imagination, when the map covers all the territory, something like the reality principle disappears" (311).²⁹

In Ballard's future America, site of the evaporation of the real, the simulacrum—the model for which there is no original—has come to achieve its own weirdly convincing originality, enjoying the kind of authenticity which Benjamin for one previously located in the unreproducibility of the work of art (cf. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction").³⁰ And the images so reverently pored over by Ballard's characters in ancient issues of *Time* and *Look* embody the paradox of a nostalgia which subsumes both past and future. This is a nostalgia which Baudrillard also recognizes; in America, after all, he glimpses "the ideal type of the end of [European] culture" (*America* 98) in the "crazy, parodic anticipation that is the New World" (*America* 104).

Both texts, therefore, are speculative allegories in which a "fiction" of America functions as the landscape of the future, as the site of utopian desire transformed into post-utopian fascination. It is tempting to conclude that there is indeed a tragic drama being played out here, but I am not referring to the New York version of the "future catastrophe of the social" (*America* 5). Rather, it is a drama being enacted in the European imaginations of Jean Baudrillard and J.G. Ballard, a drama whose central motif is a rather conventional metaphysical yearning for the "real."³¹ The tragic dénouement here is the realization that America, even as fiction, will not satisfy their desire. European angst meets American indifference and is overwhelmed. America is, as it were, (already otherwise) occupied.

5. Postmodernism as Critical Condition

While I do not mean to suggest that postmodernist cultural production cannot also be an effective means of political resistance and perhaps even of political change, it would seem that the particular allegorical formula which produces specular SF frequently results, as in the writings of Baudrillard and Ballard, in the negation of such effectiveness. Beckett's *Endgame*, for example, which dramatizes a kind of paralyzed acceptance of an "endless ending" (Brewer 164), an almost total immobility in the face of the human situation, also seems typical of this strand of specular SF. The play concludes with a quintessential image of such immobility: blind Hamm sits motionless in his chair at the centre of the "universe" while Clov, poised to leave the shelter, stands frozen as the curtain falls.

This quality of numbness is also evident in the final moments of Ballard's *Crash*, in which the narrator, mesmerized by the iconography of violent, technologized death, "already . . . designing the elements of [his] own car crash," meditates on the image of "a thousand crashing cars" (171).³² And Kavan's *Ice* ends on the following note:

A terrible cold world of ice and death had replaced the living world we had always known. Outside there was only the deadly cold, the frozen vacuum of an ice age, life reduced to mineral crystals. . . . I drove at great speed, as if escaping, pretending we could escape. Although I knew there was no escape from the ice, from the ever-diminishing remnant of time that encapsuled us. I made the most of the minutes. The miles and the minutes flew past. The weight of the gun in my pocket was reassuring.
(317-318)

In the words "outside there was only the deadly cold," we hear a parallel to Hamm's warning in *Endgame*, that "outside of here it's death" (9). Just as these characters are being progressively cut off from their own pasts, so the future also proves out of reach, a situation ironically represented in scenarios of the future.

Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar*, in its depiction of a visionary future utopia, proves to be exceptional among these texts for its optimism, but equally passive in its political orientation. *In*

Watermelon Sugar is a gentle—one might even say nostalgic—meditation on life and writing, a serenely ironic and self-reflexive vision of community after catastrophe. Among the twenty-four items listed by the unnamed narrator for inclusion in the book he is in the process of writing is

18. INBOIL and that gang of his and the place where they used to dig, the Forgotten Works, and all the terrible things they did, and what happened to them, and how quiet and nice things are around here now that they are dead. (9)

The twenty-fourth and last item noted is that "this is the twenty-fourth book written in 171 years" (9). There is no need, indeed no place, for history in Brautigan's utopia, which exists, fixed for always, on the other side of whatever fortunate catastrophe has resulted in the emergence of the new world. *In Watermelon Sugar* is counter-cultural mythmaking rather than a call to action, the depiction of a future which is really a (prelapsarian) past.³³

Applying the terminology of Derridean deconstruction, Owens examines the "supplementary" nature of allegory. He writes that allegory deals in "appropriated imagery," to which the allegorist "adds another meaning [T]he allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement" ("The Allegorical Impulse" 205).³⁴ As Owens explains, however, "the allegorical supplement is not only an addition, but also a replacement. It takes the place of the earlier meaning, which is thereby either effaced or obscured" ("The Allegorical Impulse" 215).³⁵

In most of the texts I have mentioned in this chapter, what has been "effaced" or "obscured" is the historical nature of our own present, so that the imagery of SF, whose conventional role is to point out that things will be different in the future, frequently becomes a means of collapsing the future back onto the present in a way which removes the historical specificity and contingency of that present. This also frequently results in a kind of fascinated and paralyzed acceptance of the worst that the present has to offer, as well as a loss of that sense of possible futures which can lead to various forms of political resistance in the present.

Zoë Sofia has identified "the collapsed future" as one of the dominant features of what she refers to as our contemporary "science-fiction culture." Here it is SF itself, or at least one version of SF, which

is actively involved in maintaining rather than resisting "things-as-they-are," foreclosing in the process any real future potential:

The collapsed future tense lies at the heart of our culture of space and time travel. It is the "bound to be" of the ideology of progress, operative in the discourse of those who tell us that since nuclear reactors, deep-sea mining, Star Wars, and space colonies are inevitable parts of our future, we might as well quit griping about their bad side-effects and get on with making the future happen; after all, there's no time like the present. Trouble is, the collapse of the future leaves the present with no time, and we live with the sense of the pre-apocalyptic moment, the inevitability of everything happening at once. (57)

In its critique of the postmodern condition as "science-fiction culture," Sofia's analysis bears significant resemblances to Baudrillard's theoretical allegorization of contemporary socio-political reality as SF catastrophe. However, the point of her analysis is not passive acceptance but an aggressive feminist resistance to and rejection of those science-fictional aspects of the present which threaten to foreclose the future.³⁶ In the following chapter, I will examine some examples of feminist specular SF and their efforts to keep that future open.

Endnotes

¹ Craig Owens points out the paradoxical fact that Borges, much of whose own writing is obviously allegorical, nevertheless wrote contemptuously of allegory, calling it "intolerable" (quoted in "The Allegorical Impulse" 203).

² Note, for example, de Man's collection of essays, *Allegories of Reading*, which examines what he considers to be the allegorical nature of even the most literal textual exercises. His essay, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" has, like Benjamin's study on German tragic drama, had a positive influence on contemporary "readings" of allegory even though, as I will discuss below, de Man's evaluation of the rhetorical nature of all language is itself less than positive.

³ Benjamin opens his section on allegory with a critique of Romantic theorists like Goethe and Coleridge who privilege the "transcendence" of the symbol at the expense of allegory as an aesthetic mode. Owens' study also traces the history of "the critical suppression of allegory" as "one legacy of romantic art theory that was inherited uncritically by modernism" ("The Allegorical Impulse" 209; see also 209-217).

⁴ From the perspective of generic boundaries, we can conceive of specular SF as a kind of generic "monstrosity," the kind of monstrosity Derrida ironically warns us against in "The Law of Genre."

⁵ In Baudrillard's rhetorical universe, the "simulacrum" is that model for which there is no original; as a concept, it is most clearly—if that is the right term to apply to any of Baudrillard's explanations—explicated in his "The Precession of Simulacra" (1983).

⁶ It is also possible to identify less determinate texts, such as Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), an ostensibly realist novel in which, nevertheless, the "airborne toxic event" which is central to the unfolding of the narrative represents a kind of allegorization of contemporary death which borrows from SF tropes.

⁷ Bürger's is a study of the historical avant-garde of the first part of the twentieth century; as such, it is concerned with describing certain aspects of the modernist enterprise. In many ways, however, his comments on allegory can usefully be applied to postmodernist works as well.

⁸ Benjamin writes that "In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune" (176).

⁹ In fact, some critics argue that allegory has all but disappeared in contemporary art production. Carolyn Van Dyke, for example, insists that "the genre has been, if not dead, changed past recognition for centuries" (293). Van Dyke suggests the term "postallegorical" (290) for contemporary works which demonstrate this impulse. Within the context of this present discussion, however, this might prove to be one "post" too many. As Van Dyke herself recognizes, most critics accept the continued production of allegory. See, for example, the studies by Fletcher, Honig, McQueen, and Quilligan in my Works Cited.

¹⁰ While Owens' essay on allegory focuses on contemporary sculpture and the visual arts, it can also be applied, I believe, to literature.

¹¹ It is clear, however, that this concern with reading is not peculiar to allegorical texts only; some of the speculative SF I discussed in my previous chapter, in particular *Heroes and Villains* and *Riddley Walker*, are also obviously obsessed with the textual nature of reality.

¹² Owens contends that "The projection of metaphor as metonymy is one of the fundamental strategies of allegory" (232).

¹³ However, to identify a potential for the development of allegory within the rhetorical structure of SF is not the same as claiming that all SF texts are allegorical. Indeed, as I argue above, when such a potential is fully activated, when the paradigmatic function more or less overwhelms the syntagmatic function of the SF narrative, the result is a "reflection" or "simulacrum" of SF, rather than SF "itself."

¹⁴ Benjamin also highlights this distinction when he writes of the Romantic conviction that "In the context of allegory the image is only a signature, only the monogram of essence, not the essence itself in a mask" (214). This situation suggests an interesting analogy to Derrida's critique of the privileging of speech over writing (as a kind of system of once-removed signs) in *Of Grammatology* (see, for example, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing" 6-26).

¹⁵ In their own paradoxical way, as Samuel Delany argues, the reading protocols of SF require that its imaginary worlds be interpreted "literally," as what they are, not as something else. Kurt Vonnegut may have uncovered an unconscious SF agenda in the title of his story, "The Big Space Fuck" (1972), but the fact remains that this "other" narrative of genre SF is not an allegorical one, because it is not intentional on the part of those Golden Age writers who are the target of Vonnegut's satire.

Allegory is as antithetical to the realist project as it is to that of conventional SF; realism, too, demands an empirical reading; things are what they seem to be, and are intended to be interpreted in just that way. Erich Auerbach's disapproving comment, in his 1946 study, *Mimesis*, that, at one point during the Middle Ages, "every kind of serious realism was in danger of being choked to death by the vines of allegory" (261), might well bear repeating today but for the fact that "the vines of allegory" have probably already "choked" much of the realist/modernist enterprise.

¹⁶ Foucault draws attention to the essential "conflict" between the allegorical world-view and the "scientific" world-view when he writes that, during the period of Enlightenment, "because of an essential rupture in the Western world, what has become important is no longer resemblances but identities and differences" (*The Order of Things* 50). At present, of course, as he also notes, "with the reappearance of language as a multiple profusion, the order of Classical thought can now be eclipsed" (303).

¹⁷ The term "under erasure" derives from Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (see Gayatri Spivak's explanation in her "Translator's Preface" xiv).

¹⁸ *Crash* is exactly the novel one would expect from the following analysis by Ballard of life in the post-industrial West:

an ever more ambiguous world. Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. Thermonuclear weapons systems and soft-drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography. Over our lives preside the great twin leitmotifs of the 20th century—sex and paranoia. . . . Voyeurism, self-disgust, the infantile oasis of our dreams and longings—these diseases of the psyche have now culminated in the most terrifying casualty of the century: the death of affect. ("Introduction to the French Edition of *Crash*" 5)

¹⁹ As N. Katherine Hayles explains, "simulation simulacra" enter

into a new order of non-referential signification that [operates] by displacement rather than representation. Baudrillard calls this the "hyper-real," a theater where everything is at once nonreferential and as real as anything else. (*Chaos Bound* 262)

Hayles suggests the character of television's Max Headroom as an exemplary simulacrum of the third order.

²⁰ Baudrillard, of course, is by no means the only theorist of the end of representation as we thought we knew it, although the terms of his analysis are specific to his own conceptual sphere. In my introductory chapter, especially in section 3, "Postmodernism: Crises and Repercussions," I discuss various "critical" aspects of the postmodern condition, including the crisis of representation. The very impossibility of any longer presuming to capture the "real" risks giving rise to a powerful nostalgia for that lost "real," a nostalgia which is identifiable in the work of both Baudrillard and Ballard.

²¹ The implication here, of course, as Benison points out, is that traditional SF itself has now become "a form of nostalgia" (29).

²² Meaghan Morris's critique of Baudrillard's discursive strategy seems particularly relevant here:

it vaunts the powers of enigma and seductive senselessness, while creating a most severe and rigorous and predictive allegorical mode of reading and writing: so it summons fictions, not to end but to double and redouble ever-expanding exposition: and so, in the end, does Theory . . . come to embrace itself as work-of-art, dire object, and absolute commodity. (210)

Morris's characterization of Baudrillard's project as "ever-expanding exposition" points to a nicely ironic paradox when considered in the context of Baudrillard's own characterization of the contemporary world as radically implosive.

²³ Within the utopian field, the sign functions as the supplement of the real. In the field of the hyperreal, however, signs have devoured the real; we are left with a world of signs only, and no referents—of the map only, and no territory. Simulacra thus function as products of a repetition which in effect *replace* their originals, in a movement of openly destructive supplementarity.

²⁴ In a kind of regression to the realm of the imaginary, the postmodern no longer recognizes itself—in Lacanian terms, this is *post-modernism* as *pre-mirror* stage. America functions here as the object of Europe's gaze, since it cannot see itself.

²⁵ This is like a postmodern version of Rousseau's dream of the perfect communal theatrical event, which has been described as "a unison of reciprocity and shared being such as utopias have imagined . . . a *mise-en-scène* without a gaze, everything seen and nothing to show" (Blau 182). Only Baudrillard, self-styled "aeronautic missionary of the silent majorities" (*America* 13), remains off-stage to tell the tale, to read the signs—at the same time playing out his own (ironic) tragedy, unable to close the gap of his own critical distance, a kind of post-Enlightenment wallflower watching this "last party" (*America* 47) from the sidelines which constitute the space of Europe.

²⁶ The idea of America as simulacrum is echoed in science-fictional form in, for example, the Los Angeles of K.W. Jeter's *Madlands* (1991), which is described as "a reality that had probably never existed in the first place" (27-28). Jeter's Los Angeles is "an imitation of an imitation, a photograph of a mirage" (137).

²⁷ This image of America is by no means peculiar to Baudrillard, however. H. Bruce Franklin's 1980 study of Robert A. Heinlein is subtitled *America as Science Fiction*; and recall Robert Silverberg's comment that "To much of the rest of the world, America is Science Fiction" (22).

²⁸ Benison suggests that the "desert topos" in Baudrillard's writings "serves as an extreme metaphor for stasis. No Future" (27). And, in this context, Morris comments on the logic of Baudrillard's replacement of "desire" with "fascination," when she observes that, for Baudrillard, "fascination is the ecstasy of the *neutral*" (193). It is significant, within the terms of this discussion, that Morris, no admirer of Baudrillardian "hype," borrows the title of her analysis of his writings—"Room 101 or a Few Worst Things in the World"—from a classic *dystopian* text, George Orwell's *1984*.

Marleen Barr appropriates and re-contextualizes Baudrillard's desert imagery in her discussion of *Thelma and Louise*, re-reading it in a positive way to demonstrate that this film is about "feminist escapism" (81). I cannot agree that Baudrillard's desert, rightly described by Barr as a site of "nonhuman signification" (85), can have anything to offer to any kind of feminism, which in whatever form remains based on a commitment to the significance of women's lives. It is for this reason that I conclude that Barr's reading of Baudrillard is, whether deliberately or not, a mis-reading.

²⁹ Here Baudrillard echoes Guy Debord, who, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, writes that "The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map which exactly covers its territory" (Thesis 31).

³⁰ In this context, paradoxically, absolute unreproducibility and infinite duplication lead to the same end: absolute originality.

³¹ It is as if both Baudrillard and Ballard construct an opposition in which American hyperreality ensures European authenticity, even if it is an authenticity on the verge of disappearance.

³² We might see Ballard's earlier explorations of "inner space," in novels like *The Drowned World* (1962) and especially *The Crystal World* (1966), as pointing in this allegorical direction, although they still situate themselves (to a greater or lesser extent) within what can be read as the "real world," and, for this reason, invite an extrapolative as well as a metaphorical reading.

³³ We see the same appropriation of SF imagery serving the same nostalgic purpose in, for example, Brautigan's poem "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace" (1968), which ends with the following lines:

I like to think
(it has to be!)
of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors
and joined back to nature,
returned to our mammal
brothers and sisters,
and all watched over
by machines of loving grace.

³⁴ Terms like "appropriated" imply that specular SF is the product of "high art" incursions into the realm of "low" or popular culture; even in these days of blurred boundaries, most examples of specular SF are vanguardist texts, distinct from commercial genre SF because of their specifically experimental nature.

³⁵ "Replacement" (substitution) is the function of metaphor: specular SF functions at the extreme of the speculative (metaphorical) pole of the genre. Not for nothing does Mark Rose describe Zoline's "The

Heat Death of the Universe" as "an extreme example of the transformation of the generic field into metaphor" (17).

³⁶ It is significant, in this context, that Sofia's specific concerns in the essay from which I am quoting are the abortion debate and military proliferation.

CHAPTER 4B
ALLEGORIES OF POSTMODERN FEMINISM

We're waiting to be born again and this isn't mystical; it's our only chance. (Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* 163)

In his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality," Paul de Man completes his analysis of allegory with a meditation on its relationship to irony, a meditation which is relevant to any study of postmodernism. In both allegory and irony, de Man observes, "the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous" (192), and the gap between the two is necessarily a permanent one. For de Man, this has everything to do with falling, with having fallen, with *being* fallen. It is the shadow of the originary Fall which lends to this essay its particular poignancy. De Man suggests that

The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of inauthenticity.

But, he concludes—and this is the source of what might be characterized as his tragic vision—"this does not . . . make it into an authentic language, for to know authenticity is not the same as to be authentic" (197).

As I discussed in my previous chapter, we can read maps of this knowledge which cannot help itself in texts by Baudrillard and Ballard, texts which dramatize the death of affect and the overwhelming of representation by simulation.¹ These texts all seem to arrive at the same conclusion, one which Samuel Beckett, in typically minimalist fashion, sums up in the first words of *Waiting for Godot*: "Nothing to be done" (1).

Feminism in all its forms, however, is an inherently utopian project. As such, it is propelled by desire and functions within an expanding universe—or, at least, within a universe with the potential for expansion. Even in texts like Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*, whose aim, as I will discuss below, is more descriptive than prescriptive, there is an implied call for action to effect changes in what is perceived as dystopian reality. For feminist writers, recourse to specular SF allegories is not the result

of passivity; rather, it is a means—albeit a somewhat paradoxical means—of focusing on the present moment, of reconfiguring it as a way to insist upon the necessity for change. In this way, the function of the cognitive estrangement of genre SF is reintroduced into specular SF through the political nature of the feminist project(s).

Patricia Waugh, in her study of postmodernism and feminism, writes that

Postmodernism expresses nostalgia for but loss of belief in the concept of the human subject as an agent effectively intervening in history, through its fragmentation of discourses, language games, and decentering of subjectivity. Feminism seeks a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women which has hitherto been denied them by the dominant culture. (9)²

We can read the narrative of this postmodern loss of belief in Joseph McElroy's *Plus*, for example, which recounts the desire—and the ultimate failure of that desire—to re-integrate the splintered self of postmodernism into some kind of coherent whole. McElroy's protagonist—a literally fragmented subject whose brain is now functioning as an IMP ("interplanetary monitoring platform")—undergoes a painful but exhilarating (re)growth to individual awareness. The novel begins with the beginning of this awareness:

He found it all around. It opened and was close. He felt it was himself, but felt it was more.

It nipped open from outside in and from inside out. Imp Plus found it all around
He was Imp Plus, and this was not the start. (3)

Through the integration of memory and new experience, Imp Plus, as it is known to itself, becomes capable, finally, of independent emotional and intellectual activity. At the novel's end, it performs the single act of agency left to it; cutting itself off from CAP COM (ground control), it chooses to fall into and burn up in Earth's atmosphere.³

As I read it, *Plus* is a particularly effective—and very beautiful—allegory about the loss of self and agency in the postmodern world. And this is exactly the kind of story which is of no use to feminist

writers of specular SF. In contrast, such writers—already working within a postmodern form which militates against utopian desire—incorporate elements of irony and parody into their efforts to keep the future open-ended; inauthenticity is a given, an ineluctable aspect of the postmodern condition—part of its working conditions, so to speak.

In a sense, postmodern feminists are always already fallen women, since, like all postmodernists, they are aware of the impossibility of stepping outside of the structures—social, political, discursive—which are the targets of their critiques.⁴ *Pace de Man*, irony can also function as a weapon, arming us against the myths which oppress us, myths of the Fall, for instance; and an awareness of inauthenticity can militate against our own oppressive myth-making tendencies. In her "Manifesto for Cyborgs," Haraway reminds us that irony is also

about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, . . . about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method.

(173)

Haraway's "manifesto" is a work of specular SF as feminist theory; and it has been usefully read alongside Baudrillard's work—especially his "The Precession of Simulacra"—by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay in "The SF of Theory."⁵ It is a theoretical/critical undertaking which "attempts to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism" (Haraway 173), to build in imagination "the constructed revolutionary subject" (Haraway 182). At the centre of Haraway's "ironic dream of a common language for women in the integrated circuit" is the figure of the cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 174).

Like Baudrillard, Haraway also theorizes the closing of the gap between the "real" and the "imaginary" in postmodern life, although, for her purposes, this becomes an empowering rather than a paralyzing development. Contending that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion," Haraway uses the figure of the cyborg to develop a socialist-feminist response to the realities of late-capitalist, nuclear-powered patriarchy, supporting her own undertaking with references

to the texts of feminist SF writers such as Joanna Russ, John Varley, James Tiptree, Jr., and Octavia Butler.⁶ Haraway identifies these writers as "theorists for cyborgs" (197) who have themselves constructed "monstrous and illegitimate" (175) figures in their (science)fictions, the most notorious of which, perhaps, is Russ's "female man." Rejecting much of the project of liberal feminism, Haraway writes an allegory of postmodernist, anti-humanist feminism, constructing a utopian vision which is at once deeply ironic and deeply sincere:

The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world: it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. . . . The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. . . . The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. . . . The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (175-176)⁷

Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* exists in much the same relation to Haraway's "Manifesto" as Ballard's *Crash* does to Baudrillard's theoretical allegories of the postmodern condition; in each case the "fiction" can be read as a narrative version of the "non-fiction." Irony, perversity, the rejection of fathers, and utopian yearnings are all at (serious) play in Acker's novel, whose "near future" setting does little to disguise the fact that it is also our own dystopian present. The figure at the centre of this fictional world is also a "monstrous" cyborg Other—Abhor, who is black, part-woman and part-robot.

Empire of the Senseless, like *America* and *Hello America*, is a kind of postmodern parody of the romance form.⁸ Its quest ends in the desire for "a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn't just disgust" (227), demonstrating in the process a virulent rejection of contemporary patriarchal culture. Acker's novel is a compelling literary subversion of the language,

relationships and political forces which have led to our own crisis-ridden situation, and as such, it offers itself as a politically-aware allegory of the present as dystopian future. Its description/analysis of the present insists on change through the very abhorrence of that present. Not for nothing is *Abhor* so named: "I stood there, there in the sunlight, and thought that I didn't yet know what I wanted. I now fully knew what I didn't want and what and whom I hated. That was something" (227). In its refusal/inability to envision a viable future, *Empire of the Senseless* seems to subvert the very notion of utopian desire. Nevertheless, for Acker, the allegorical mode provides a literary form within which to undertake socio-cultural critique. Through *Abhor*, Acker's text insists that "literature is that which denounces and slashes apart the repressing machine at the level of the signified" (12).

Like Burroughs, whose fragmented texts and penchant for appropriating from a variety of sources are an obvious influence on her style, Acker—whom Paul Di Filippo has dubbed (in his essay of the same title) "queen of the slipstream"—pushes her writing to extremity in order to shock her readers into action. Like Haraway, she recognizes the necessity of creating new myths for our contemporary situation; and like Haraway, she is more concerned with efficacy than authenticity:

What is the language of the "unconscious"? . . . Its primary language must be taboo, all that is forbidden. . . . Language, on one level, constitutes a set of codes and social and historical agreements. Nonsense doesn't per se break down the codes; speaking precisely that which the codes forbid breaks the codes. (134)

However, "if this ideal unconscious or freedom doesn't exist: pretend it does, use fiction, for the sake of survival, all of our survival" (134).

These feminist texts are involved in the double action of at once debunking traditional mythologies and at the same time creating new stories to take the place of the myths which they have rejected. The efficacy of this dual project becomes clear when we recall Frank Kermode's distinction between "myth" and "fiction" in *The Sense of an Ending*:

Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable

gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time . . . , fictions, if successful make sense of the here and now (39)

It is this dual project which is also at the core of Monique Wittig's allegory, *Les Guérillères*. *Les Guérillères* (The Women Warriors) is a classic lesbian/feminist utopia which also insists on the empowering potential of fiction, whether appropriated from patriarchy or newly created. Wittig's women say:

There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. . . . You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember. . . . You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent. (89)

In *Les Guérillères*, Wittig has invented a tale of liberation through violent, carnivalesque disorder, through negation of the languages, systems of logic, and values of the old order. Inserted throughout her exhilarating parable of victorious communal struggle are other stories and tales which appropriate and revise those figures which have worked against women for so long: Minerva and Eve, Medusa and Mary, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty:

[The women] say that they are inventing a new dynamic. They say they are throwing off their sheets. They say they are getting down from their beds. They say they are leaving the museums the show-cases the pedestals where they have been installed. They say they are quite astonished that they can move. (126)

Here what is presented as taking place in some future time is also offered as a prescription for feminist action in the present.⁹ Wittig is keenly aware, however, of both the contingency and the potential coerciveness of all myth-systems: having readily invented narratives of empowerment, her women warriors are equally prepared to put away these stories when their purpose has been served: "they do not want to become prisoners of their own ideology" (57):

They say that at the point they have reached they must examine the principle that has guided them. They say it is not for them to exhaust their strength in symbols. . . .

They say that they must break the last bond that binds them to a dead culture. (72)¹⁰

What seems most to differentiate allegories of postmodern feminism from other powerful allegories of specular SF is the refusal of the former to consider the matter closed. For the Beckett of *Endgame*, there seems to be no possibility of a timely exit from our frozen moment at the end of time; for the Baudrillard of "The Precession of Simulacra," there seems to be no way to return to the "innocence" of "honest" representation here in "the desert of the real" (2).

Rather than producing texts about what Zoë Sofia calls "the collapsed future," however, postmodern feminist specular SF is written in "a future conditional" tense (Sofia 57). Writers like Haraway, Acker, and Wittig make use of SF in their analyses of the present to produce ironically utopian imaginings of a future which, while it is by no means guaranteed—especially as it exists under the threat of what Sofia refers to as "the ultimate science-fiction spectacular, where the future evaporates into a fireball or freezes to double-death in a nuclear winter" (59)—is at least still considered to be contested territory.

Endnotes

¹ In his discussion of Baudrillard's rhetorical strategies, Stephen Watt raises the following question:

if difference itself is eroded, then what becomes of such discourses as feminism, which, especially in its reading of contemporary aesthetic practices, frequently assumes an intervenient posture between the representations of a dominant male culture and something else—truth, whatever variance or nuance it incorporates? Most feminist projects have a vested interest in reality and representation, in difference, all of which Baudrillard's viral imaging destroys. (145)

² For a detailed examination of the notion of agency within post-structuralist feminist theory, see the chapter on "Feminism" in Paul Smith's *Discerning the Subject* (132-151).

³ In some ways, it is tempting to read *Plus* as a kind of postmodern tragedy whose protagonist is the literalization of the "BwO" (Body without Organs) theorized in the anti-psychoanalytic writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. While McElroy's emphasis is on loss and the slow, painful effort to gain back what has been lost, in Deleuze and Guattari's *exercise in fantasy* the BwO is not at all tragic. As an imaginative construct, it represents the limit-point of a kind of unimaginable freedom (see also Chapter 5A, note 12, below):

Where psychoanalysis says, "Stop, find your self again," we should say instead, "Let's go further still, we haven't found our BwO yet, we haven't sufficiently dismantled our self." Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation. Find your body without organs. Find out how to make it. It's a question of life and death, youth and old age, sadness and joy. It is where everything is played out. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 151)

Scott Bukatman usefully notes some interesting correspondences between Deleuze and Guattari's constructions of the BwO and the alternative modes of both physical and non-physical being in

cyberpunk fiction, especially in Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* ("Postcards from the Posthuman Solar System" 353-355).

⁴ This complicity has been most clearly articulated, perhaps, by Derrida, who recognizes the ironic nature of the deconstructive enterprise as one which is itself "always already" compromised. In *Of Grammatology*, for example, he writes of the epistemological conventions which are the targets of his attack that "it is not a question of 'rejecting' these notions; they are necessary, and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them" (13).

⁵ Csicsery-Ronay's description of Haraway's project is of particular relevance within the context of this present discussion:

For an open future even to be conceivable at least two things are required: the dissolution of the myths of time that have informed western technology and mythology (from innocent origin, fall out of nature, and apocalyptic reunion); and the emergence of a conception of virtual timespace, where many possibilities might be realized fatelessly. Such a reformulation of cultural timespace, and necessarily also of conceptions of human freedom, cannot come about by theoretical fiat. The theorization of an open future depends on a condition of existence that can no longer be seen as essential, self-enclosed, and infinitely self-productive. For Haraway that condition exists at the site of the cyborg. (395)

⁶ Haraway's "appropriation" of SF material continues in her history of the development of Western primate studies, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Western Science* (1989). The two sections in her final chapter are entitled "Reading Primatology as Science Fiction" and "Reading Science Fiction as Primatology." This latter section is devoted to a reading of *Dawn*, the first book in Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy, of which Haraway, in terms familiar to readers of her "Manifesto for Cyborgs" writes:

Butler's salvation history is not utopian, but remains deeply furrowed by the contradictions and questions of power within all communication. Butler's fiction is about miscegenation, not reproduction of the One. Butler's communities are assembled out of the genocides of history, not rooted in the fantasies of natural roots and recoverable origins. Hers is survival fiction. (379)

⁷ While recognizing the power of Haraway's utopian imagery, Csicsery-Ronay also offers a critique of its theoretical—that is, its cognitive—weaknesses. Taking his cue from Fredric Jameson's comments in "Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?", he introduces

the problem facing all people who try to imagine a utopian negation of the totality of domination in [the] present. Since the language of the negation is itself part of the language of domination, there is an ironic shadow cast over the conception of emancipated relations—or, to alter the image, a Trojan Horse carried into the wish for the utopian future, from which issue the terms and relations of the present, which then set out to colonize the future. Jameson discerns this absolute terminus of language to be the informing aporia of SF. (398)

Such a critique, of course, is perfectly in conjunction with the direction of Haraway's own writings. It seems unlikely that she would dispute Csicsery-Ronay's charges.

⁸ Linda Hutcheon has noted the popularity of parody as a mode of postmodernist feminist art production. She has also identified the intrinsically complicitous nature of parody, which is a technique that both "install[s] and then subvert[s] conventions" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 151). Acker's parody of *Neuromancer* is interesting in the context of a discussion of postmodern SF, of course, especially in light of the feminist critique of cyberpunk which was introduced in Chapter 2B.

⁹ Not surprisingly, *Les Guérillères* is a product of the heady days of the 1968 May Revolution in France and the rise of the French women's liberation movement, as well as of the struggle for civil

liberties in the United States and the protests against the war in Vietnam.

¹⁰ Judith Butler explains that

The force of Wittig's fiction, its linguistic challenge, is to offer an experience beyond the categories of identity, an erotic struggle to create new categories from the ruins of the old, new ways of being a body within the cultural field, and whole new languages of description. (127)

Butler's analysis of Wittig's writing, both fiction and non-fiction, usefully situates Wittig's particular project of radical feminism within the larger project(s) of feminist post-structuralist deconstructions of the sex/gender system as constitutive of individual identity (see, especially, 111-128).

CHAPTER 5A
PLAYING (AT) THE END OF THE WORLD: SPECULAR SF IN POSTMODERN THEATRE

[A]t whatever point [the nuclear apocalypse] should come into existence, it would be a grand premiere appearance. (Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now" 24)

A screaming comes across the sky. (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 3)

1. Nuclear Wagner

When SF appears on the postmodern stage, it frequently does so in its "specular" form, that is, it tends to become absorbed into dramatizations characterized by their affinity for allegory.¹ One very striking example is the production of Richard Wagner's epic music drama, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, which premièred at the Bayreuth Festival in 1988. Although nothing could be further from the "spirit" of SF than Wagner's mythic "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), this production was staged as taking place after a nuclear apocalypse, the form given to the catastrophe of the final segment—*Götterdämmerung*, "the twilight of the gods."²

This *Ring* was a high-tech production, complete with laser beams and projected city-scapes which towered over the human players in the drama. Harry Kupfer, the director, explains that "we begin this *Ring* with the assumption that the entire story has taken place, and the ruins you see on stage are the result of a type of *Götterdämmerung*." And, he continues,

What we see is our world a million years later, after it has been destroyed by a nuclear bomb. Life was almost wiped out, but the buildings are still standing, rusting away into ruins. . . . The streets of this strange world are crumbling too, and the surviving population lives among these ruins, wondering about their mysterious ancestors.
(quoted in Lieberson 28)

What Kupfer seems to have recognized is the by-now-mythic status of a nuclear apocalypse which exists outside time and history, itself a kind of allegory of the postmodern apprehension of an eternal crisis-ridden present.³ Just as Wagner turned to Nordic mythology in order to capture the "spirit" of the German people, so Kupfer has availed himself of what has perhaps become the most powerful

archetype of contemporary Western consciousness—the nuclear apocalypse—in his effort to ensure the ongoing relevance of the Wagnerian myth. *Der Ring* here becomes our new epic of apocalypse, Wagner is cast as maestro of fin-du-millennium anxiety, and SF is absorbed into the timelessness of a myth which definitively forecloses any possibilities of time future.

If Jean-François Lyotard is correct in his depiction of postmodernity as "incredulity toward metanarrative" (*The Postmodern Condition* xxiv)—and I believe that he is by no means wide of the mark, although this is by no means the whole story—then we might expect that the all-encompassing idea of apocalypse (in the strict Biblical sense) would not play a significant role either in contemporary critical thinking or in contemporary narrative-making, since apocalypse—containing as it does within itself the promise of total revelation as well as of absolute (narrative) closure⁴—might be said to function as the final structural element in *any* overwhelmingly totalizing narrative.

In partial concurrence with Lyotard's analysis of postmodern scepticism, Jameson opens his essay on postmodernism with the observation that:

the last few years have been marked by an *inverted* millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the "crisis" of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. ("Cultural Logic" 53; my emphasis)

Jameson is here defining our postmodern premonitions of various very *specific* endings against that more all-encompassing "sense of an ending" which guarantees not only closure but *significant* closure. Jameson's implication is that, because this is not an age of traditional millenarianism, it is also no longer an age in which our "sense of endings" includes within itself the promise of meaning, of the resolution of conflicts, of completed patterns. We might therefore characterize postmodernism as somehow irresolute, in the sense of unresolved or open-ended.

This, of course, has tended to effect the ways in which narrative structure has been

reconceptualized in recent decades. Traditionally, narrative is a "sense-making" cultural activity, and its endings have functioned to make good sense of things. Postmodern story-telling, however, whether narrative or dramatic, unfolds within a cultural moment whose approach to such comforts as closure and disclosure has been rendered more complex: some narratives eschew completely the notion of closure; more often, those that do provide "climactic" resolutions—such as many of the apocalyptic narratives I will be discussing in this chapter—tend simultaneously to negate the possibility of any meaningful disclosure. While postmodern narrative is still, of course, a "sense-making" activity, the sense it is in the process of making seems to have become *no* sense.

It is not surprising, from this perspective, to find that the end of the world in Kavan's *Ice* is almost as tortuously drawn out as it is in Beckett's *Endgame*; each envisions an almost completely static condition rather than a kind of process. And the (postmodern) post-apocalyptic worlds of *Heroes and Villains* and *Riddley Walker* are occupied by characters obsessed with trying to interpret the signs of the old world which form the detritus of their less-than-brave new worlds.

In spite of our rejection of the consolations of climax and closure, however—or, perhaps, because of it—contemporary apprehensions that we are living through/within/after various "particularized" endings have frequently given rise to what Charles Newman impatiently complains of as an inflationary "rhetoric of crisis" (11). We can see this traced in the theoretical writings of the past few decades. Derrida, for instance, theorizes, if not the end, then at least the "historical closure" of Western metaphysics (*Of Grammatology* 14); Foucault represents "man" as "an invention of recent date . . . perhaps nearing its end" (*The Order of Things* 387); and Baudrillard has announced that we have moved "From a capitalist-productivist society to a neo-capitalist cybernetic order that aims now at total control" ("The Orders of Simulacra" 111). Popular critical themes, several of which I have rehearsed during the course of this thesis, include "the death of the subject," "the death of the author," "the end of the book," and "the crisis of representation."

The postmodern sense of crisis⁵ has inevitable ramifications for SF, the literature of (secular) apocalypse. Certainly, our contemporary image of apocalypse is a nuclear one; it is the ultimate narrative

"climax."⁶ In my chapter on cyberpunk, I discussed the rejection of apocalyptic themes in some contemporary genre SF. This chapter will examine the appropriation of elements of the SF mega-text into certain productions of postmodern theatre and performance art. In the process, I will demonstrate how the nuclear apocalypse—which Derrida has called "a fabulous specularization" ("No Apocalypse, Not Now" 23)⁷—can sometimes function as the spectacular climax in postmodern theatrical productions.

2. Setting the Scene

In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), the third volume of William Gibson's cyberpunk trilogy, we find Slick Henry at the Factory in Dog Solitude, obsessively constructing gigantic and grotesque "robots" with names like the Witch, the Corpsegrinder, and the Judge. It is significant within this discussion of postmodern theatre that the source of Gibson's inspiration for Slick Henry and his robots is the performance art of Mark Pauline's San Francisco-based Survival Research Laboratories, whose productions have themselves been influenced by the image-field of contemporary SF. Scott Bukatman calls SRL performances "entertainment in a cyberpunk novel, today" (*Terminal Identity* 291).⁸

These are productions which collapse the traditional boundaries between the organic and the technological in ways which inevitably recall the deconstructions undertaken by cyberpunk; in effect, they remove the human body altogether from the space of performance. As described by John Shirley, SRL productions also exemplify the integration of a science-fictional mode of imaging into a theatre attempting to represent aspects of life at the fin-du-millennium:

fierce-looking dark machines . . . move like giant scorpions to smash at other machines with a spiked mace on a chain; . . . stalk one another with hammers and flame throwers and machine-guns firing pellets. They are strikingly martial stylizations contrived with the stripped-down elegance of automatic weapons, their parts of black metal sometimes fused with bone and bits of mummified animal, expressing a stomach-churning actualization of the inter-breeding of organism and machine. (61)⁹

Another performer who also demonstrates the influence of SF within the deconstructive context of postmodernism is Stelarc, an Australian artist who performs what he refers to as "the body obsolete"

in productions which are occasionally as grotesque as those of SRL. Stelarc argues that

It might be the height of technological folly to consider the body obsolete, yet it might be the highest of human realizations. It is no longer of any advantage to either remain "human" or to evolve the species. The body must burst from its biological, cultural, and planetary containment. It is time to *desynchronize*, *diversify*, and *depart*. Obsolete but aware, the body can plot its own demise—its own vanishing. (19)¹⁰

Granted that both Stelarc and the members of SRL "perform" outside the context of anything that we would consider conventional theatre, their work, so obviously influenced by the tropes of genre SF, may nevertheless be interpreted as postmodern responses to what I will discuss below as the problematization of the concept of theatrical *presence* in contemporary theatre.

3. The Crisis of Theatrical Re-presentation

Postmodern theatre not only rejects many of the conventions of the realist stage, but also, in many cases, replaces what we commonly think of as theatrical convention with the more amorphous and indeterminate forms of performance art. In order to appreciate the extent of this revisionary activity, however, it is useful to examine what, in retrospect, appears to be the unavoidable failure of dramatic realism in Western drama.¹¹

Of the many forms of cultural production available for contemplation at this moment in our history, none has invested more completely than the theatre in the concept of presence, presence as it is embodied by actors on a stage. This embodiment, this fact of *live* performance, is perhaps the essence of Western theatre, serving for example to differentiate it from electronic forms of dramatic representation such as the cinema. It is in the theatre of realism that we see the most striking results of such an investment, in the theatre which is—inevitably, and in spite of itself—also the theatre of illusion.

Herbert Blau suggests that "what is universal in performance is the consciousness of performance" (171). Every performance is, in this sense, always already a re-presentation, a re-production, and a doubling. In fact, it can be argued that nothing is *less* capable of guaranteeing presence than performance. From this perspective, the anxiety of representation, which has always haunted

Western theatre, may be read as a paradigmatic symptom of the postmodern condition, which, in dramatic terms, is a metatheatrical condition, that is, a condition of self-reflexive performance.¹²

Antonin Artaud's vision of a "theatre of cruelty," which would "break through language in order to touch life" (13), arose at least in part from his passionate desire to realize the kind of presence on stage that realist theatre had seemed to promise but which it failed to achieve.¹³ The crisis of representation in the realist theatre can be conceptualized as a crisis of authenticity originating in the unavoidable gap between actor and role which realist performance seeks to overcome, but which always threatens to undermine the "truth" of performance. Because absolute presence is exactly what is rendered impossible by the very fact of performance, the failure of the promise of realist theatre arises from its own ineluctably duplicitous condition.

This is so because dramatic activity functions as a kind of stand-in for the presence which is both enacted and deferred on the stage. What Jacques Derrida has termed *différance* is at work here—*différance* as the gap, both spatial and temporal, which comes to exist in any activity of mediation, in this case the mediation of performance, the space for "play," for example, between actor and character. It is *différance*, therefore, which serves not only to create the impression of the full presence of the character, but also—paradoxically and ironically—to maintain its absence.¹⁴

4. Re-presenting Mimesis

. . . the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (*Hamlet* III.ii.20-24)

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle observes that drama arises from "the instinct of imitation" (55), and his theory of *mimesis* was one of the most powerful of the historical forces which aimed the trajectory of Western theatre toward the theatre of illusion. Now that we find ourselves on the far side of, or to one side of, this trajectory, however, we might re-read Aristotle and conclude that he has always been right about the mimetic function of drama. The theatre of illusion, for example, "mirrors" a world in which language is reliable, in which the "real" may lie buried but can be unearthed, in which the "self" is more

or less at one with itself. An early modernist play like Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1891), shaped as it is by the influence of realism, relies on the certainty that, while language may not always speak the *true*, it nevertheless can be made to speak the *real*. We are not so naïve as to believe much of what Hedda says in dialogue with other characters like her benighted husband, George Tesman; instead we are invited to delve *beneath the surface* of appearances to the realities of her complex dramatic personality (in a kind of Freudian excitement, we set out to answer the "meaningful" question at the "centre" of the play: "What does Hedda want?").

Several characteristics of realist theatre—correspondences with which can clearly be seen in features of both the realist novel and traditional genre SF—can be isolated here: the reliance on language as signifying system and its close (if oblique) relationship to that which it signifies; the surface/depth opposition upon which much of realist drama models itself (we can call it "getting to the bottom of things");¹⁵ and the conviction that dramatic character is a unified (however complex) structure which can and will reward analysis (so that both containment and closure are products of this analysis).

In its own very different way(s), postmodern theatre is also involved in a mimetic enterprise. It too endeavours to "mirror" the "real." Within the postmodern cultural field, however, there has occurred a drastic alteration in the ways in which aspects of the "real" have come to be defined. Language is an arbitrary system of signs which are culturally produced and which undergo constant transformation; the mediation of language and other culturally-defined codes creates a permanent division between the "real" and our interpretation of it; and the self is a fragmented and unstable entity, created in language, never identical with itself, continually in process.

It is not surprising, therefore, to note that the fantastic seems now to be the aesthetic mode most conducive not only to postmodern fiction, but to postmodern theatre as well. When contemporary theatre turns to the fantastic, it does so not in opposition to "reality"; rather, the fantastic has become the new *mise-en-scène* of that reality. In a parallel movement, we can also note a renewed interest in, and the subsequent proliferation of, various forms of performance art, experiments which attempt to break with traditional notions of linear plot-structure and conventional character development.

It seems appropriate as well that irony, the trope of absence, has become a privileged trope of postmodernist drama. Paul de Man's comment in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," that "ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity" (197), not only neatly encapsulates the divisiveness of the ironic stance, but applies with special appropriateness to the divided self of performance.

De Man's statement may be read as reflecting Samuel Beckett's concern with "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Three Dialogues* 103). Not for nothing is Beckett considered both the last of the modernists and the first of the postmodernists of twentieth-century theatre.¹⁶ Janus-like, he faces both towards the wordless alienation of an exhausted high modernism and the decentred fragmentation of a burgeoning theatrical vanguard.¹⁷

5. Staging the End of the World

Clov: Do you believe in the life to come?

Hamm: Mine was always that. (*Endgame* 49)

Beckett's *Endgame* (first performed in 1957 as *Fin de partie*) suggests so many intriguing facets of the nature of specular SF on the postmodern stage—most notably in its dramatization of the postmodern sense of an ending—that I will introduce it here as a kind of working paradigm for the various other productions I will also include in this discussion. *Endgame* dramatizes a situation very familiar to SF readers. Four characters, blind Hamm, crippled Clov, and Hamm's "accursed progenitor[s]" (9), Nell and Nagg, appear to be the only survivors of a disaster which has destroyed the rest of humanity and depleted the earth beyond restoration (Hamm: "Outside of here it's death" [9]). As the play unfolds, however, this situation becomes more and more complex and ambiguous, demonstrating a degree of semantic indeterminacy which is the frequent hallmark of postmodernist aesthetic production.

Endgame is specular SF: it functions as a kind of allegory which appropriates the icons and images of SF as a way of commenting, not on time future, but on time present. As specular SF,

Endgame provides its audiences with the semiosis of a future which has already arrived, a future collapsed back onto the present. And it does so in terms which are unremittingly, if complexly, apocalyptic.

Endgame is also a particularly powerful dramatization of the sense that contemporary reality has become the victim of an irremediable break with history, a break which has resulted in a feeling of timelessness which is also a feeling of perpetual crisis.¹⁸ In the world of *Endgame*, the time is always "the same as usual" (4), and Beckett's characters are caught within a compulsive repetition of (in)action and dialogue—Clov to Hamm: "You've asked me these questions millions of times" (38)—even as they demonstrate a desperate desire to finish their drama. Clov's first statement as the play opens sets the tone: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (1). He threatens to leave Hamm over a dozen times during the course of the play and his climactic speech reveals a yearning for the freedom that an End will grant: "Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes. . . . I open the door of my cell and go. . . . When I fall I'll weep for happiness" (81). His (not-quite) last line is appropriate on more than one level: "This is what we call making an exit" (81).

Within the brief (meta)theatrical event which is *Endgame*, we seem to encounter the end of the world, but also an end endlessly deferred, as well as the suggestion that the end has always already occurred.¹⁹ There seems no way to make any choice about what the situation actually is. The title of this pre/post-apocalyptic vision provides one way into the indeterminacy of the play's often conflicting "meanings," resonating as it does with significances beyond its immediate reference to the final moves in games of chess. Repeatedly, for example, we see Beckett's characters "rehearsing" an end to their situation, playing out the apocalypse, as it were, which at the same time defers its arrival. Hamm, for example, puts out his own death near the end of the play:

Perhaps I could throw myself out on the floor.

[. . .]

Dig my nails into the cracks and drag myself forward with my fingers.

[. . .]

It will be the end and there I'll be, wondering what can have brought it on and

wondering what can have . . . (he hesitates) . . . why it was so long coming. (69)

His extremely melodramatic (ham-like) monologue culminates in the desire to "get it over!" (70). But just as Clov's constant threats to leave the shelter come to nothing, so Hamm is merely playing at one version of the End; he is never ready for the finality of death.

Anticipating Baudrillard's stance of ironic resignation, *Endgame* dramatizes the apocalypse with irony rather than nostalgia. Beckett's characters do not desire any kind of renewal. It is the cessation of process, the End, which alone will draw the curtain on their sufferings, which will guarantee that the whole nasty cycle will not recur. Hamm rather grandiosely suggests that "it won't all have been for nothing" (33), but perhaps not even its ending can confer significance on this long, agonizing winding down.²⁰ It is no wonder that Hamm fears to leave the last flea alive: "If he was laying we'd be bitched" (34). The fear of renewal is even more emphatically (and metadramatically) expressed when Clov seems to see a boy outside their shelter:

Clov: Bad luck to it!

Hamm: More complications!

[. . .]

Not an underplot, I trust.

[. . .]

Clov: A potential procreator? (78)

This figure, a rather conventional symbol of hope, is in this context also a threat, precisely because he represents a potential future which would continue the farce/tragedy of human life. In its steadfast renunciation of the future, *Endgame* might indeed be said to pronounce "the end of science fiction" as the literature of extrapolation.

Kermode suggests that apocalyptic fictions—and I would include here non-fiction criticism as well as narrative fictions—"reflect[] our deep need for intelligible Ends. We project ourselves . . . past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (8). The final tableau of *Endgame*—Clov poised for an exit which he will never make, Hamm motionless in

his chair—dramatizes Beckett's refusal to project his characters, and by extension, his audience, past the End. Within the tension of the dramatic situation, we remain trapped with his characters within "our spot of time in the middle" which is already the End, although it offers neither comfort nor conclusion. The refusal of closure is also, therefore, the repudiation of any possibility of apocalyptic revelation, which is at once the object of fear and desire in Beckett's drama.

6. Theatre for the Fin-du-Millennium

As stage event, the end of the world suggests some of the ways in which the apocalyptic imagination plays itself out here at the fin-du-millennium. One reason for its appearance on the postmodern stage, as *Endgame* demonstrates, is its potential for simultaneously realizing and undermining exactly that kind of closure which has been so ubiquitous a feature of Western drama. The yearning for closure is no longer "innocent" and to stage apocalypse is to ironize and subvert the very notion of closure even as we dramatize its allure. Catherine Belsey, for instance, has defined "classic realism" in part as "an illusionist mode which struggles to efface its own textuality, and which depends on a structure of enigma leading to closure which is also a disclosure" (*The Subject of Tragedy* 87). The conventional structure of dramatic narrative—which we see already in place in Aristotle's *Poetics*—builds to a climax, which is also a revelation, and concludes on a note of resolution. And, as so many Renaissance tragedies assure us, the one dramatic event that can most satisfactorily guarantee this combination of resolution and revelation on the stage is death.

As Belsey's pairing of closure and disclosure implies, the moment of death has also conventionally been the moment of revelation. Death as "the moment of truth"—of disclosure—supports the humanist notion that truth resides within the self.²¹ For this reason, characters speak from a position of truth in their final moments, and their last words serve as beacons for those who live on after them. The chilling power of Lear's final vision of the void—"Thou'lt come no more,/Never, never, never, never, never!" (V.iii.307-308)—arises at least in part because it must be accepted as the truth, even if this is a truth of absolute negativity.

On the contemporary stage, the apocalypse functions as a kind of collective death-scene. In part,

this dramatizes our tendency to conceptualize the postmodern condition as a critical condition. However, the function which death traditionally played has taken on different configurations, because one of the projects of postmodernism has been to drive a wedge between closure and disclosure, so that apocalypse—whether individual or collective—no longer contains within itself that promise of presence and revelation which was for so long an integral part of the structure of Western drama.²²

7. American Apocalyptic Drama

The postmodern sense of an ending is an essential component in Sam Shepard's *Action* (first performed in 1975), a play which is, in many ways, a kind of reprise of Beckett's *Endgame*, but one with a particularly American flavour. Indeed, the influence of American popular culture on Shepard's work is one of its most marked features and SF is an important element not only in *Action*, but, as I will discuss below, in several of his other works as well.

The situation dramatized in *Action* inevitably recalls that of *Endgame*. Shepard introduces us to four characters, Lupe and Liza, Jeep and Shooter, who are isolated in (what is perhaps) a cabin, cut off from a world (which seems to be) in the throes of some "crisis" (178). Like the "game" in *Endgame*, the "action" in *Action* goes nowhere; in the process, it self-reflexively calls attention to itself as a series of events played out on a stage. In a very brief space of playing time, the four characters prepare and consume (what might be) a Christmas dinner; they argue, sometimes violently; they attempt to find their place in a book they have been reading to each other; they re-enact various dreams and memories; they wait. An unnamed but self-conscious dread permeates this play, recalling not only the paranoia of *Endgame*, but also its ironic absorption in role-playing. In a monologue which may or may not be of particular relevance to the overall "action," Shooter concludes that

Just because we're surrounded by four walls and a roof doesn't mean anything. It's still dangerous. The chances of something happening are just as great. Anything could happen. Any move is possible. I've seen it. You go outside. The world's quiet. . . . Then you go inside. It's a shock. It's not like how you expected. You lose what you had outside. You forget that there even is an outside. The inside is all you know.

You hunt for a way of being with everyone. A way of finding how to behave. You find out what's expected of you. You act yourself out. (178)

Like *Endgame*, *Action* seems to imply that some apocalyptic event has cut these characters off from the world of everyday reality. Their understanding of events is even less clear-cut, however, than is Hamm and Clov's; consequently, the action in *Action* amounts to inaction, the kind of time-passing familiar to us both from *Endgame* and from *Waiting for Godot*. As one of Shepard's characters muses: "Sometimes I have the idea I know what's happening to us. Sometimes I can't see it. I go blind. Other times I don't have any idea. I'm just eating" (178).

References to the mysterious book which is so important to the four characters seem especially significant: Liza calls attention to a sequence in which "they've [no antecedent supplied] returned to earth only to find that things are exactly the same. Nothing's changed" (172); the characters' continuing and frustrating failure to find their "place" leads Lupe to ask: "Was it near the place where the sky rained fire?" (184). Shepard's references to standard SF scenarios serve at once to construct a familiar frame for *Action* and to render its "meaning" even more indeterminate. Its ending is fully as inconclusive as the final moments of *Endgame* and we find ourselves deeply implicated in a postmodern ironization of "last things," as concepts like presence and closure continue to elude both Shepard's characters and the audience which watches them in action/*Action*.

In his early play, *Icarus's Mother* (first performed in 1965), Shepard ironically dramatizes another seductive feature of the apocalypse as theatrical event, that is, its potential as "spectacle."²³ The "spectacular" value of the end of the world is clearly spelled out in the description of a fireworks display which is also an airplane crash which is also the nuclear holocaust. These scenarios are played offstage against the ecstatic commentary of one of the characters:

You guys have missed the fireworks altogether. You should have seen—this is something to behold, this is. . . . If only the weather and the atmospheric conditions had been better than they were it would have beaten the Hindenburg by far more than it did. . . . By that I mean to say a recognized world tragedy of the greatest proportion

and exhilaration to make the backs of the very bravest shudder with cold sensations and the hands moisten with the thickest sweat ever before known, ever. And the eyes to blink in disbelief and the temples to swell with pounds and the nose run with thick sticky pus. Oh you guys should have come, you guys should have. What a light!"

(*Icarus's Mother* 57)

In plays like *Icarus's Mother* and *Action*, Shepard demonstrates a postmodern proclivity for allegory which clearly aligns his work with that of the Beckett of *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*. This allegorical bent is even more evident in one of his most accomplished plays, *The Tooth of Crime* (first performed in 1972), which is also his most science-fictional play, albeit of the specular kind. In *The Tooth of Crime*, Shepard revises the convention of individual-death-as-personal-apocalypse within the context of postmodern irony.

The Tooth of Crime dramatizes the dissolution of the essential self of traditional Western theatre within the framework of an SF Western. In its use of "street" language and its vision of a violent future controlled by anonymous powers, it dramatizes a world which bears some resemblance to the fictional worlds of the cyberpunk writers whose work appeared in the following decade. As one of them explains: "The streets are controlled by the packs. They got it locked up. The packs are controlled by the gangs. The gangs and the Low Riders. They're controlled by cross syndicates. The next step is the Keepers" (219).

In this ambiguously futuristic setting, two rock star/killers, Hoss and Crow, compete for first place in the "charts." As befits a play which has been interpreted as "a kind of allegorical conversation—or rather confrontation—between modernism and postmodernism" (Wilcox 564), their contest climaxes in a showdown of language and style, won by the younger, more flexible Crow, who warns Hoss that "We gotta break yer patterns down, Leathers. Too many bad habits. Re-program the tapes" (245).

The central action in *The Tooth of Crime* is, finally, a confrontation between Hoss's outdated reliance on absolutes, on codes of behaviour, on myths of origins, and Crow's cynically ironic acceptance

that the self is all style and surface, a simulacrum. Shepard's play seems to conclude, however regretfully, that this is all the reality we are likely to experience in our contemporary moment. Repeating—as if in quotation marks—the narrative resolution which has conventionally guaranteed a return to full presence, *The Tooth of Crime* ends with Hoss's suicide: "The mark of a lifetime. A true gesture that won't never cheat on itself 'cause it's the last of its kind. . . . It's mine. An original. It's my life and my death in one clean shot" (249).

While for Crow, the postmodern everyman as SF-punk killer, "the image is my survival kit" (249), Hoss stakes his life—and his death—on a reality which is not just illusion. He offers the audience his death—"a true gesture"—as an event which at once resolves the dramatic action and reveals its final truth. But what is the truth of this truth invoked by Hoss? Shepard's play seems to require us to ask this question. While suicide means for Hoss that he can "take [his] life in [his] hands . . . in death" (249), those of us who have watched the play unfold are uncomfortably aware that this has been a play about performers and performances, about surface style and theatrical gesture. Hoss's "true gesture," the play seems to suggest, is itself a performance, one which ironically recalls the heroic suicides of earlier tragic heroes at the same time as it calls into question the possibility of such "heroic" action in the present.²⁴ As an audience of one, Crow's only reaction to Hoss's apocalyptic gesture is a rather ironic appreciation of its theatricality: "Perfect, Leathers. Perfect. A genius mark. I gotta hand it to ya" (249).

8. The Terminal Stage

When SF is appropriated to the allegorical aims of the postmodern stage, that is, when it becomes specular, the result—which we have already seen in specular SF fictions—is a foregrounding of the present at the expense of the future. This tendency may well be a result of the nature of theatre itself, as a cultural form devoted to notions of presence and immediacy—however illusory such devotion has proven to be.

While *The Tooth of Crime* stages the death of the individual as theatrical spectacle, Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* (first performed in 1976) once again invokes the spectacular appeal of

the collective apocalypse, eschewing, however, the ironic overtones embedded in *Icarus's Mother*. Wilson's "post-Wagnerian" operas, of which *Einstein on the Beach* is probably the most well-known, exemplify a tendency in postmodern theatre—which we see also in much postmodern fiction—to move away from conventional character, dialogue, and narrative. As Bonnie Marranca suggests in her discussion of what she terms "the theatre of images,"

The absence of dialogue leads to the predominance of the stage picture in the Theatre of Images. This voids all considerations of theatre as it is conventionally understood in terms of plot, character, setting, language and movement. (78)²⁵

Because theatre is less reliant on words than is fiction, its attempts to achieve an immediacy of re-presentation—a kind of post-Artaudian effort to close the breach between performer and performance—have often resulted in the displacement of verbal language by the language of spectacle.²⁶ As a result, Wilson's operas more properly belong to performance art than to conventional theatre. Deconstructing traditionally rigid separations between theatre and other kinds of performance, Wilson's productions are imposing collages of dance, music, song, verbal "gestures" (as opposed to dialogue), setting, and high-tech stage machinery.²⁷ Wilson literally decentres the human on his stage: "actors" are overshadowed by towering sets, dialogue is replaced by dream-like sequences of vocal repetition, pure sound, gesture, and movement. Here, for example, are the opening lines of one "speech":

Will it get some wind for the sailboat. And it could get for it is. It could get the railroad for these workers. And it could be were it is. It could Franky it could be Franky it could be very fresh and clean. It could be a balloon. Oh these are the days my friends and these are the days my friends. It could get some wind for the sailboat.

(Program notes to *Einstein on the Beach*)

In *Einstein on the Beach*, Wilson stages the apocalypse as postmodern spectacle; the beach of the title is the terminal beach of the nuclear age. However, for all its recognition of our situation within technology, *Einstein on the Beach* avoids any real engagement with history. As Marranca writes,

Einstein on the Beach is [Wilson's] most specifically historical piece simply because

there is a direct link between what is being related in the opera (the destruction of the world through technological means) and the historical figure it is named after Yet it remains a meditation on the modern age rather than an attempt to explore the life of Albert Einstein. Einstein is both inside (as a presence) and outside (playing his beloved violin from a position between stage and orchestra pit) the work, witness to history on trial. Or is the opera offering a grotesque pun: the earth burned while Einstein fiddled?
(119)

This is, finally, the dilemma of "the theatre of images." It indicates a tendency in some postmodern performance art to fiddle with spectacle instead of critically engaging our contemporary situation, allying itself to, rather than resisting, the postmodern cult of the simulacrum, becoming in the process a neo-avant-garde which is in fact neo-conservative. Poised within the hypnotic repetitions of Philip Glass's minimalist score, the images of scientist and spaceship on the stage of *Einstein on the Beach* are, finally, passive, drained of their ability to "mirror" any reality outside their own reality as pure image.

What we can here conceive of as a kind of postmodern "collapse of representation" demonstrates once again the way in which specular SF—here allied to the specific spec(tac)ularity of the theatre of images—can tend to obliterate traditional SF's capacity to (in Jameson's terms) "historicize the present" ("Progress Versus Utopia" 244). Within the context of the theatre of images, the "meaning" of SF is emptied out, and its images are appropriated into the construction of the spectacle. This failure of historicization arises, at least in part, from the nature of theatre itself as the cultural form most devoted to the notion of an unmediated representation. In a study of cinematic spectacle, Dana Polan suggests that we respond to spectacle as "the triumph of an impression of presence" ("Above All Else to Make You See" 61). His comments are as relevant to the massively popular productions of Andrew Lloyd-Webber as they are to Wilson's operas:

The image shows everything, and, because it shows everything, it can say nothing; it frames a world and banishes into nonexistence everything beyond that frame. The will-to-spectacle is the assertion that a world of foreground is the only world that matters

or is the only world that is. (61)²⁸

Glass himself produced an SF "spectacular" in 1988, the evocatively titled *1000 Airplanes on the Roof*, scripted by David Henry Hwang. Here we have perhaps the ultimate replacement of "content" by spectacle on the postmodern stage, as Glass's beautiful score and Jerome Sirlin's breathtakingly high-tech sets completely overwhelm the weak narrative line concerning the capture of a character, "M," by aliens. While the plot resembles something we might read about in *The National Enquirer*, the production as production was exquisite. As one reviewer noted, "The triumph of the production lay in its overwhelming effect" (Kosson 209).²⁹

The "theatre of images" carries postmodern self-reflexivity to one logical extreme: it re-presents nothing but itself and demands only that we submit ourselves to its seductive "spectacularity." At the same time, ironically, it might also be said to have at least partially satisfied the overarching desire of Western theatre for unmediated presence in the space of performance. Because it eschews self-consciousness, however, repudiating the ironic metatheatricity of works like *Endgame* and *The Tooth of Crime*, the theatre of images must also refuse to engage with its own historical moment; it remains unconscious of itself, and its invitation to audiences is to participate in exactly this same form of unthinking spectatorship.³⁰

As productions from *Endgame* to *Einstein on the Beach* attest, there is something intensely and perversely appealing, here at the fin-du-millennium, in the notion/nature of the nuclear climax, an event billed by feminist theorist Zoë Sofia as "the ultimate science-fiction spectacular" (58) and by Derrida as "a fabulous specularization" ("No Apocalypse, Not Now" 23). Douglas Robinson explains Derrida's fascination with the apocalyptic imagination "precisely as the 'purest' form, the most mythical expression of the most extreme statement of the metaphysics of presence" (251; n.1; my emphasis).³¹ As Derrida realizes, even postmodern scepticism can succumb to the lure of the rhetoric of crisis at this point in our history, so that we must constantly remind ourselves that these end-games are, in fact, fictions which we ourselves have invented.³²

Given that—like the Elizabethan world—all the postmodern world is indeed a stage, it makes

a very great difference whether we submit to the seductions of the imagery of resolution or manage to maintain an ironic distance from our own (on-stage and off-stage) productions.³³ This is the distance which is maintained, for example, in the lack of closure of plays such as *Endgame* and *Action*, in the ironic treatment of spectacle in *Icarus's Mother*, in the subversion of the notion of "the moment of truth" in *The Tooth of Crime*.

These issues are central to any discussion of theatre at the present moment, for cultural as well as for political reasons. As Herbert Blau insists, "Whether or not the consciousness of performance is to be forgotten is perhaps the major issue of the history of performance, as it certainly is of postmodernism" (179).

Endnotes

¹ It is not my intention in this chapter to undertake anything like an analysis of the interactions of SF and theatre. My specific focus is on certain postmodern performances which have been influenced by the SF mega-text; even more limiting, my interest is in productions which are also examples of specular, that is, allegorized, SF.

SF and theatre have a long, if troubled, history, as demonstrated by the fact that *Frankenstein* was adapted for the English stage as early as 1823 (within five years of its original publication). However, not only are "realist" SF productions haunted by the technical difficulties of representation which have been (more or less) solved by the cinema; even more problematic is the fact that the staging of "realist" (that is, conventional and metonymic) SF seems to be defeated in advance by the nature of theatre itself, which frames everything within a "presentness" that subverts SF's historicizing function. In Dragan Klaić's study of utopian and dystopian elements in modern drama, he suggests that "Future setting goes against the materiality of the stage . . ." (211; n. 6). See note 27 for further comments on the nature of the theatrical subversion of the function of conventional SF.

The following two essays contain useful information about the history of SF's appearances on the conventional stage, as well as some analysis of the difficulties involved: Samuel R. Delany, "'Flow, My Tears . . .': Theatre and Science Fiction" and Ralph Willingham, "Scenic Realism and Science-Fiction Theatre."

² It seems almost eerily prophetic that, in a discussion of the flood archetype in Western literature, Northrop Frye begins a statement with the words, "From Wagner's *Ring* to science fiction." Frye's focus, not surprisingly, is on apocalypse, and he goes on to note that the use of this archetype "usually takes the form of some cosmic disaster destroying the whole fictional society except a small group, which begins life anew in some sheltered spot" (203). This scenario bears a striking resemblance to the *Ring* production I am discussing here.

³ Frank Kermode, for example, identifies the development of a contemporary apocalypticism arising from the conviction that ours is "an age of perpetual transition in technological and artistic matters . . . an age of perpetual crisis in morals and politics" (28). And Umberto Eco, within the context of a discussion of "our own Middle Ages," writes of "an age of 'permanent transition' for which new methods of adjustment will have to be employed" (84). He also notes that "recurrent themes of atomic and ecological catastrophe suffice to indicate vigorous apocalyptic currents" in contemporary cultural production (79).

In "Aids and Its Metaphors," Susan Sontag also recognizes the specifically apocalyptic tenor of the present moment:

AIDS may be extending the propensity for becoming inured to vistas of global annihilation which the stocking and brandishing of nuclear arms has already promoted. With the inflation of apocalyptic rhetoric has come the increasing unreality of the apocalypse. A permanent modern scenario: apocalypse looms . . . and it doesn't occur. And it still looms. We seem to be in the throes of one of the modern kinds of apocalypse. (175).

Sontag's discussion of this "modern kind of apocalypse" bears more than a passing resemblance to Baudrillard's (cf. Sontag 175-177).

⁴ According to Northrop Frye, "Apocalypse means revelation, and when art becomes apocalyptic, it reveals" (125). As I hope to make clear, the "truth" of the postmodern apocalypse would seem to be the complete lack of possibility of arriving at anything like "truth"; this is, it might be argued, itself a sufficiently momentous revelation.

⁵ In their introductory essay to *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*—a text which both enacts and meditates upon some of the more extreme visions of the contemporary moment—Arthur Kroker and David Cook state that

Ours is a *fin-du-millennium* consciousness which, existing at the end of history in the

twilight time of ultramodernism (of technology) and hyper-primitivism (of public moods), uncovers a great arc of disintegration and decay against the background radiation of parody, kitsch, and burnout. (8)

Adam Parfrey's deliberately hysterical *Apocalypse Culture* is another extreme text which is both symptom and analysis of the "sense of an ending" of our present fin-du-millennium. In a prefatory note, J.G. Ballard describes the collected writings in *Apocalypse Culture* as "the terminal documents of the twentieth century" (n.p.).

⁶ Brian McHale notes, for example, that "Most postmodernist futures . . . are grim dystopias—as indeed most science-fiction worlds of the future have been in recent years. The motif of a world after the holocaust or some apocalyptic breakdown recurs" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 67).

Bonnie Marranca, in her discussion of Meredith Monk's performance piece, *Recent Ruins* (1980), suggests that "the real threat of nuclear holocaust has entered our consciousness, reconstituting the myth of the Apocalypse" (103).

⁷ Derrida also notes the "fabulously textual" nature of the nuclear apocalypse: "for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it" ("No Apocalypse, Not Now" 23).

⁸ Bukatman also discusses the (inevitable?) links between SRL productions and Ballard's *Crash*, noting that SRL "staged a small homage to *Crash*" when Re/Search published its special J.G. Ballard issue (*Terminal Identity* 291-292).

⁹ Re/Search's *Industrial Culture Handbook* (1983) includes a report on Mark Pauline's "performance work"; the chapter opens with the following description:

Mark Pauline manufactures maniac machines with personalities . . . then turns them loose on people in parking lots and other public sites amidst dynamite detonations, spurting blood, rockets on cables, dead animal-robot mutations, mechanical flipping men, huge blowers, giant paintings of public figures being mercilessly mocked and

tormented—the general atmosphere of a rusty carnival in hell exuding sweat, fire and poisonous fumes. Often machines battle each other to the death, fall on each other from great heights, and in other ways demonstrate the follies of impersonal power and injustice. Hieronymus Bosch come to life in the graveyard of the Industrial Revolution (Vale & Juno 23)

It is interesting to note the similarities between these "productions" and the opening scenes of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991); both *Terminator* films are influenced by the imagery of cyberpunk.

¹⁰ The major influence on Stelarc's ideas about "the body obsolete" is Hans Moravec's *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1985), which insists upon the inevitability of a post-biological evolution for the human race. In his review of Moravec's book, Roger Penrose argues that many of the ideas in *Mind Children* are "clearly science fiction," and complains that Moravec doesn't make it clear "where the science ends and the science fiction begins" (5).

While Stelarc's theories of the future of the body are clearly also science fictional, his performance art may be read as a kind of technological extension of Antonin Artaud's "theatre of cruelty."

¹¹ It is hindsight, of course, which allows me to construct this cause-and-effect narrative, a narrative imbued with the kind of historical inevitability which should be received with a certain scepticism; under the sign of the postmodern, the critic as well as the performer stands at a certain ironic distance from her own productions.

¹² Making my own use of the metaphor of "the great stage of the world," I am suggesting that the postmodern condition is a metatheatrical condition, as we play out our "real life" roles at this period in our history both sincerely *and* self-reflexively. Like the Renaissance theatre, postmodern theatre is a theatre of intense self-commentary; for this reason, if for no other, Renaissance theatre is more in tune with our present "condition" than is most of the drama which has intervened in the four centuries between it and us. It is from this perspective that I concur with Peter Brook's comment that

Just as in astronomy a certain planet swings closer to the earth in its orbit, and all the astronomers get out their telescopes because this is the moment to study it to advantage, in the same way for the first time in four centuries the Elizabethan era with all its values has swung closer to us than it has ever been. (91)

¹³ It was Artaud who originally theorized the "body without organs," which concept has been taken up by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (see note 3 in Chapter 4B). See also Scott Bukatman's discussion of the BwO and its conceptual interaction with postmodern SF in *Terminal Identity*, 325-328.

In his deconstruction of the concept of presence in the theatre, Derrida describes Artaud's ideal "theatre of cruelty" as follows:

The stage will no longer operate as the repetition of a *present*, will no longer *re-present* a present that would exist elsewhere and prior to it, a present whose plenitude would be older than it, absent from it, and rightfully capable of doing without it It will not even offer the presentation of a present, if present signifies that which is maintained *in front of me*. Cruel representation must permeate me. And nonrepresentation is, thus, original representation. ("The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation" 237)

¹⁴ To make use of another Derridean concept, we might say that an actor is always a necessary *supplement* to the creation of her character, which is never present in itself, but is always endlessly deferred by the very fact that the actor stands *in the place of* the character. The actor, therefore, is a *sign* of the character and, as Derrida reminds us, "the sign is always the supplement of the thing itself" (*Of Grammatology* 145).

From the perspective of a semiotic analysis, Keir Elam notes that "the performer is always to some degree *opaque*, putting his [sic] own histrionic strategies on show as an index of his [sic] own

virtuosity" (86). At the heart of the most realistic characterization, therefore, there is always the "canker" of metatheatre, with its ironic affirmation of the duplicitous nature of performance.

This is why even Artaud recognized the impossibility of ever actualizing his "theatre of cruelty"; this is also why he admitted that "As much as I love the theatre, / [So] much am I, for that very reason, its enemy . . ." (quoted in Esslin 89).

¹⁵ As Robert W. Corrigan notes:

We should remember that the idea of a "subtext" was first presented by Stanislavski at the end of the last century. This idea only makes sense if there is an underground action, which must be given expression, which has a beginning, middle, and end once you find the hidden thread. (159)

There is a definite correspondence, of course, between the foregrounding of surface detail in texts like *Neuromancer* and the repudiation of notions like "underground action" in the postmodern theatre.

¹⁶ David Lodge, for one, contends that Beckett "has a strong claim to be considered the first important postmodernist writer" (221).

¹⁷ While a full treatment would fall outside the scope of this thesis, it is worth raising here the question of the nature of tragedy at the postmodern moment. In his response to Thomas Van Laan's study, "The Death-of-Tragedy Myth," Bert O. States argues that what he calls "the tragic vision" is "the *terminal realization* that nothingness is the likeliest of two possible extremes in any dialectic on human destiny" (10). He also points out that

a *terminal* view of existence and what constitutes a terminal preoccupation is bound to vary with each era and to be intimately bound in the progress and capacity of art to render it without iterating itself to death. ("Tragedy and Tragic Vision" 16)

Not for nothing does States include Beckett's dramas in this discussion of "the tragic vision" (17-19); and, I would suggest, non-dramatists like de Man, J.G. Ballard, and (on occasion and, perhaps,

most closely related to the absurdist vision of Beckett) Baudrillard, in the extremity of their views of the postmodern condition, might also be characterized as "tragic" writers.

Finally, if we accept States' concept of the tragic vision as that which embodies "a terminal view of existence," it is worth considering the "tragic" nature of many of the works of specular SF which are the focus of my present discussion.

¹⁸ In Jameson's discussion of this sense of an endless present as "one major theme" of our contemporary situation, he writes of it as

the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. ("Postmodernism and Consumer Culture" 125)

¹⁹ The similarity to Baudrillard's "dramatizations" is obvious; as Meaghan Morris notes of the latter's apocalyptic rhetoric, "No more Last Judgement: even the Apocalypse is over, and we're out the other side" ("Room 101" 199).

²⁰ States, who describes Beckett's theatre as "the central instance of dramatic tragic vision in the post-Ibsen to postmodern era," argues that

[Beckett] is the quintessential case of modern extremity and the theatre has not yet caught up with him. . . . Unlike any other modern dramatist, he went for 'the thing itself,' in Lear's dreadful term, rather than one of its social or psychopathic derivatives and that is why his is the most radical vision of the postmodern era. . . . In Beckett the protagonist is no longer defined by deeds or by social status . . . but by what may be called the act of being conscious. His people are post-experiential, all *anagnorisis* No reversal is necessary because reversal is strictly a function of social experience,

or of the deed coming 'full circle.' No death because death is the point of deliverance from both the social and the tragic life. (17)

²¹ We see the seductiveness of this position even in the postmodern pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*, whose narrator writes of "the moment of assassination" as "the moment when power and the ignorance of power come together, with Death as validator":

What passes is a truth so terrible that history—at best a conspiracy, . . . to defraud—we never admit it. The truth will be repressed or in ages of particular elegance be disguised as something else. (192)

²² Derrida writes:

Literature belongs to this nuclear epoch, that of the crisis and of nuclear criticism, at least if we mean by this the historical and ahistorical horizon of an absolute self-destructibility without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge. ("No Apocalypse, Not Now" 27).

²³ In many ways, *Icarus's Mother* is even more elusive than *Action*. Ross Wetzsteon has suggested that, while Shepard's early plays in particular don't "seem to be 'about' anything," they are in fact "actually about their highly charged atmospheres . . . [T]heir surreal dislocations perfectly [convey] Shepard's sense of the psychic pressures of contemporary life" (4).

²⁴ Hoss's suicide is another moment which raises the question of postmodern tragedy. Even if we read it as a parody of the tragic dénouement, parody is, as Linda Hutcheon points out, complicitous with the object of its ironic imitation (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 151). If we consider de Man's commitment to the "tragic" nature of ironic inauthenticity, then we might consider that the "real" tragedy in *The Tooth of Crime* is perhaps the very impossibility of the tragic gesture which the play dramatizes.

²⁵ Marranca also identifies the metatheatrical nature of the "theatre of images," since the productions

which exemplify it for her—in particular, those of Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman (Ontological-Hysteric Theater), and Lee Breuer (Mabou Mines)—“are about the making of art”; that is, they “focus on process” (79).

²⁶ It is significant in this context that Guy Debord opens *Society of the Spectacle* with the argument that

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a *representation*. (Thesis 1)

For Debord, spectacle and representation are complicit phenomena, symptoms of the loss of unity, of the “separation” at the root of capitalist society. Although the context of his critique is different, his analysis of “*Separation* [as] the alpha and omega of the spectacle” (Thesis 25) recalls post-structuralist analyses of the divided nature of performance (see, for example, Derrida’s “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” and Blau’s “Universals of Performance; or, Amortizing Play”).

²⁷ Wilson describes his theatre as follows:

I thought about gestures or movements as something separate. And I thought about light as something separate, and the decor, the environments, the painted drops, the furniture, and they’re all separate. And then you have all of these screens of visual images that are layered against one another and sometimes they don’t align, and then sometimes they do. If you take a baroque candelabra and you put it on a baroque table, that’s one thing. But if you take a baroque candelabra and you place it on a rock, that’s something else. . . . This theater is about that. (quoted in Sayre 129)

²⁸ Polan’s observation also suggests that the theatre is a less than ideal venue for the working out of conventional—that is, forward-looking, metonymic, extrapolative—SF, since it necessarily encourages spectators to focus on the immediacy of the images with which they are presented, rather than on the

implications of these images, that is, on their historical contingency and specificity.

This is also, of course, the dramatic dilemma which most engaged Bertolt Brecht; not for nothing was his theory of "cognitive estrangement" (*Verfremdungseffekt*) later applied to genre SF by Darko Suvin. In view of the lack of complete success of Brechtian dramatic distancing, however, it would seem to be as difficult to maintain an emphasis on dramatic self-reflexivity as it is to effect its complete effacement. Brecht's "failures" in practice seem to have arisen because of the recurrent breakdown of exactly that distance he sought to maintain between actors and roles—and both actors *and* audiences persist in "identifying" with memorable characters and character-conflicts in his plays. Noting Brecht's awareness of this problem in regard to efforts to politicize the theatre, Polan quotes Brecht's observation from "The Literarization of the Theatre," that "This [theatrical] apparatus resists all conversion to other purposes, by taking any play it encounters and immediately changing it so that it no longer represents a foreign body within the apparatus . . . it theatres it all down" (quoted in "Above All Else to Make You See" 66).

²⁹ A *Time* review describes *1000 Airplanes on the Roof* as "a science-fiction music drama that is part Freud, part Kafka and part Steven Spielberg" (Walsh 54).

³⁰ It is worthwhile to recall here Baudrillard's claim that, "With the marvellous complicity of its entire population, New York acts out its own catastrophe as a stage play" (*America* 22). It may be that his complaints about the unself-consciousness of "America" are not completely wide of the mark.

³¹ Robinson draws readers' attention to the following statement by Derrida from the latter's analysis of the "tone" of apocalyptic rhetoric:

Whoever takes on the apocalyptic tone comes to signify to, if not tell, you something. What? The truth, of course, and to signify to you that it reveals the truth to you; the tone is the revelator of some unveiling in process. Unveiling or truth, apophantics of the imminence of the end, of whatever returns at the limit, at the end of the world. Not

only truth as the revealed truth of a secret on the end or of the secret of the end. Truth itself is the end, the destination, and that truth unveils itself as the advent of the end. Truth is the end and the instance of the Last Judgment. The structure of truth here would be apocalyptic. And that is why there would not be any truth of the apocalypse that is not the truth of truth. ("Of an Apocalyptic Tone . . ." 84; quoted in Robinson 251, n.1)

³² Kermode warns that "if we forget that fictions are fictive we regress to myth . . ." (41); he strongly supports what he calls "the clerly rejection of romantic tenements" (43).

³³ Marranca notes the tendency of the American military complex to appropriate the metaphors of theatre and performance for their own dubious ends; she argues that

The kind of imagery rehearsal that is taking place all around us elaborates a profoundly disturbing mode of thinking because it regards history only in terms of spectacle: Europe as a "staging ground." Not only does it abstract war, it aestheticizes war and our feelings towards it to the point of anaesthesia. (148)

CHAPTER 5B
"LANGUAGE IS A VIRUS FROM OUTER SPACE":
THE PERFORMANCE ART OF LAURIE ANDERSON

I am in my body as other people are in their cars. (Laurie Anderson, quoted in Sayre, 150)

Ironic distancing is central to the work of Laurie Anderson, a musician, video artist, and performance artist whose interest in the contemporary influences of science and technology occasionally moves her work into the territory of specular SF. Anderson's critique of the contemporary American political environment, as well as her commitment to feminism, make her an appropriate figure with which to conclude this discussion of theatre and performance art within the context of SF and postmodernism.

While Wilson's operas are postmodern theatre as "high art," the performance art of Laurie Anderson is at once "difficult"—as she satirically advertises in "Difficult Listening Hour" (*United States I-IV*)—and accessible to the popular imagination.¹ Her multilayered presentations emphasize the uncertainties of the realities within which she works, at the same time as they demonstrate the ironic self-reflexivity of her performances: "Are you talking to me or are you just practising for one of those performances of yours?" (*United States I-IV*).

"Language Is a Virus," the title of one segment of Anderson's work, *United States I-IV* (1978-1982), points to Anderson's ongoing exploration of the vicissitudes of communication in the postmodern world.² Much of her work undertakes a sceptical problematization of contemporary sign systems. Unlike some postmodern artists, however, Anderson is more interested in negotiating the perils of language than in succumbing to its inherent limitations. The "stories" that she tells in her performances function as satirical allegories of the postmodern condition of contemporary America.

In a 1981 interview, Anderson stated that, "in terms of technology affecting people's lives on a daily basis, that is what my work is really centered on. How does a person really cope with being in an electronic world" (La Frenais 262). The following, for example, is an excerpt from her 1979 *Americans on the Move*, recounting a fictional "conversation" with a teenage girl in an airplane:

If she didn't understand something, it just "didn't scan." Everything was circuitry . .

. electronics . . . switching. We talked mostly about her boyfriend. He was never in a bad mood—he was in a bad mode. Modey kind of guy. The romance was rocky and she kept saying, "Oh man like, it's like it's so DIGITAL." She just meant that the relationship was on again/off again. [. . .] It was a language of sounds . . . of noise . . . of switching. [. . .] Current running through bodies. On again/off again. One thing instantly replaces another—a language of the future.

Put your knees up to your chin.

Have you lost your dog?

Put your hands over your eyes.

Jump out of the plane.

There is no pilot.

This is the language of the on again/off again future. ("From *Americans on the Move*" 48)

Rather than meditations on literal apocalypse, Anderson's texts, both visual and verbal, invite a thoroughly ironic consideration of the problematics of life in the present moment:

The moon . . . 1999 . . . we move up . . . move out . . . on the move.

And we leave our flag . . . planted up there . . .

[. . .]

Cause we're Americans. We're Americans on the moon.

Yeah we're colonists. Colonists on the move and we're moving,

On the move. Moving out. ("From *Americans on the Move*" 52-53)

Anderson's observations on the schematic human figures which were emblazoned on the outside of the Pioneer spacecraft also demonstrate her fascination with the indeterminacies of language:

In our country, we send pictures of our sign language into outer space. They are speaking our sign language in these pictures. Do you think they will think his hand [referring to the slide of a male figure with its hand raised] is permanently attached that

way? Or do you think they will read our signs? In our country, good-bye looks just like hello. It is a sweep on the dial. In our country, you don't ever know if you have really arrived. You don't even know if you have left yet. In our country, good-bye looks just like hello. Say hello. ("From *Americans on the Move*" 55)

This particular segment has been analyzed in some depth by Craig Owens in his study of postmodern allegory.³ As I pointed out in my last chapter, Owens attributes the allegorical propensity of much postmodern cultural production to "its preoccupation with reading" (223). In the piece quoted above, Owens notes that Anderson highlights a situation in which "two *clearly defined but mutually incompatible* readings are engaged in blind confrontation in such a way that it is impossible to choose between them," and he "reads" this as an allegory of the problematization of "the activity of reading, which must remain forever suspended in its own uncertainty" ("The Allegorical Impulse" 220).⁴

In "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," an early attempt to theorize the interactions of feminism and postmodernism, Owens suggests that the possibilities for a politicized postmodern cultural production lie most particularly in the work of feminist artists such as Anderson. He relates this to the fact of the deconstructive nature of both postmodern art and feminism as theory and practice.⁵ In this essay, he also builds on his previous discussion of Anderson's choice of the Pioneer spacecraft figures to note that it is the figure of the male who is

chosen to represent the inhabitants of Earth for the extraterrestrial Other, it is the man who speaks, who represents mankind. The woman is only represented; she is (as always) already spoken for. ("The Discourse of Others" 61)

It is significant, in this context, that a frequent strategy of Anderson's performances involves parodic "cross-dressing." Not only does she wear masculine clothing, but she electronically lowers her voice to a male register as well.⁶

From Beckett to Anderson, there is a direct line of concern with the limitations and proliferations of language. Her various and unexpected juxtapositions of dramatic forms and electronic media seem both to recognize the exhaustion of language—"nothing with which to express"—and to extend the search

for new ways in which to satisfy "the obligation to express." This is, of course, the double bind of both art and criticism at the fin-du-millennium.

Anderson's performance piece, *Empty Places*, which premiered in 1989, continues her electronic commentary on life in postmodern America. She writes of it:

Like many people, I slept through the Reagan Era politically. When I woke up, everything looked really different. . . . [T]he national mood was characterized by fear, intolerance, and straight-ahead greed. Suddenly everything seemed deeply unfamiliar. . . . I decided to write about this new place, not because I had any solutions, but because I needed to understand how and why things had changed. (*Empty Places: A Performance* 113)⁷

Like Baudrillard's *America*, *Empty Places* is the exploration of a particular culture at a particular moment in its history. Unlike Baudrillard's "America," however, Anderson's is a densely populated, immensely troubled, but potentially utopian space—as opposed to Baudrillard's hyperreal "utopia achieved." Segments of *Empty Spaces* focus on issues such as the wages paid to working women, the abortion issue, the national debt, and the absurdities of the American military machine. America's dystopian features here provide the incentive for a future-oriented political critique.

Anderson's exploration of technology is more than simply a thematic element in her work; it provides the visual context of her performances as well, of course, as the means. The set for *Empty Places* seems itself to exist in a kind of science-fictionalized present:

The set . . . consisted of two twenty-foot projection towers on either side of the stage and three movable units in the center. These structures were covered with screens for rear projection. Forty-five slide and film projectors were located in the structures and controlled by one image computer. In addition there were projectors from front-of-house positions for a large screen hung at the back of the stage. After several weeks on the road we were able to get the entire system running in just a few hours. (113)

Both creating this context and embedding herself within it, Anderson thus becomes the subject of her

own performances.

Like an embodiment of Haraway's allegorical cyborg or Cadigan's fictional hackers, Anderson performs at the interface of the human and the machine, celebrating, as Henry M. Sayre suggests, "the modes of power implicit in technology" even as she subverts them (150).⁸ Her high-tech performances, variously live, recorded, and filmed, are ironic in the extreme; the monologues that weave through her complex pop-inflected electronic music are aimed at defamiliarizing—in a very science-fictional sense—the idiosyncrasies of life in an age of electronic codes and images.

In Anderson's work, the critical distance between audience and performance, collapsed in the visual romanticism of productions like *Einstein on the Beach* and *1000 Airplanes on the Roof*, becomes reinforced, renewing in the process the possibilities for a politicized postmodernism. Laurie Anderson is a rare instance of the *rapprochement* of the feminist self with contemporary technology. She performs herself as the technologized subject in an active, critical, and ironic way—that is, in a postmodern way.

Endnotes

¹ To date, Anderson has released three commercial albums, as well as the five-album recording of *United States I-IV* (despite its title, *United States I-IV* is composed of five LPs). Her performances take place in rock-music venues as well as vanguardist performance spaces, and her concert film, *Home of the Brave* (1986), was released commercially. Even more so than Philip Glass, to whom she is frequently compared, Anderson is popular in both "high" and "low" art contexts.

From the perspective of feminist politics, this popularity presents its own particular problems, as Jeanie Forte points out:

The threat and power of assimilation is constant, and most visible in the make-up of the performer's audience; Laurie Anderson's appeal for a mainstream rock audience illustrates this problem—just how much does the work retain any potentially subversive impact once it has achieved commercial viability? To what extent do those commercial endorsements render any radical politics impossible? Yet, if performance artists are doomed to relative obscurity, playing only to audiences of the "converted," how will societal consciousness be raised (or abraded) on a larger scale? Should this even be a conscious goal? (268)

² Anderson attributes the statement to William Burroughs (although neither I nor Trent University's resident expert on Burroughs' fiction has been able to find its source), and it neatly captures the ironic, science-fictional imagery which runs through both his work and her own. In a 1981 interview, Anderson said that "In terms of politics, Burroughs is one of my heroes . . . and also in terms of his style, his absolute precision" (La Frenais 255). Burroughs participated in Anderson's second commercial album, *Mr. Heartbreak* (1984), and has appeared with her on stage as well as in her performance film, *Home of the Brave*.

³ Marleen Barr also briefly mentions Anderson's use of this image in the Preface to her *Feminist*

Fabulation, although she does not acknowledge Owens' earlier—and much more detailed— discussion (xi-xii). She also neglects to mention Anderson's particular interest in the indeterminacy of the "sign language" represented in this image.

⁴ This recalls Paul de Man's discussion, in "Semiology and Rhetoric," of the ambiguity inherent in Archie Bunker's question: "What's the difference?" Like Anderson, although somewhat more anxiously perhaps, de Man's interest lies in the inherently unstable semantic function of language as a signifying system. In the example he takes from Archie Bunker, he points out that "it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely contradictory) prevails" (129). "What's the difference?": on one hand, this phrase can indicate precisely the speaker's *indifference* to the situation at hand, while, on another, it can be taken as the expression of a genuine desire for information.

⁵ Some facets of the complex interactions of feminism and postmodernism, which Owens tends to de-emphasize, are discussed in chapters 2B and 4B. Linda Hutcheon also argues that, while feminisms and postmodernism may occasionally become overlapping projects, it would be a mistake to conflate them:

Both enterprises clearly work toward an awareness of the social nature of cultural activity, but feminisms are not content with exposition; art forms cannot change unless social practices do. Exposition may be the first step; but it cannot be the last. Nevertheless feminist and postmodern artists do share a view of art as a social sign inevitably and unavoidably enmeshed in other signs in systems of meaning and value. But I would argue that feminisms want to go beyond this to work to *change* those systems, not just to [demystify] them. (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 153)

⁶ In her insightful—and highly entertaining—study of the history and cultural ramifications of cross-dressing, Marjorie Garber mentions Anderson's deployment of male drag in a discussion of transvestism

and representation. She suggests, in a comment which is important to my own theory of postmodern metatheatricity, that transvestism is "a condition that very frequently accompanies theatrical representation when theatrical self-awareness is greatest" (353).

⁷ Anderson's observation that "I slept through the Reagan Era politically" recalls Atwood's *Handmaid*, who tells how, before the establishment of Gilead, "We lived, as usual, by ignoring" (53). Offred, too, might have stated that "When I woke up, everything looked really different."

⁸ Sayre also observes that Anderson's dependence upon electronic media in her performances undermines the effect of presence which usually derives from live performance (151). The oscillation between presence and absence which results from this deconstruction creates a potentially critical distance between performance and audience, in contrast to the collapse of this distance in much postmodern theatre.

EPILOGUE

Shall I project a world? (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*)

In *Constructing Postmodernism*, Brian McHale suggests that SF is a particularly useful site from which to analyze aspects of postmodernism, since

SF constitutes a particularly clear and demonstrable example of an intertextual field, one in which models, materials, images, "ideas," etc., circulate openly from text to text, and are conspicuously cited, analyzed, combined, revised, and reconfigured. In this it differs from "mainstream" postmodernism only in the openness and visibility of the process. It is precisely this relative openness of intertextual circulation in SF that makes it so valuable as a heuristic model of literature in general, and postmodernist literature in particular. (12)

One of the ways in which my own study can be read, then, is as an attempt to demonstrate the intertextual nature not only of science fiction, but of the range of cultural productions which have resulted from its convergences with postmodernism. I have also attempted to indicate, through the kinds of texts included here, that these convergences have produced both genre and non-genre texts, both extrapolative and speculative texts, in addition to more experimental works of specular SF which point to (one version of) the end of the genre.

Specular SF demonstrates the problematization of the generic enterprise of SF at the present historical moment, at least in part because of our increasing sense that the future has already arrived, that the present moment is itself a science-fictional one. In other words, this moment in our history produces an "SF effect": it has *become* specular SF. It is for this reason, if for no other, that this particular transformation which the genre has undergone enjoys a particular significance, since there is some truth to Slavoj Žižek's claim that "The easiest way to detect changes in the so-called *Zeitgeist* is to pay careful attention to the moment when a certain artistic (literary, etc.) form becomes 'impossible,' as the traditional psychological-realist novel did in the 1920s" (48). Specular SF is one obvious way in which SF has become "impossible" within the context of postmodernity.

Given that there is still something we can call SF, it seems to me that the genre, as it has developed within this context, tends to be broader than is sometimes acknowledged. I have tried, however, to avoid delineating the field in so strict a fashion that its borders become rigid and impermeable. My inclusion of specular SF in this discussion should serve to suggest that, while these borders no doubt exist, they are, like most borders within the context of postmodernity, contingent and unstable, in place only insofar as they are necessary to delineate a domain of study and analysis.

I tend to agree with Ralph Cohen that "'Postmodernist' writing without boundaries is as much a fiction as postmodernist writing fixed by them" (247). Cohen argues that in order for any discussion of cultural production to take place, some discussion of genre is inescapable, no matter how much "play" contemporary theorists identify within the arena of the postmodern: "postmodern theorists, critics, authors and readers inevitably use the language of genre theory even as they seek to deny its usefulness" (Cohen 255). While the context of postmodernity tends to cast "the language of genre theory" in an ironic light, this is simply one more irony among the many facing any theorist today.

Another way to read this study is as an intervention into some of the recent and ongoing critical discussions about the ways in which science fiction and postmodernism have become implicated in each other's projects. There has too often been a tendency to create barriers between certain areas of the "field" produced by these interactions, with the result that in the rare instances in which, for example, cyberpunk is discussed alongside feminist SF, or genre SF is discussed alongside vanguardist SF, the purpose of these discussions has been to represent them as almost completely different projects, rather than as variations produced within the same contemporary fictional space/time.

Fredric Jameson, Brian McHale, and Larry McCaffery tend, for example, to focus on cyberpunk and vanguardist SF, but rarely take into account the variations produced by feminist SF writers. Feminist critics like Marleen Barr and Jenny Wolmark, because of the specific nature of their own literary interests, tend also towards exclusivity in their studies. Scott Bukatman's *Terminal Identity* is unusual in the breadth of its focus, taking in as it does literature, film, and television, cyberpunk (and cyberpunk-influenced performance art) and feminist SF, genre and vanguardist fictions. My chapter on postmodern

theatre is a similar expansion from literature to another form of representation in which SF is playing a significant role at present.

In a gesture which has become rather too familiar among male critics who espouse a feminist position, Bukatman raises the subject of feminist SF at the conclusion of his study. Its position there suggests that feminist artists and critics function within his study as ethical exemplars—angels in the postmodern house, as it were—working *against* the cultural and critical productions introduced in his earlier chapters. I have dispersed my discussion of feminist texts throughout this present study in order to suggest, first of all, the heterogeneous and fragmented nature of contemporary feminisms, and, in addition, to demonstrate that feminist cultural work is not simply produced as some kind of (belated) reaction to previous cultural work. As its own "field," it is influenced by and influences the broader field at the same time as it focuses on its own political agenda(s).

Finally, this study can be read as the projection of a textual world which combines certain features of SF with particular aspects of postmodernism; I would hope that the resulting "literary universe" proves useful as a hermeneutic exercise, insofar as it proposes one possible model of contemporary narrative-building. In the sense proposed by both Fredric Jameson and Craig Owens, I have, in effect, produced my own allegory of the intersections of SF and postmodernism.

Jameson, for instance, ironically notes the fact that "postmodern theory is itself an example of what it claims to anatomize"; he suggests that "the newer allegorical structures are postmodern and cannot be articulated without the allegory of postmodernism itself" (*Postmodernism* 168). Influenced by Northrop Frye's analysis of allegory, Owens takes this even further, insisting that "allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning" ("The Allegorical Impulse" 205).

This exercise in critical/theoretical allegory, which is also an exercise in supplementarity, may be one of the few worthwhile options left to the postmodern critic. As Hal Foster asks:

Is it necessary to think in terms of fields and figures of representation? No doubt: and yet criticism thereby remains recuperative. As a textual practice, postmodernist art

cannot be translated: criticism, then, would not be its supplement. But then what would it be? What does criticism *do vis-à-vis* such art? Does it enter as another code in the text of the art? Or does it initiate the very play of signs that *is* the text?" (196).

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