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NAM-SHUB VERSUS THE BIG OTHER: REVISING THE LANGUAGE THAT BINDS US  
IN PHILIP K. DICK, NEAL STEPHENSON, SAMUEL R. DELANY, AND CHUCK  
PALAHNIUK

by

JASON M. EMBRY

Under the Direction of Chris Kocela

ABSTRACT

Within the science fiction genre, utopian as well as dystopian experiments have found equal representation. This balanced treatment of two diametrically opposed social constructs results from a focus on the future for which this particular genre is well known. Philip K. Dick's *VALIS*, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby*, more aptly characterized as speculative fiction because of its use of magic against scientific social subjugation, each tackle dystopian qualities of contemporary society by analyzing the power that language possesses in the formation of the self and propagation of ideology. The utopian goals of these texts advocate for a return to the modernist metanarrative and a revision of postmodern cynicism because the authors look to the future for hopeful solutions to the social and

ideological problems of today. Using Slavoj Žižek's readings of Jacques Lacan and Theodor Adorno's readings of Karl Marx for critical insight, I argue these four novels imagine language as the key to personal empowerment and social change. While not all of the novels achieve their utopian goals, they each evince a belief that the attempt belies a return to the modernist metanarrative and a rejection of postmodern helplessness. Thus, each novel imagines the revision of Žižek's big Other through the remainders of Adorno's inevitably failed revolutions, injecting hope in a literary period that had long since lost it.

INDEX WORDS: Philip K. Dick, Neal Stephenson, Samuel R. Delany, Chuck Palahniuk, *VALIS*, *Snow Crash*, *Babel-17*, *Lullaby*, American literature, Postmodernism, Modernism, Science fiction, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, Theodor Adorno, Metanarrative, Logos, Gnosticism, Utopia

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## DEDICATION

To my eternally patient wife, Kristen, and my beautiful daughter, Harper. Thank you both for enduring.

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Thanks should go to Chris Kocela for guiding me through the formative moments of this piece with calm, ease, and constant reassurance. Thanks to Marti Singer for stepping up at the last minute and helping me push through to the very end. Thanks to Nancy Chase for being flexible with the constant delay of that very first draft. Finally, thanks to Ben Robertson and Lisa Yaszek for getting me involved in the science fiction academic community where many inspirational conversations have me eager for the next project.



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## INTRODUCTION

Being bodies that learn language/thereby becoming wordlings/humans are/the symbol-making, symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal/inventor of the negative/separated from our natural condition□by instruments of our own making/goaded by the spirit of hierarchy/acquiring foreknowledge of death/and rotten with perfection.

Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*

Kenneth Burke<sup>1</sup>, twentieth century philosopher and rhetorician, argues that humans, in nature, created language and subjugated themselves to that language, thereby removing themselves from nature and condemning themselves to encounter the world from a distance. For this reason, humans only understand the world around them in opposition to themselves. This alterity<sup>2</sup> is the negative that is invented to acknowledge and cope with the Other<sup>3</sup> which only serves to further separate humans from other things and people instead of linking them together. These relationships are then classified and re-classified in never-ending attempts to capture their true qualities. Alterity lies at the center of Slavoj Žižek’s Hegelian reading of Jacques Lacan. Žižek explains the reason for alterity using Lacan’s “Three Orders” of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Žižek argues that the Imaginary<sup>4</sup> order has

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Burke was an 20<sup>th</sup> century American philosopher and rhetorician who spent much of his career studying the social and political power language. He believed that by analyzing what language and its relation to the commentary on action people can better understand their motives and bring about change.

<sup>2</sup> This term was coined by Emmanuel Levinas in a series of essays collected as *Alterity and Transcendence* and used by many philosophers and psychologists of the twentieth century to refer to the otherness experienced when two or more people are together.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of the Other has a long and varied history. For the purposes of this argument, the Other should be attributed to Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and other German Idealists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jacques Lacan and Emmanuel Levinas popularized the phrase in relation to psychoanalysis of literature and critical social theory respectively.

<sup>4</sup> The Imaginary order is the social reality that is constructed by language. It depends on the mutual agreement of language users.

the appearance of a complementary relationship between thesis and antithesis, the illusion that they form a harmonious Whole, filling out each other's lack[...] This false appearance of a mutual completion is shattered by the immediate passage of an extreme into its opposite: how can an extreme fill out the lack of its other, when it is itself, in its very opposition to its other, this other?...What 'holds together' the two extremes is therefore not the mutual filling out of their respective lacks but *the very lack they have in common.* (*Tarrying with the Negative* 123)

The Imaginary order is interpreted by Žižek as that which we experience with other people and things. It has depth. It has connection to other events. It considers other elements in the grand design. It is the hopeful symbiosis of things. It is, for all intents and purposes, the world we see around us. The world is mediated by the language we use to understand it and the otherness that surrounds us. The Imaginary is dependent on the Symbolic relation, language, because it provides that structure for the events experienced within the Imaginary. Whereas the Imaginary is complementary, Žižek describes the Symbolic<sup>5</sup> as

differential: the identity of each of the moments consists in its difference to the opposite moment. A given element does not fill in the lack of the other, it is not complementary to the other but, on the contrary, *takes the place of the lack in the other*, embodies what is lacking in the other: its positive presence is nothing but an objectification of a lack in its opposite element. The opposites, the poles of the symbolic relation, each in a way return to the other in its own lack; they are united on the basis of their common lack. (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 171-2)

This statement hits more closely upon what Burke means by the inherent dichotomy of language. Only through the Symbolic relation can people believe they connect with others and experience events as meaningful or important. These experiences illustrate Burke's "symbol-making, symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal" who depends on language to relate to others. But we are perpetually "separated from our natural condition by instruments of our own making" because these symbols conceptually address a literal lack, a negative relation to the other. For Žižek, this negative relation serves to construct a deceptively "harmonious whole" comprised of the two or more people found using language, the Symbolic order, to connect. Within the Symbolic order lies the big Other<sup>6</sup>, a policing agent that ensures proper behavior or, at the very least, the avoidance of impropriety. This big Other acts like the third person omniscient spectator from whom characters are always trying to hide their actions, but are forever unable to do so. The big Other effectively presides over the deceptive "harmonious whole" that is created by the interplay of the Symbolic and Imaginary relations. Žižek notes, "if individuals were able to co-ordinate their intentions via shared knowledge, there would be no need for the big Other" (Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* 138). Beyond the Symbolic and the Imaginary lies the Real.<sup>7</sup> This Real exists outside of language because language is, by its nature, approximate and incomplete. However, the Real is always whole. It defies definition and as a result of this completeness, we find it impossible and traumatic to imagine. Because the Real is

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<sup>5</sup> The Symbolic order is the language that we use to relate ourselves to the world around us. It is highly dependent on the visual recognition of things that comprise the Imaginary order. These two work in tandem to define the phenomenal world.

<sup>6</sup> The big Other is the policing agent that language users imagine oversees their interactions with one another. These rules are established by language users. Despite this, language users feel oppressed by these rules that guide their behavior.

overwhelming, the Symbolic order provides the framework and the symbols for the construction of the Imaginary order. This Imaginary order counterfeits the Real and allows us to operate within the world with others who are equally removed from the traumatizing true nature of the Real. Žižek explains we acknowledge the existence of the Real through a cognitive “shift from actuality to possibility, the suspension of actuality through inquiry into its possibility, [and it] is therefore ultimately an endeavor to avoid the trauma of the real, i.e., to integrate the real by means of conceiving it as something that is meaningful within our symbolic universe” (*Tarrying with the Negative* 157).

Therefore, according to Burke, Lacan, and Žižek, we only understand objects and ideas by setting them against what they are not. We understand tolerance because we see intolerance in the world. One cannot exist without the other. They complete each other conceptually. Likewise, an understanding of human relationships is predicated on the idea that language is the basis for human interaction. Beyond communication with others, language constructs a reality that is mutually agreed upon and allows for discussion of objects and ideas that exist or originate outside of our direct actions. Mutually agreed upon reality is exactly what is interrogated and dispelled in postmodernist fiction.<sup>8</sup> Many postmodernist authors rail against the modernist grand narrative. This grand narrative, or metanarrative, represents an over-arching grand scheme or

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<sup>7</sup> The Real is the indescribable totality that exists beyond language. Language is our feeble way of dealing with the Real because it is too large and traumatizing for us to recognize.

<sup>8</sup> Postmodernist fiction grew out of a frustration with modernist literature’s hope for an understanding of history through the deconstruction of events in the lives of individuals and use of experimentation with formal aspects of narrative. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), postmodernists eschewed the modernist belief in an underlying totalizing narrative, called the grand narrative or metanarrative, and taking a cue from the modernists, used experimental narrative techniques to emphasize a lack of order and a failure of science to make sense of history. Lyotard argued that the failure of the metanarrative resulted in language games that stressed individual analysis of relevant situational information regarding everything in order to deal with the multiplicities of events and preferable outcomes.

design that explains all events and history as part of one great system or plan. Modernists look to the metanarrative because they wanted to believe, like most others, that the problems of the world and the people within it served a greater purpose. Postmodernists believe that these modernists were fooling themselves and that insistent reformulation of the metanarrative to suit each new event provides proof that no such metanarrative can exist. Instead, postmodernists craft stories that explicitly reject any metanarrative and resist being forced into one.

### *The Problem with Postmodernist Literature*

In *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek contends that at the center of postmodern cynicism, paranoia, and helplessness lies the destabilization of this big Other which is illustrated by frustration with its institutions and ideologies. This destabilization has led to the assumption that no big Other can exist when so many different agendas and ideologies compete for the regulation of the masses. However, Žižek explains, “the problem today is not that subjects are more dispersed than they were before [...] the fact that ‘the big Other no longer exists’ implies, rather, that the symbolic fiction which confers a performative<sup>9</sup> status on one level of my identity, determining which of my acts will display ‘symbolic efficiency’, is no longer fully operative” (*The Ticklish Subject* 330). This symbolic inefficiency must then lead to a revolution that inevitably culminates in the formulation of an Other of the Other and a new and improved Symbolic order complete with new rules for the proper engagement of others that accounts for the disparate

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<sup>9</sup> Performative utterances were first defined by J. L. Austin as those statements that promise some kind of action, regardless of whether the action is actually performed. In this instance, Žižek argues that stating the big Other no longer exists implies that the Symbolic order is beginning to break down and the policing agent that ensures proper behavior is either being rebelled against or lacks the power it once held over social interactions.

interest of the masses. Žižek is, however, careful to question whether this new big Other will fail just as its predecessor did and become destabilized as well:

What are the modalities of the big Other which emerges after the experience of its nonexistence? Is there enough difference between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ big Other? The obvious solution, of course, is *cynicism* as the post-revolutionary attitude *par excellence*: fully aware of the nullity of the big Other, we feign allegiance to it and play its game, as it were, ‘with our fingers crossed’—in this way, however, one merely ducks the issue, since cynical distance, by definition, covers the true dimension of our actual involvement. Are we then condemned to the resigned conclusion that the founding gesture is necessarily eclipsed by the very state of things to which it gives birth? (*The Indivisible Remainder* 133)

The postmodernists constructed tales whose organization is meant to lead readers to ask: what exactly is the reality of this book? These texts force the reader to look at reality as loosely organized and easily malleable. In this climate of subjectivity and relativism, Žižek suggests that the big Other “is supplanted by ‘ethical committees’ as so many substitute ‘small big Others’ on to which the subject transposes his responsibility and from which he expects to receive a formula that will resolve his deadlock” (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 334). But, as with the problem of too many cooks in the kitchen, this solution appears all but unreachable. Since society is a product of majority rule, any kind of absolute group consensus can rarely be attained. The resulting subdivisions then lead the reader to conclude that an agreed upon reality is a myth and that all understanding of the world is ultimately subjective.

Postmodernists seem resigned to what Žižek refers to as “radical negativity.” This radical negativity is the state in which we operate and “cannot be reduced to an expression of

alienated social conditions [...] as such: there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to ‘overcome’, to ‘abolish’ it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it” (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 5). Take this impossibility to the macrocosmic level and all systems are doomed to failure if the smallest cogs, the humans, cannot communicate their own desires and stand for the same thing for the same reasons. It would appear that all is lost and nothing constructive can come from this system of radical difference; yet, Žižek champions the modernist metanarrative: “This is why it is insufficient to designate the totalitarian project as impossible, utopian, wanting to establish a totally transparent and homogenous society—the problem is that in a way, totalitarian ideology knows it, recognizes it in advance” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 127). Žižek argues that totalitarian and utopian projects, and fantasy for that matter, know before they begin that they will and must fail. For Žižek, “*fantasy is a mean for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance [...]*” The function of ideological fantasy is to mask this inconsistency, the fact that ‘Society doesn’t exist’, and thus to compensate us for the failed identification” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 127).

### *The Retrieval of Modernism in SF*

While postmodernists were beginning to revolt against a totalizing view of reality, science fiction authors were constructing new worlds that appropriated both modernist and postmodernist views of the metanarrative. Springing from American modernism in the 1930s with the help of pulp magazine publishers like Hugo Gernsback and John Campbell, science



fiction naturally included metanarrative elements because this was the reigning ideology within literature at the time. These stories focused on the scientific and rational world while projecting a neo-Enlightenment position on futuristic utopian tales. Several science fiction texts provide avenues toward these reconstructed social systems by removing power from the postmodern big Other and re-devising the Symbolic order to consciously favor the desires of those who operate within them.

Science fiction writers frequently concern themselves with building new, alien yet cohesive, worlds that comment on our own fractured, ideology-driven world of pain and isolation either through mimesis or by offering some kind of dialectical counter to existing society. For example, William Burroughs, often considered to have one foot in postmodernist fiction and the other in science fiction, describes fractured and alternate realities whose barriers can be traversed through time and/or inter-dimensional travel in *Naked Lunch*, *Nova Express*, and *The Ticket That Exploded*. These other worlds are often grotesque renderings of our current reality where people are controlled using different mind- and sex-altering methods of language-based coercion. Brian McHale, in his book *Postmodernist Fiction*, refers to these worlds as Interzones<sup>10</sup>—spaces that lie between and beyond reasonable realities. McHale uses Burroughs' term, Interzone, in order to explain a particular facet of postmodern writing, one concerned with crossing and re-crossing traditional boundaries, but the term can be reasonably extended to facets

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<sup>10</sup> Interzone was a fictional place created by William Burroughs inspired by observations of life in Tangier, Morocco where he lived in the mid 1950s. Interzone is fictionalized in several of Burroughs' novels and short story collections, most notably *Naked Lunch*. Brian McHale uses the term to explain places simultaneously between and outside of reality. McHale's book, *Postmodernist Fiction*, explains that Interzones figure heavily in postmodernist fiction because they create spaces where time and place collide and co-mingle, fracturing these for the reader and contributing to a refocus on ontological meaning instead of epistemological understanding.

of science fiction storytelling. For example, in “The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction,”<sup>11</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. argues that one characteristic of science fiction is the existence of Sublime Chronotopes. He compares sublime chronotopes to objective reality: “As the common space is depicted or evoked in familiar, and even oppressively confining terms, so the paraspatial chronotope is depicted in sublime terms. This sublimity is often obvious and physical, but it can also be conceptual, in the concretization of certain philosophical conundrums.” Samuel Delany refers to this play with reality as paraspaces that allow for unmitigated review of our collective agreement of terms. These interzones or paraspaces or sublime chronotopes are fabulations of the authors’ design that highlight our tenuous grip on reality, or more specifically, our understanding and expression of reality through language that is meant to interrogate the possibility of one singular view of objective reality. Marie Jakober, in her essay “The Continuum of Meaning: A Reflection on Speculative Fiction and Society,” applauds fiction that speculates on the future of society because it “makes us think, and, specifically, it makes us think *differently*. It makes us examine things we have never examined. Even better, it makes us *re-imagine* things we thought we knew” (Jakober 30). This move has been scrutinized by many Marxist theorists, like Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson, who recognize the problems with realizing a successful utopia where equality and plenty can exist for all. Jameson, in his book *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, sees the utopian aim as ultimately futile because it always directly responds to contemporary problems.

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<sup>11</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. lists seven elements in this online publication that might be traits of science fiction narratives. These include neologisms (new words), novum (new inventions), historical extrapolation (how we got from the contemporary historical situation to the far future that is depicted in the piece), oxymoron (logical contradiction), scientific impertinence (intentional disregard for contemporary science fact), sublime chronotopes (artistic license taken in regards to alien worlds or abstract concepts like “cyberspace”), and parable (lessons imbedded within the plot). He qualifies this list by arguing that not all of these need to be in a work to classify it as science fiction, but many items on the list are often used in conjunction with one another in the better known works of science fiction.

Once these problems have been solved, or at least made more manageable, other problems that in the past went unnoticed become the major stumbling blocks of the new system. Thus, utopia always fails. However, recent feminist critiques of utopianism have argued that rather than approach it as examples of revised social systems, we should “approach utopianism as a site of *becoming*, a process of conscious revolution, experimentation, and realignment of existing elements” (Plante 174). Likewise, Adorno sees the failures of utopianism, or the remainders of the attempt at utopianism, not as signs of failure, but as the seeds for the next revolution to the keen eyes of the rationalist.

Deborah Cook, in *Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society*, claims Adorno believes that “critical thought, informed by emphatic possibilities gleaned from damaged reality, is required if society is ever to be radically transformed to the point where it fulfills its utopian promise” (160). Furthermore, Joel Whitebook, in his article “Weighty Objects: On Adorno's Kant-Freud Interpretation,” explains that Adorno believes, “the movement of the dialectic is animated by the perpetual pursuit of the ‘remainder,’ that is, the excess that is left over after the necessary failure of each attempt to grasp the non-identical conceptually. This continuous movement drives negative dialectics to take up the deficiencies, as well as the truth content, of each one-sided moment and thus constantly to move from one position to its antithesis, attempting to extract the truth content of each” (55). According to Whitebook, for Adorno, successful revolution is possible if those who seek change rely on their critical faculties, observe the pitfalls of ideology, and utilize the remainder left from the previous social revolution as the starting point for the next. This movement is necessarily incremental and does not

promise achievement of utopia; however, according to Adorno, striving for utopia should still be the goal of those ruled by reason.

The major impediment to the success of utopian aims is what Adorno refers to as the “culture industry.” This “culture industry,” a term coined by Adorno and fellow Frankfurt School theorist, Max Horkheimer, refers to capitalism’s propensity to dictate demand to the masses, effectively reducing them to automatons with no individual desires or needs outside those proscribed to them. The “culture industry” decides what is valuable and marketable, instructing the masses in what to value in and around the market. The control of the market and the consumable products it trades reflects who we are and what we care about in society. This culture industry is what Žižek would call “ideological” in nature. It defines the government, as the market in the Western contemporary world often does, as well as the people who think they provide input into the workings of their country. Žižek views the current Western ideological system of capitalism as falsely free. In other words, because the “free” market is controlled by the culture industry, the economy is rigid and admits little variation. The surface ideology of capitalism dictates that opportunity and riches await the next great idea, only the next great idea comes from within the culture industry and rarely signifies something truly new or even needed.

It would be remiss to call capitalism or the big Other evil in the sense that either is out to get us. Both are in fact systems we have empowered to help us mitigate and act within our environment. Capitalism, in theory, engages the masses to produce commodities that will benefit all, add to social and technological progress, and boost the economy, allowing for greater luxury and ease. However, we have ceased any real engagement with this system, allowed it to go on autopilot, and now it tells us what we need. In many ways this is the same problem

illustrated by the big Other. We have allowed its oversight for so long that we have forgotten that we dictate the terms of this oversight. The central problem of both the big Other and the culture industry is the mindless reliance on these constructions and the release of our free will and individuality in the process. One could argue this relinquishment is natural to progress. We as a society have given up many learned skills to machines that can do these simple tasks for us. But some part of us is lost in the process and the more that is given away, the less control we have over our society. The same can be said for language. As we accept more and more symbols for tangible things, the further we remove ourselves from any useful engagement with those tangible things. The desire to restart, to set right what has gone awry appears in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. When speaking about his intentions in removing himself from society, Thoreau said:

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (Thoreau 61)

He recognized that his isolation from nature was keeping him from true connection with the world. City living was pulling him away from simple, honest, and tangible engagement and was

creating an unsatisfying existence. Thoreau thought about this and took steps to reconnect with nature. In many ways, Adorno and Žižek are demanding the same. Adorno calls for a return to reason and critical thought. We can no longer allow the “culture industry” to thrive and dictate our desires. We must take ownership and move in the direction of progress instead of walking in circles. Likewise, the solution to postmodernism in Žižek is the politicization of the economy and politics. We have to allow for real choices instead of the same consumables proscribed by the culture industry, or the trite ideologies of a two party system that rarely changes over time. Žižek calls for those who stand outside of the system to have a voice and act. Only then can fresh eyes, unencumbered by the current ideologies that are in power, see new paths toward a better world. Thoreau, Adorno, and Žižek all advocate for a critical engagement with our world that has slipped away and caused many to feel oppressed and hopeless. New eyes, whether attained by a trip to the woods, earned by thoughtful analysis, or brought in from the outside will be able to spot the problems imbedded within the ideologies of the big Other/culture industry and revise this oversight to better suit all groups.

### *Language as Dominator/Liberator*

Acceptance of ideologies in place of thoughtful social interrogation, like Thoreau’s attempt to live at Walden Pond, leads to a society of automatons. Within the postmodernist movement, the theory suggests that contemporary society finally understands the link between language and the construction of reality and for this reason it is highly suspicious of institutions and corporations as well as governments who would dictate what we do, what we need, and who we are. Žižek refers to these various systems and their priorities as ideologies. These ideologies are religions, political parties, ethical codes and morality. But because these are causes that

people champion, they pretend to be freely available and chosen. Žižek would argue that these are not so freely chosen and we are, on some level, aware of this loss of free will. Žižek explains:

If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge, then today's society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way—one of many ways—to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy; even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them.* (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 33)

In other words, according to Žižek, people in postmodern culture simultaneously acknowledge the existence of controlling agents, speak out against some, and willingly join others. We all accept the illusion that we have control over our beliefs and actions while we submit willingly to systems of control. In his book, *How to Read Lacan*, Žižek observes, “It is as if we, subjects of language, talk and interact like puppets, our speech and gestures dictated by some nameless all-pervasive agency” (8). This agent, the big Other, acts as the guide for our understanding of reality and the policing agent for proper action within the framework it has constructed. This overseer of the process of communication is that which codes behavior and dictates the terms of connection by representing a third party whose awareness implies

omniscience over all interactions. Žižek follows this idea with a very simple question: “Does this mean that, for Lacan, we human individuals are mere epiphenomena, shadows with no real power of our own, that our self-perception as autonomous free agents is a kind of user’s illusion blinding us to the fact that we are tools in the hands of the big Other that hides behind the screen and pulls the strings?” (*How to Read Lacan* 8). I believe the texts chosen in this dissertation answer this question quite ably. These texts argue that individuals have real power over their reality through language and ultimately dictate the significance and role of the big Other. As represented by these texts, science fiction texts seem to exemplify a sense of the possible, a heroic solution, and ultimately an element of human control—rendering society no longer a slave to the currently constituted big Other. William Burroughs describes language, or more specifically the spoken word, as a virus that binds us to a dichotomized view of everything.<sup>12</sup> It reduces everything to parts and resists totality. This is, of course the postmodern tendency. Having come to the conclusion that a system of totality will never adequately explain history, postmodernists divide and subdivide society and social reality so that no totality seems possible. The novels, the worlds within the novels, and the ideas are all fragmentary.

This reality, while fragmented in the postmodern sense, constitutes a whole that is always in question. While the ideas, cultures, and people are all different, these all exist, despite experimental narratives, in one place, and they all must interact and learn to get along with one another. Calling these disparate voices and interests disparate simply suspends fruitful critical inquiry because all projects can go about study without returning to the center to see how they all connect. There is nothing to do if all parts are so radically and unalterably different. In these

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<sup>12</sup> This sentiment is best expressed in the 1970 essay collection *The Electronic Revolution*.



novels, this control appears as language itself in the formulation of an Other of the Other after the destabilization of the ideology-stricken postmodern big Other. The texts in this study return to a primordial version of language—one that is used to instruct and communicate effectively rather than blind and control. This basic version of language is Logos,<sup>13</sup> the original world-builder, creator, and freedom-giver.

### *Modernist Advocacy in a Postmodern World*

In this dissertation, I propose that my selected novels imagine a society that replaces the postmodern operating system of cynicism, paranoia, and superficiality with a Logos-centered operating system that allows for better connection between subjects by removing the current postmodern big Other and replacing it with a conscious revision of the Symbolic order. I believe Philip K. Dick's *VALIS*, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, Samuel Delany's *Babel-17*, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby* reveal a concerted attempt to return language and its power to construct and control worlds to the hands of the language users in order that they may devise a new Symbolic in opposition to the postmodern Symbolic. I argue that in all of these novels, the protagonists revise the conventional worldview in favor of Logos/God/the proper code/the incorruptible language of creation/truth and order because postmodern thought has left the culture cynical, paranoid, and helpless. These texts revolt against postmodern tendencies in favor of the modernist metanarrative that awards agency to the revolutionaries and provides for the construction of a more acceptable Symbolic order. While many science fiction texts deal with

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<sup>13</sup> Logos has been used by religious scholars, rhetoricians, mystics, Gnostics, psychologists, and philosophers for centuries. I intend to use the term in this work as the primordial language of creation that continues to imbue contemporary language with a supernatural persuasive quality that is consistent with many of the discussions of these groups.

revolution and subverting dystopian orders, few critics have commented on their use of language as a means of reconstruction and liberation.

In the first chapter, I focus on the prophetic announcement for change. In Philip K. Dick's *VALIS*, Horselover Fat, a split personality of Phil Dick (the character), describes experiencing folds in time, glossolalia, xenoglossia<sup>14</sup>, and a belief that we are all encoded with universal knowledge—including the origin of humanity—but that we are unable to retrieve this knowledge from our collective unconscious. Horselover's experiences seem to result from different tragic events that occur in his life. Having been recently separated from his wife and child and forced to deal with the suicide and terminal cancer diagnosis of two of his friends, Horselover cannot deal with the world on his own. It is at this moment that Logos reveals itself to Horselover. This contact, via a pink laser beam with Logos, gives him an explanation for the pain and imperfection that surrounds him. As a result, he begins to pour over obscure religious texts in an attempt to reconcile his revelation with the current Symbolic order. In his search, Horselover discovers ancient Gnostic texts that support Logos' explanation of the world. The conversations between Horselover Fat and Logos point to a paranoia about, and awareness of, irrationality that pervades our society, confirming a postmodern view of the world—one that is chaotic and doomed. Horselover proselytizes that humans and nature alike function under the same operating system and that operating system is corrupt because the false god that oversees the world, or the Black Iron Prison, as Horselover calls it, is unaware that it is not the true Creator. The one true God, Logos, is sent to reset the program in the form of Jesus Christ and

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<sup>14</sup> Glossolalia is the term for speaking in tongues. Xenoglossia refers to speaking a language that is unknown to the speaker. Both refer to a preternatural ability to communicate across cultures by tapping, knowingly or not, into a shared natural language that lies beneath the surface of contemporary language.

then the Holy Spirit at Pentecost by enabling the Apostles of Christ to experience xenoglossia and convert others to the true operating system designed by Logos. But Pentecost was only a patch job and the world has fallen away from Logos, necessitating its return.

Many critics have covered Philip K. Dick and his relationship to both science fiction and postmodernism. F. Scott Walters, Andrew Butler, and Christopher Palmer, as well as Dick himself, have made arguments for his postmodern tendencies and his relentless paranoia and questions about ontology. Peter Fitting and David Golumbia have looked at his revolutionary attitude toward reality and its construction. Others like Jean-Noel Dumont, Robert Galbreath, Robert Stilling, Patricia Warrick, and Gabriel Mckee have focused on his search for meaning in Gnostic texts. But very few have looked at how language is specifically linked to these questions. I argue Horselover's compulsion to continually unpeel the layers of corrupted reality in *VALIS* indicates Dick's desire for return to the modernist metanarrative.

In chapter two, I discuss Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and its exploration of language as programming. Stephenson situates this programming source in the ancient and lost language of Sumer. According to the text, the language of Sumer was actually a string of syllables that represented memes, or *me*. Each *me* instructs the user in the skill for which it was designed. The *me* is an operating system. There were once *mes* for baking bread, working with stone, being a mother, etc. Without these *mes*, the culture of Sumer would not have survived or flourished. The Sumerian language was eventually erased because it was realized that a language used for building a civilization could also be used to enslave that nation. This theoretical back-history sets the stage for the scholar/archeologist/evangelist L. Bob Rife to discover, in the present of the novel, Sumerians' peculiar talent for reprogramming individuals. By using

syllables established since early civilization Sumerians could redefine neurolinguistic patterns to suit the architect of the new *me*.

I believe Stephenson's novel expresses the dangers of what Richard Dawkins describes as the meme. This meme is the cultural equivalent of the gene in genetics. This meme transmits at a deep, almost imperceptible level the cultural biases of a civilization. These memes are often inherited and passed down from one generation to the next. *Snow Crash* fictionalizes this concept of the meme and further legitimates and mythologizes it by attributing it to the ancient and fallen cradle of civilization, Sumer. Stephenson appropriates mythology and Judeo-Christianity for his post-cyberpunk world, a world that is as diverse as Babel after the Infocalypse—the scattering of civilization by destroying the language of Sumer. In the present of the novel, modern Los Angeles is constructed of dozens of Burbclaves—small, independent, self-governed suburbs with security forces like border guards.

Like postmodern society, this world is obviously fractured and patched together, denoting the distinct Otherness of Žižek's account. The only singular, cohesive world in the book is the Metaverse. However, in the text, the threat of computer viruses in this Metaverse becomes a threat to the Symbolic order because of the similarity between Sumerian and computer programming language. In *Snow Crash*, Virtual Reality and the Symbolic come crashing together so that in order to save those in the real world, the protagonist must actually defeat the virus in the virtual world, subverting the superficial facsimile as presented in Žižek and once again giving agency to humans to revolt against language and the pervasive and controlling big Other. Stephenson's novel has attracted a steady stream of attention since its publication in 1991. David Porush, Raymond Gozzi, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, and Salvatore Proietti have

contributed to the discussion of neurolinguistic interfaces, computer viruses as metaphors, and virtual reality but none have looked at these in terms of the return of the metaphysical Logos and what that means to the current Symbolic order. I would like to add my particular optimistic, anti-postmodern take on the digital revolution that informs this text.

In chapter three, I discuss Samuel Delany's *Babel-17*. In this text, Delany draws several characters at various stages of self-actualized language usage—meaning they are able to predict and control the actions of others to varying degrees by understanding the physical and spoken languages used in their presence. Alternately, other characters have been reduced to an almost childlike state of language usage due to language reprogramming and memory extraction. In the novel, everyday spoken language becomes a kind of programming language that controls the actions of characters. I believe that by depicting such a spectrum of language users, Delany highlights issues of social control and language's power over the construction of those selves that we, like Stephenson's avatars, put on to move around in it.

*Babel-17* illustrates a connection between the physical and the linguistic. Early on, Rydra Wong professes to be able to read a person's mind, when really all she is doing is reading the "tell"—language the body speaks that the mouth has yet to articulate. This observation is important because, later in the novel, the Invaders and the code they allowed into the hand of our heroes reverses this process. This code is actually a language akin to basic programming language. Delany's treatment of language portrays humans like computers that can be programmed. In the work, humans are compared to machines that can be controlled and directed through the reordering of their language protocols, thereby changing the world around them. Language becomes an active inputting process and not an outputting, expressive tool. Delany, in

the end, gives power back to the language user and allows for understanding of the motives and actions of others *through* an understanding of language construction and use. For Delany, this is an active and controlled use of language that acts against postmodern cynicism and allows for positive social change as a result of language programming. This change is illustrated by the fact that the war between the Alliance and the Invaders eventually comes to an end.

In the final chapter I discuss Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Lullaby* and its use of magic in relation to social revolution. This novel, like *VALIS* and *Snow Crash*, imagines the rediscovery of linguistic knowledge from the ancient world. *Lullaby* describes the accidental use of a "culling poem" in the deaths of several children all over America. Somehow, a poem that causes the listener to stop breathing has made its way into a collection of children's literature and those parents who read the lullaby to their crying babies are unknowingly killing them. Several characters join in the search for the source of this lullaby, a book of dark magic called a Grimoire, and try to keep others from killing more children while they grow more and more willing to use the poem for their own ends. Once they find the book, only a few of the spells are deciphered before two of the more militant and revolutionary-minded members of the search party decide to use the book to wage a war against animal cruelty and environmental contamination. The bio-revolutionary witches command trees and plants to break through the concrete of a Midwestern city, drawing it back to a state of Nature. In another case, they reanimate road kill along major highways, reversing the effects of mass transportation on local animal life. These feats are not terribly productive, but they do what they can by demonstrating the power of the few spells that have been translated. They do not use the culling spell, as the

other searchers frequently do, because they have more respect for life—biological as well as ecological.

These spells, an incarnation of a quiet but powerful Logos, suggest an enlargement of the concept of operating systems to include the world as a body with a mind that is vulnerable to revolt. Like the Cabalistic belief that knowing and speaking the true name of God will unmake the world, Palahniuk's book argues that there is a language that can be known and used to rewrite the world as well as the people who populate it. Very little has been written about Palahniuk's works outside of *Fight Club* and the corresponding film, but it is obvious that he belongs among these authors and their search for a new linguistic order.

In this dissertation I argue that within these texts, the world building component in science fiction and speculative fiction that grew to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s in the American pulp magazine market inspired writers of fiction for the remaining decades of the twentieth century. While some postmodernists initiated their assault on science, reason, and ideology, other writers took a softer approach. These science fiction authors were also interested in analyzing the problems of the late twentieth century, but they did not share the postmodernists' particular stance. For these science fiction and speculative fiction authors, the world can still be saved by rational thought, and hope can be found in the possibilities of the future. Jakober explains that, "just as realistic fiction can help us to understand an aspect of human life in all the complexities of a particular context, a speculative fiction can help us to understand it a different way, by lifting it *out* of its familiar contexts and searching for elements that might be universal" (29). These authors recognize the problems caused by misdirected scientific advancement, a lack of faith in reason, and the replacement of critical engagement with

stock ideology. These authors opt, instead of vilifying the deficiencies of the twentieth century, to revive the power of human agency and give hope back to the people. This power is demonstrated in many ways across science fiction and speculative fiction.

In the four texts that follow, Philip K. Dick's *VALIS*, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby*, the role of language is put to the test in determining who we are and why we make the decisions we do. Using the work of Žižek, I maintain these authors advocate breaking free of the current big Other of our own design in order to reconstruct an Other of the Other that better suits our current needs and allows us to feel less controlled by institutions and ideologies that seem to have so much power today. This movement implies a return to the modernist metanarrative as a totalizing guide. Constructing a society that is free of all ideology and corruption is nearly impossible, of course; but Adorno provides a partial solution to this problem. According to Adorno, while the utopian project is doomed to fail, the impulse to revise and lead through reason and critical inquiry wards off the reconstruction of a big Other that would convince us nothing could be done. The novels in this study illustrate this move toward change in different ways. Dick's prophet recognizes the need for a change in the Symbolic order and prophesies the coming of Logos—the Word, truth, the proper code which will liberate society from suffering and alienation. Stephenson's characters save the world from a threat to free will posed by both virtual and physical viruses that are transmitted through language. Delany, similar to Dick, poses the possibility that language can be used to create a better reality—one free of suffering and war. Finally, Palahniuk imagines using forgotten spoken magic to change the world, but the revolutionaries are divided by their methods. Each novel ends at a different stage in the process of revision. Dick's novel imagines



a failed attempt at revision through Logos but leaves the characters hopeful for the next opportunity. In *Snow Crash*, a malevolent attempt at world revision through Logos is thwarted, but the ancient power to use Logos to affect drastic social change is left in the hands of the good guys. Ultimately, they refuse to use this power in favor of allowing free will to guide human development. Likewise, a benevolent and complete version of Logos is applied to the language of Babel-17 tensions between the Invaders and the Alliance to be resolved, ending a 20 year war. Then the world is left to move in its own, free direction. In *Lullaby*, Palahniuk leaves Logos in the hands of an idealistic couple of witches who attempt to change the world one small act at a time. While the scale of revolution changes in scope depending on the novel, all point to people who, using their reasonable minds and the power of language, can effect positive social change.

## CHAPTER 1.

## THE PROPHETIC ANNOUNCEMENT

Philip K. Dick's novel, *VALIS*, describes one man's journey to understand the existence of suffering in the world. Horselover Fat has had a tough life. His wife has left him and taken his only son, Christopher. His old friend, Gloria, has just jumped off the rooftop of a treatment facility and killed herself. Another friend, Sherri, has terminal cancer. And as a result of all of this, Fat has taken a half of a bottle of digitalis and been admitted to the psychiatric ward of the local hospital. It is in sessions with his therapist that we first learn of Fat's peculiar outlook on this world and the suffering that all its inhabitants must endure. He has been searching for answers for quite some time and has woven together history, theology, and science fiction to generate a totally new and potentially crazy cosmology that might just explain all that he feels is wrong with the world.

Fat believes that a secret has been revealed to him via pink lights and visions of ancient Rome during the time of Christian persecution. This revelation describes the hijacking of time and space by a false god, the Demiurge<sup>15</sup>, who is intent upon hiding Truth from us. This false god wants to rule as the true god but he is imperfect and allows for imperfection in the world, a place Fat refers to as the Black Iron Prison (BIP). As a result of researching texts like the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient and esoteric works, he concludes that his visions of first century Rome are in fact a clue that things are not as they appear. After he is released from the hospital, he spends his time trying to reveal the BIP to anyone who will listen to him. Eventually, his

friends, Phil, Kevin, and David are convinced that Fat may be on to something when they see a science fiction movie called *Valis* that seems to be echoing Fat's theories about suffering, the BIP, and the Demiurge. Naming themselves the Rhipidon Society, Fat and his friends decide to contact the filmmakers of *Valis* and ask them about their inspiration for the film. They all travel to the compound where the filmmaker and his wife live and discover that they have given birth to the savior of the world, Sophia, who is a 2 year old embodiment of Wisdom and speaks with authority about overthrowing the Demiurge and freeing humanity from the BIP. To demonstrate her power, she commands Fat to disappear, and he does. The Rhipidon Society then recognizes that Fat was only a split personality of Phil, a science fiction writer who created Fat to help himself deal with the suffering in his life. Unfortunately, once the brotherhood returns home from the compound, they learn that their savior, Sophia, has been killed by the filmmaker's friend, Brent Mini, while he was trying to download Truth from her using laser beams similar to the ones Fat first encountered. As a result of the loss of the savior, Phil splits again and Fat reappears to search for the next savior. Meanwhile, the Rhipidon Society disbands, and the novel concludes with everyone wondering how Truth will be restored.

When reading PKD's novels, it is difficult to ignore his intentions for them and his personal belief about them. In fact, his own personal beliefs and criticism of his own work coincide so closely with the beliefs of his characters that it seems foolish to dismiss his thoughts when reading his work. His fiction appears to assist him in understanding the world through a kind of dialectical inquiry. Many of Dick's novels can be read as attempts to work out a

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<sup>15</sup> According to Gnosticism, the Demiurge is the entity that, perceiving creation, believes itself to be the creator. It is the child of Sophia, Wisdom, but having no father, is flawed. Its imperfection stains all with which it comes in contact, thus injecting evil and suffering into the world.

problem that he sees in the world. Two questions appear regularly within his work: What does it mean to be human? What constitutes reality? Emerging from these is a third: Why is there suffering? This third question necessarily arises from the previous two because, arguably, suffering either originates from within a person or is levied upon a person. If being human means experiencing emotion and mortality, then suffering is a component of being human. If reality is a construct to which we all subscribe, then the suffering we generate internally might be a construct to which we subscribe as well. In his fiction, I believe PKD makes explicit his interest in these ideas and attempts to solve the problem of suffering and brokenness in the world by exploring what it means to be “human” and what we experience as “reality.”

With these ideas in mind, I intend to read *VALIS* through three frameworks: Dick’s published philosophical and quasi-theological interrogations of the world, the Lacanian linguistic constitution of reality, and a Žižekian analysis of humans and their culture. These frameworks work well together because, as I will argue, PKD intends to empower his characters with a direct link to God through regained memory of their long-lost union with Him and reliance on knowledge of the self as the architect of their own representational reality. However, PKD is not so naïve as to believe that the reunion with God and the comfort of a new order will be either immediate or easy. Instead, he characterizes this reunion as a gradual path toward fullness and completeness. In *VALIS*, the Demiurge tries to keep humanity deceived and under control for as long as possible by using the construct that is the BIP. This BIP is very similar to Žižek’s big Other: “The distrust of the big Other, the subject’s refusal to ‘take it seriously’, relies on the belief that there is an ‘Other of the Other’, that a secret invisible and all-powerful agent actually ‘pulls the strings’ and runs the show: behind the visible, public Power there is another obscene,

invisible power structure” (*The Ticklish Subject* 362). PKD acknowledges that a return to God, Logos, or the Source, must involve the gradual shedding of the currently accepted reality—one of imperfection and suffering—and this path will be fraught with many missteps and apparent failures, but progress toward God and self-knowledge is inevitable. In, “If You Think This World Is Bad You Should See Some of the Others,” PKD argues, “many of us believe in Valis or God or Brahman or the Programmer, but if we ever actually encountered it we could simply not handle it.... He could sustain hoping and waiting, he could pray, he could wish, he could suppose and imagine and even believe; but the actual manifestation—that is too much for our small circuits” (Dick 254). This statement betrays Dick’s belief that humans require the belief in a “master control” entity but fear a confrontation with this entity.

One possible reason for this fear might be the forced acknowledgement of the weakness of humans within the grand design. We believe we would have to face ourselves within the shadow of things much larger and of more consequence than ourselves. But according to Gnostic principles, this is flatly untrue. PKD uses Gnosticism as an articulation of this concern. Eric Davis, in *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, explains the basic tenant of Gnosticism:

Taking the widespread human intuition that *something is amiss* to new levels of cosmic crankiness, the Gnostics insisted that life on our heavy ball of sex and death was not just an unmitigated disaster—it was a cosmic trap. The central myth of Gnosticism’s byzantine cosmologies held that the creator of this world is not the true god, but an inferior demiurge who ignorantly botched the job.... [and] Humans are imprisoned in the material universe of fate that they control, though we carry within ourselves the leftover

sparks of the divine and precosmic Pleroma (Fullness) that existed before the demiurgic construction company plastered everything over. (113)

In Gnosticism, the universe is tied to the Monad, or Source of all things. This Source has become estranged from the universe by a deity, or demiurge, which believes it is the true God. But it is not. It is deluded and imperfect. This delusion and imperfection characterizes its power over the universe. Gnosticism claims to provide the path back to the Source through the revelation of secret knowledge about the universe that the demiurge does not possess. This knowledge will not deliver reality to the Source; rather, the individual will be reunited with the Source of all things. In this way, echoes of pre-Socratic thought can be recognized as having a strong influence on the formulation of early Gnosticism.

PKD does not simply adopt this philosophy; instead, he folds Gnostic principles into his thoughts about reality. For example, in the Appendix to *VALIS* which he entitled *Tractates: Cryptica Scriptura*, PKD explains, “The Gnostics believed in two temporal ages: the first or present evil; the second or future benign. The first age was the Age of Iron. It is represented by a Black Iron Prison”(Dick *VALIS* 231). The *Cryptic Scriptura* is commonly known as an excerpt from PKD’s *Exegesis*, a journal of sorts that explores his visions and religious inquiry during the last decade of his life. The BIP, he explains, is the construct designed by an occluded demigod who thinks he is the one true God. That which controls us—that to which we submit—does not have our best interests at heart. Instead it is only concerned with its own dominance. Its only goal is to bind those in its thrall. PKD entertains the notion of a plurality of realities: “what if there exists a plurality of universes arranged along a sort of lateral axis, which is to say

at right angles to the flow of linear time?... ten thousand bodies of God arranged like so many suits hanging in some enormous closet, with God either wearing them all at once or going selectively back and forth among them” (Dick, “If You Find This World Bad” 234). By creating this kind of cosmology, PKD allows for multiple views of reality—perspectives that can explain all unexplainable events. If God were trying on realities depending on his mood, then he would appear irresponsible with his creation. Taken a few steps further, PKD’s argument takes a nasty turn, implicating the creator in the suffering of the world. Then this creator is not the Source of all things. Instead maybe this creator is deluded or evil and attempts to hide his true self from us. Through a kind of dialectic, Fat arrives at Gnosticism and the eventual hope of reunion with the Monad. Then all of the prophets throughout history are explained as agents of the Source inevitably dispatched by the creator/demiurge intent upon maintaining its stronghold over us.

PKD explains the aim of the prophets using the example of Christ: “And Christ was saying over and over again that there are many objective realms,.... And he did not merely speak of a variety of ways of subjectively viewing one world; the Kingdom was and is an actual different place, at the opposite end of continua starting with slavery and utter pain” (Dick, “If You Find This World Bad” 238). Here, Christ teaches of another realm removed from this BIP and separate from suffering and pain. PKD articulates this cosmology in his essay, “If You Find This World Bad, You Should See Some of the Others”:

What I was sensing was the manifold of partially actualized realities lying tangent to what evidently is the most actualized one, the one that the majority of us, by *consensus gentium* [general consent], agree on [....] Although originally I presumed that the differences between these worlds was caused entirely by the subjectivity of the

various human viewpoints, it did not take me long to open the question as to whether it might not be more than that—that in fact plural realities did exist superimposed onto one another like so many film transparencies. What I still do not grasp, however, is how one reality out of the many becomes actualized in contradistinction to the others. Perhaps none does. Or perhaps again it hangs on an agreement in viewpoint by a sufficiency of people. (Dick 240)

Gary Mckee, in *Pink Beams of Light from the God in the Gutter*, describes this confusion of realities as “primarily dualistic in the Platonic sense: it relies on a division between an illusory reality in which we experience our day-to-day existence and the eternal, actual existence—the truly real—that underlies it” (9). The world that we see is exposed as some kind of fabrication intended to keep us unaware of the real world. PKD explains later in the same piece:

If indeed we are, collectively, being moved along desired paths toward a desired outcome, the entity that sets us in motion along those lines, that entity which not only desires the particular outcome but that *wills* that outcome—he must not enter into it palpably or the outcome will be aborted. What, then, we must turn our attention to is—not the Programmer—but the events programmed. Concealed though the former is, the latter will confront us; we are involved in it—in fact, we are instruments by which it is accomplished. (“If You Think This World Is Bad” 253)

God’s influence in the world affects changes that alter reality and sometimes people. PKD believes these changes can be seen by those affected by them, but many people are either slow to acknowledge or are suspicious of these changes because they sometimes run counter to what is commonly agreed upon and believable. Often these adjustments are then saddled with the term



*hallucinations*. For PKD and certainly Fat, there are many shifting realities from which to choose to observe and in which to take part. PKD anticipates counterarguments to this cosmology by addressing the appearance of hallucinations and psychosis.

*Reality, Hallucinations, and Language*

Hallucinations play an important part within PKD's cosmology. He believes they are "received by the brain, like any 'real' sense datum, and the patient acts in response to this to-him-very-real perception of reality in as logical a way as we do to our sense data. In any way to suppose he only 'thinks he sees it' is to misunderstand totally the experience of psychosis" (Dick, "Drugs"167). He recognizes that this misunderstanding is not simply the result of choosing the wrong choice of two realities. He believes both to be revelations of truth absorbed by the brain. Likewise, he questions the recognition and treatment of psychosis in contemporary society. He suggests that instead of treating psychosis as a break with reality—seeing and experiencing things that are not there—we should accept the possibility that what is seen and experienced might be real and everyone else who call these visions into question might be the ones suffering under delusions set up by a malevolent force bent on concealing truth. PKD argues, "one must be able to recognize a good deal of the external world in order to function (this, of course, is why the name problem is real and not a figment of medieval imagination; the logos, the word, turns chaos into separate and different objects)" (Dick, "Drugs" 171). By "name problem," PKD refers to the problem of using words to represent objects and ideas. Dick continues, later in the same piece, to explain that language

is the cardinal instrument by which the individual worldviews are linked so that a shared, for all intents and purposes common reality is constructed. What is actually subjective becomes objective—agreed on. So, viewed this way, sociologically and anthropologically, it does not matter where the hallucinations originate or even whether they are accurate—but unique and hence unshared—perceptions of ‘higher levels of reality unglimped ordinarily,’ even by the person himself. (173)

PKD portrays Fat’s hallucination as a revelation—he finally sees the world as it really is and not as the Demiurge has constructed it. Fat has somehow glimpsed truth through the bars of the BIP and understands suffering as the product of the imperfect Demiurge’s control over perceived reality. Thus, his hallucinations are revealed truth, not psychosis. On a certain level, PKD and Žižek are in agreement about the construction of reality.

While Žižek discusses language as an ideological system of social control that leads to alienation, PKD portrays language as a metaphysical prison with an insane demigod acting as warden. One refers to this system as the big Other and the other calls it the Black Iron Prison (BIP). We may not always understand what we see, but this lack of understanding does not necessarily mean that what is seen is untrue. Rather what is seen is bound by the language used to express it to others, thus exemplifying the radical alterity that Žižek believes is the inevitable root of many problems in society. Hallucinations only widen this gap between language and reality as well as the distance between people by pointing to those events that are not commonly shared. This perspective on reality and language is not altogether new. It can be seen in the beginnings of Hinduism and Judaism with the Aum and the Word respectively. In *VALIS*, a conflation of classical philosophy, esoteric theology, and contemporary psychoanalytic theory is

used to explain pain and suffering in the world through the construct of language, text, and forgotten knowledge revealed.

*Gnosticism, Psychoanalysis, and Self-help*

Fat begins to question this BIP that he believes causes his suffering and suddenly experiences glimpses of a reality outside of it. He describes experiencing folds in time and spontaneously understanding and speaking ancient languages he has never before known. These events lead Fat to believe that we are all encoded with universal knowledge—including the origin of humanity—but we are unable to remember this knowledge because the BIP keeps the true world hidden from people. Fat spends the first third of the novel in sessions with several psychiatrists due to a suicide attempt after his wife leaves with their son. He is admitted to the hospital, evaluated, and remanded to the hands of the psychiatric ward where he undergoes assessment and separate psychotherapy sessions with Dr. Leon Stone and Maurice<sup>16</sup>. From the start, PKD shows an awareness of psychological concepts as Fat explains to a group of psychiatrists why he should be allowed to leave the hospital: “I really have learned my lesson.... Suicide represents the introjection of hostility which should better be directed outward at the person who has frustrated you. I had a lot of time to meditate during the intensive cardiac care unit or ward and I realized that years of self-abnegation and denial manifested itself in my destructive act” (*VALIS* 45). Using the language of psychologists, Fat attempts to ally himself with them in order to secure release. PKD, likewise, uses the mouths of his characters to discuss

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<sup>16</sup> These names might reveal another level to the text. Stone’s name suggests the Apostle Peter and the bedrock of Christianity. Dr. Stone’s acceptance of Fat’s delusions inverts Peter’s denial of Jesus the night before he was crucified. Maurice might be a reference to the Roman Emperor Flavius Mauricius Tiberius Augustus whose reign marked the beginning of the decline of the Roman Empire, a period that Fat believes is still happening despite what he perceives as contemporary 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

his own interests. Here, he uses psychology to represent a social construction intended to relieve suffering. But, by using it at this particular moment, PKD also acknowledges the power that the user of language has as a means of reconstructing one's own reality. Ultimately, the attempt fails, and Fat must speak to Dr. Stone in order to obtain release after a short stay at the hospital for evaluation.

The relationship between Fat and Dr. Stone synthesizes PKD's intellectual interests—psychology, theology, and philosophy. These academic interests all seek to answer PKD's three big questions mentioned above. In their meetings, Dr. Stone encourages Fat to discuss his thoughts about the world. To Fat's surprise, Dr. Stone seems well versed in pre-Socratic philosophy and Gnosticism. They discuss the writing of Lao Tzu, Parmenides, Saint Mark, Xenophanes of Colophon, and the Nag Hammadi codices in relation to their views on reality, hallucinations, and the coming of a new order. For the first time, Fat finds a person with whom he can discuss his thoughts openly and fully. And, interestingly enough, this person is his therapist. At the end of their sessions, Fat admits,

Stone had restored his—Fat's—spiritual life. Stone had saved him; he was a master psychiatrist. Everything which Stone had said and done *vis-à-vis* Fat had a therapeutic basis, a therapeutic thrust. Whether the content of Stone's information was correct was not important; his purpose from the beginning had been to restore Fat's faith in himself, which had vanished when Beth left—which had vanished, actually, when he had failed to save Gloria's life years ago. (*VALIS* 65)

The language and the therapy save him and make him more resolved that he is not crazy. Dr. Stone listens and engages with Fat about his belief that Logos is living information that has been trapped in the Nag Hammadi codices, allowing for the Demiurge to control reality. Time begins anew upon the release of this living information from the caves where the codices were found in 1945. Dr. Stone is familiar enough with these basic principles to understand where Fat is coming from. By stating that Fat is an “authority” on these subjects, Fat is able to gain confidence in his own control over his representational reality and pull himself out of his depression so that he can continue to solve the mystery of suffering. The language used on Fat by the psychologist pulls him out of his depression. Dr. Stone uses language to revise Fat’s reality and improve him. This relationship teaches Fat that Dr. Stone is a micro-form of God and “by regarding benign people as micro-forms of God, Fat at least remains in touch with a good god, not a blind, cruel or evil one [...] If the Logos was rational, and the Logos equaled God, then God had to be rational. This is why the Fourth Gospel’s statement about the identity of the Logos is so important: ‘*Kai theos en ho logos*’ which is to say ‘and the word was God’” (VALIS 67). Fat continues to discuss Jesus as the Logos of the Gospels and locates the most important statement in The Bible in I John 3:1-2, which states: “My dear people, we are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not been yet revealed; all we know is, that we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is.” Fat interprets this statement as a validation of a literal reunion with God. He explains, using Gnostic doctrine, “Man and the true god are identical—as the Logos and the true God are—but a lunatic blind creator and his screwed-up world separate man from God” (VALIS 68). The scene sets Fat on a more directed study of reality, hallucinations, and the power of language.

While sessions with Dr. Stone represent an encouragement to Fat, I believe the sessions with Maurice can be seen as a test. Fat attempts to convince Maurice that his psychosis is not actually psychosis; rather it is Maurice who suffers from a mass psychosis along with everyone else, and only Fat has been exposed to the truth. Compared to Dr. Stone, Maurice represents a very different creature within the BIP. He is not as educated as Dr. Stone. Their names in the novel, at the most basic level, illustrate the difference. Dr. Stone discusses theological as well as psychological questions with Fat about the nature of reality and a person's place within it. His pedigree is academically and intellectually impressive because it carries with it the weight of schooling and a professional job.

Maurice, on the other hand, is described as “not your standard therapist. During the Sixties he had run guns and dope into California, [...] and had fought as an Israeli commando against the Syrians” (*VALIS* 82). He seems to be caught up in the BIP in a palpable way by trafficking drugs and contributing to conflicts in the Middle East. Dr. Stone works on the fringe of the BIP to help Fat extricate himself from the control of the “lunatic blind creator” while Maurice appears to be in the service of the false god as an agent of suffering. Maurice's treatment of Fat also indicates his allegiance to the BIP. Instead of engaging Fat and helping him find his way, Maurice's game plan involves “bullying Fat into enjoying life instead of saving people” (*VALIS* 82). On the surface, Maurice's tactic does not appear harmful, but it does little to address Fat's real problem. Instead of encouraging Fat, Maurice ignores Fat's need to search for the reasons for suffering and tells Fat to just be happy. The BIP functions primarily for these same reasons—the inhabitants do not interrogate their place within it, nor do they call

to question the problems within it. Instead they are enjoined to accept the suffering of the world as simply their lot in life. Fat responds to Maurice by saying that he “had no concept of enjoyment; he understood only meaning” (Dick *VALIS* 82). Here, Fat once again rejects the BIP in favor of revealed truth, and PKD indicates the method of deconstruction of the world within the novel—analysis of desire for discovery of meaning.

*Dick, Gnosticism, and the Critics*

Jean-Noel Dumont, Robert Galbreath, Patricia Warrick, and Gabriel McKee have focused on Fat’s search for meaning, self, and hope for renewal in Gnostic texts. Out of all of these critical responses to *VALIS*, Galbreath ties into the preceding criticism best by returning to its connection with psychoanalysis. He views Gnosticism, “not only as a vehicle for satire but also as an interpretive structure which enables PKD to come to terms with the personal experience underlying the novel, an experience he regards as a decisive, even traumatic, turning-point in his life” (Galbreath 115). This gives credence to Stilling’s proposition that, “at the purely narrative level [*VALIS*] combines metaphysical speculation and therapeutic action and technique to form that distinctive fusion I call metapsychoanalytic” (96). Stilling’s argument recognizes Dick’s own implicit evaluation of psychosis using the most popular tool of evaluation at the time—psychotherapy. However, PKD employs psychoanalysis in some ways to show its inability to adequately deal with the enormity of the problem. Stilling concludes that Dick explores in his own quirky and distinctive metaphysical style the farthest reaches of the Pleasure Principle itself—the possibility of a truly revisable world, a malleable and therefore perfectible reality:

This is the metaphysical and metapsychological impulse of the science fictional imagination working towards one of the genre's fundamental dreams: the construction (with all its ambiguities) of Utopia. If, then, we find in Freud's metapsychology the dominance of the Reality Principle, in Dick's late metapsychoanalytic fictions we find the valorization of the wish as a mode of artistic and psychological liberation. (Stilling 104-5)

It is not surprising that some critics should see psychoanalysis as the guiding theoretical framework of *VALIS*. Peter Stilling defines the psychoanalytic novel as "a work of fiction that consciously incorporates into itself the highest theoretical implications of the clinical practice of psychotherapy so that they become a source of story ideas, narrative structures, and ongoing intellectual issues to be explored, interrogated, confirmed, rejected, or revised" (92). The main character of *VALIS* sees different layers of reality superimposed onto one another and competing for control of the consciousness of the characters. Stilling argues that a meditation on the usefulness of psychiatrists is reflected in the "involvement of the protagonist with the overextended and sometimes totally incompetent institutional structures that have to deal with a whole society that may be 'insane'" and consequently indicates Dick's struggle to understand himself and his urges in a world that seems more and more disorienting and painful everyday (92). After Dr. Stone says that he believes Fat's delusions, signaling the doctor's break from the BIP, Fat feels finally on the road to recovery. Fat discusses therapy and its usefulness early in the book:

They—note the "they"—paid Dr. Stone to figure out what had destroyed the patient entering the ward. In each case a bullet had been fired at mind, somewhere, at some time, in his life. The bullet entered him and the pain began to spread out. Insidiously,



the pain filled him up until he split in half, right down the middle. The task of the staff, and even of the other patients, was to put the person back together but this could not be done so long as the bullet remained. All that lesser therapists did was note the person split into two pieces and begin the job of patching him back into a unity; but they failed to find and remove the bullet. The fatal bullet fired at the person was the basis of Freud's original attack on the psychologically injured person; Freud had understood: he called it a trauma. (Dick, *VALIS* 66)

By validating trauma and likening it to the power of the BIP, Fat then uncovers the reason for suffering and focuses on a revision of the system. The first step is the awareness of the problem. Once Dr. Stone acknowledges the problem, Fat is released from the hospital. Fat's understanding of the problem is the first step in his recovery.

Žižek similarly argues that the world is a fabrication of our own design based on differing ideologies that keep us separated from each other and the Real. Both PKD and Žižek see a possible revision to the prison of language, but not a complete solution. They both see hope in redesigning the world in which we operate by redefining the terms of acceptance. PKD sees awareness of the fabrication and our own power over it as key, much like Žižek. Neither believes in complete revision, but see the step toward revision and empowerment as a movement in the direction of a solution. The big Other and the birth of the Other of the Other or the revision of the Imaginary using a less paranoia-inducing Other indicates that we have collectively recreated our Symbolic order to suit our current needs. The new Symbolic order provides us with new rules. In the text, Fat finds a better god, or realizes that the trauma caused

by the revision of the big Other results in the reformulation of another Other that allows for the loss of some of the rules and prohibitions of the previous order while still providing the security of a symbolic order. As Žižek puts it: “if what we experience as ‘reality’ is structured by fantasy, and if fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly over-whelmed by the raw Real, then *reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real*” (*How to Read Lacan* 57). The conversations Fat and Logos have point to a paranoia and awareness of irrationality that pervades our society, confirming a view of the world that is chaotic and doomed. *VALIS* can be seen as an example of the Symbolic universe which Žižek postulates. What can be known is known only through the language that we share and use to communicate with others.

### *Intersections of Gnosticism and Žižek*

It would be difficult to ignore the similarities between linguistic and theological cosmologies in Žižek and Gnosticism. Both describe a world in which we abdicate control and subject ourselves to the rules of a construct that keeps us from connecting with others as well as ourselves, and this belief is emulated in *VALIS*. Fat believes that various people through history, many of whom have been connected with theosophical sects, have been aware of this deceit and have striven for reunion with the Monad, but have failed to bring the message to the people of their time. He argues, “The great secret known to Apollonius of Tyana, Paul of Tarsus, Simon Magus, Asklepios, Paracelsus, Boehme and Bruno is that: we are moving backward in time. The universe in fact is contracting into a unitary entity which is completing itself” (Dick, *VALIS* 230). Fat evokes this list of thinkers in order to establish a connection between his cosmogony

and Gnostic and Neoplatonic thinkers throughout history, who tried to teach others about the material world as well as methods of theurgy that lead to henosis, or eventual reunion with the Source of all things—God in most circles. Fat believes that all of these thinkers, along with many others like Jesus and Elijah, attempted in various ways to reveal the truth of the material world and the lies upon which it is built.

The same kinds of people are drawn in *VALIS*. There are Linda and Eric Lampton, celebrities who have made a film called *VALIS* that seems to corroborate Fat's testimony about the BIP. Along with the Lamptons, Fat meets Brent Mini, composer of electronic music and a wiz with lasers. These three make a secret society bent on exposing as many people as possible to the truth of the BIP and the loss of the one true God. When Fat, Phil, Kevin, and David arrive on the Lamptons' compound they discover that the Savior has returned. The savior is Sophia and she was born of Linda but has the mind of *VALIS* and speaks with wisdom. She explains to Fat and his friends that she is here to reclaim the world from the Demiurge. They only need to accept their own divinity and ancient ancestry among the stars. In effect, Fat acts as the harbinger of Sophia, who is the most recent incarnation of the Logos—that which comes to free us from the Black Iron Prison. Brent Mini, an acolyte of *VALIS* and follower of Sophia, explains to Fat/Dick and the other members of the Rhipidon Society their place in the struggle with the Demiurge against the BIP:

We are in a maze, here [...] which we built and then fell into and can't get out. In essence, *VALIS* selectively fires information to us which aids us in escaping from the maze, in finding the way out. It started back about two thousand years before Christ, in

Mycenaean times or perhaps early Helladic. That's why the myths place the maze at Minos, on Crete [...] We were great builders, but one day we decided to play a game. We did it voluntarily; we're such good builders that we could build a maze with a way out but which constantly changed so that, despite the way out, in effect there was no way out for us because the maze—this world—was alive? To make the game into something real, into something more than an intellectual exercise, we elected to lose our exceptional faculties, to reduce us an entire level. This, unfortunately, included loss of memory—loss of knowledge of our true origins. But worse than that—and here is where we in a sense managed to defeat ourselves, to turn victory over to our servant, over to the maze we had built. (187)

In this statement, Mini reveals the pseudo-Gnostic origin of the BIP. He explains the BIP is a construct of our own design and built with the aid of our forsaken third eye. The construct was so convincing that it constantly reconfigured itself, effectively obscuring the only way out. VALIS, a satellite our ancestors built as a failsafe, has been trying, as various enlightened people, to teach humans how to free themselves from the construct and remove the Demiurge, or the AI running the BIP program, from its seat of power and re-establishing humanity as the master of its own reality.

PKD constructs his cosmogony on the basis of these suppositions—that the world of pain and suffering is the creation of a deluded god and the true realm of peace and happiness exists outside the BIP and within the Monad, the true Source of all things, the true Creator, the true God. For example, in the novel *Fat/Dick* latches onto the idea that humans and nature alike function under the same operating system and that operating system is corrupt because the

Creator/Demiurge is isolated and insane. The one true God, Logos, is sent to reset the program in the form of Jesus Christ and then the Holy Spirit at Pentecost by enabling the Apostles of Christ to experience xenoglossia and convert others to the true operating system designed by Logos. But Pentecost was meant only as a temporary solution. The world has fallen away from Logos, necessitating its return. Using a dialectic, the novel portrays reprogramming, resetting, renewing, destroying the current Symbolic order in favor of establishing either a reunion with the Monad or, at the very least, a reorganization of the current Symbolic order. Patricia Warrick explains the belief: “Christ as the Logos comes to this decomposing creation to form his own universe in its place. Thus, the rational has invaded the irrational and is assimilating it into its own body. Therefore, the universe is moving from chaos to order, from irrationality to rationality”(124). Mckee explains further:

Finding solutions and comfort in esoteric texts, PKD envisions redemption and a new reality which is much more reassuring than the world within which he presently lives:

The countless epiphanies of the *Exegesis* are recorded not *after* they happened, but rather were brought out *during* the act of writing. Words, for Dick, are not a barrier but a doorway through which Truth can sometimes be glimpsed. Dick’s writing offers the view that intellectual analysis is both a form and a cause of religious experience, and further if that analysis is done in the act of writing, the writing is inseparable from the experience it causes. (Mckee 71)

It is not surprising, then, that Fat seeks answers in knowledge that promises transcendence from this faulty world: “Gnosis contains practical information as well: the “knowledge of the way” after death, the sacramental procedures, secret names, and magic formulas that enable the soul to

break through the lower spheres under demiurgic control and mount to God” (Davis 604). The reader cannot help but understand this statement to mean that we worry too much about the wrong things, things that tie us too closely to a false world of our own design and that Sophia, or Wisdom, demands that we recognize the falsity and remove ourselves from its thrall. PKD seems then to be speaking to the reader here, imploring the reader to realize that the world of suffering is an illusion that we have constructed for ourselves and only we can free ourselves from it. Questions like “why is there suffering?” then become more appropriate questions about our own complicity in death and misfortune. Phil Dick is hung up on why his wife has left him and taken his son, why Gloria jumps off a roof to her death, as well as why Sherri’s cancer returns. These concerns about unfairness in the world effectively fracture Phil, splitting him into two selves—Phil and Horselover. With Wisdom’s help, as VALIS incarnate, we can reconnect to our forgotten selves or in other words, connect to Logos.

PKD’s message is insistent because, at the end of his career and the end of his life, he sought clarity and relief from the suffering, sadness, and complacency surrounding him. His affiliations with postmodernism and science fiction betray a cultural articulation of informed and intelligent doubt and childlike optimism. His fractured character and timelines co-exist with the idealistic and sensitive hopefulness represented by Fat, Sophia, and even Kevin in his mourning of the death of his cat. For Kevin, his “cat is a symbol of everything about the universe he doesn’t understand” (*VALIS* 26). Kevin’s cat was run over one day while he was taking it for a walk. Kevin sees the death of his cat as meaningless. When given the opportunity to ask Sophia why his cat had to die, she responds, “God so loved his cat—actually—that God had seen fit to take Kevin’s cat to be with him God instead of him Kevin” (*VALIS* 211). Kevin, obviously,

does not respond well to this explanation, but in many ways it corresponds to the message of the Gospel as well as the Gnostic view of the world. The world, reality, is broken. The cat is now with the Monad and is once again complete. Anger about a reunion is irrational. The desire to cling to the BIP is irrational. This desire should not lead people to suicide; rather it should enjoin those who have discovered gnosis to spread the word. Sophia explains the call to those to whom gnosis has been revealed, to those who have been exposed to the homeoplasmate of living information, the Logos. She tells them:

Now I give you your commission. You will go out into the world and you will tell the *kerygma* which I charge you with. Listen to me; I tell you in truth, in very truth, that the days of the wicked will end and the son of man will sit on the judgment seat. This will come as surely as the sun itself rises. The grim king will strive and lose, despite his cunning he loses; he lost; he will always lose, and those with him will go into the pit of darkness and there they will linger forever. What you teach is the word of man. Man is holy, and the true god, the living god, is man himself [...] The goal of your lives has been reached. (VALIS 198)

Her message is a call to followers to reunite with the Source of all things and remove themselves from the control of the BIP, or Žižek's Imaginary and Symbolic orders, by replacing them with orders of their own design, being gods themselves. Sophia names them as gods and architects of their own reality and tells them to spread the good news that the Demiurge's world is false.

This critical take on contemporary society and its layering of realities can also be seen in many postmodern and science fiction texts. Many critics have covered PKD and his relationship

to both science fiction and postmodernism. Christopher Palmer, Umberto Rossi, and Andrew Butler, as well as Dick himself, have made arguments for his postmodern tendencies, his relentless paranoia, and his ontological questions. These results materialize in several ways in *VALIS*: literal colliding realities, split personalities, and a dependence upon seemingly divergent texts. Obviously, all three of these highlight things—realities, personalities, or texts—in opposition to one another and it is through opposition that PKD makes his point. PKD uses divergent concepts against one another to best highlight their successes and failures in some kind of odd cultural synthesis that will bring us that much closer to a better world. Of course, the characters are the cogs that make these worlds go around, so inevitably the discussion must turn to their purpose in the world. Christopher Palmer suggests that the pain that leads Fat to try to commit suicide also “suggest[s] how painful it can be when pursuit of the ethical collides with the proliferating textuality of meaning” (340). Fat’s search for answers in Gnosticism indicates his “retreat into textuality” (Palmer 334) or a desire to find answers from a third party who is supposedly an authority. Robert Galbreath adds, “modern salvation-knowledge is disoriented as well as disorienting. It questions its own validity, leaving the liberated imagination with knowledge only of itself, a pleroma of self-constructed thoughts, fantasies, and revelations, of textual relationships and self-referential commentaries” (130).

### *Science Fiction, World-Building, and Language*

These self-referential commentaries can express themselves differently in science fiction because it involves a different kind of world-building. Many authors intend for the constructed worlds of science fiction to comment on the existing one without making the reader feel indicted.



Darko Suvin has called this distance cognitive estrangement. Samuel Delany describes these spaces as paraspaces. Paraspaces then are settings of potentially metaphor-bending experiments. They are alien, foreign, and full of possibility.

It is in this kind of Petri dish that science fiction is cultivated and world-building becomes truly inspired. Science fiction capitalizes on metaphor by creating worlds based on these figurative gestures and criticizing the basic assumptions that make up our current reality. Thus PKD is able to structure *VALIS* using the following paraspace:

As to our reality being a projected framework—it appears to be a projection by an *artifact*, a computerlike teaching machine that guides, programs, and generally controls us as we act without awareness of it within our projected world.... ([It] is a vast living organism, intrinsically—without this mirror—without qualities or aspects, which is why it needs the empirical world as a reflection by which to “see” itself). (Dick, “Cosmogony and Cosmology” 281)

By positioning the current world as a fabrication manipulated by a machine that trains us, like a flight simulation, PKD articulates his belief that the world provides a constant dialectic by which to arrive at Truth. PKD’s collision of post-war possibilities indicates his desire to move away from the atrocities of World War II to worlds free from these horrors—be they political, social, economic, or religious dystopias.

Fredric Jameson argues in his book, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, that the impulse to imagine new worlds devoid of the problems that plague today will inevitably culminate in failure: “for the more surely a given Utopia asserts its radical difference from what currently is, to that very degree it becomes, not

merely unrealizable but, what is worse, unimaginable” (Jameson xv). However, I believe Jameson does not give enough credit to the utopian impulse itself as an act of revision, regardless of success or failure. The creation of a Utopia will be flawed because people who push for change will invariably create something that alienates or controls some other individual or group. However, the desire for change alone indicates a need to build a new world that is better than the present one, or at least one that does not have the same problems. The attempt, at least to PKD, will always yield results.

In the book, *Fat* is simultaneously a mad prophet and the respected science fiction author Phil Dick. As the novel progresses, *Fat* is exposed as the split personality of Phil Dick, the character, born from the trauma of Gloria’s suicide. This split is compounded by the main character’s pink laser beam transmissions that have superimposed his contemporary world onto the world of the Roman Empire at the height of Christian persecution. During these transmissions, Dick/*Fat* believes he is experiencing the life of a man named Thomas, a Christian who must hide his faith from the prevailing world view to avoid, at best, harassment and at worst, death. Fundamentally, Dick sees the world from the perspective of his real self in the non-fictional world, his fictional Dick, his split personality, *Fat*, and finally the Roman-era Christian, Thomas<sup>17</sup>. His reality splinters in four different directions as his understanding of himself takes on the visage of four people, all of whom rail against the prevailing notion of what the world is like and what our purposes within it are. Dick, the author, as we have seen from his writings on the nature of psychosis, believes that their reality is on one hand an agreed upon

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas probably refers to the Apostle Thomas whose apocryphal Gospel is one of those discovered at Nag Hammadi and advocates for a personal and mystical reunion with the God which is consistent with Gnostic teachings.

experience, and on the other hand is completely subjective, depending on the visions and hallucinations that might be revealed truths. He shares his view with Fat because Fat has experienced, like the non-fictional Dick, revelatory visions that expose a different reality than is commonly agreed upon. The fictional Dick functions as a foil of Fat. He represents that “normal” person living in the contemporary world. Finally, Thomas symbolizes the lost knowledge of reality at an early point of breakage from God, or more specifically, at one of the most important attempts at synthesizing the current broken world with the world of God through Jesus. Although the synthesis failed to completely join the world with God, it provided one in a series of steps toward a union. In many of Dick’s writings later in life, he demonstrated a belief in the gradual movement toward the true God as Logos. He believed that the more we discover about the current occluded world, or the BIP, the looser the grasp becomes of the demiurge that believes itself to be the true God and who manipulates and manages the broken world.

### *The Postmodern Dickian Salmughundi*

PKD blends postmodern literary techniques, Gnosticism, and science fictional alien origin theories in order to layer this paraspace and its slow forward reunion with the Source of all things and our original home. Clearly, Dick the author, as well as Dick/Fat the character, has stumbled upon a way out of postmodern oppression. The solution is discovered through recognition of the system as oppressive, inherently flawed, and of our own design. We have constructed the Black Iron Prison, the maze referred to by Brent Mini and, more importantly, we are responsible for the creation of the demiurge. PKD adapts Gnosticism to suit his own belief that we have control but have relinquished it. In the novel, we see the return of Sophia as the

manifestation of VALIS on Earth, or more specifically, the forgotten truth about our own origins. She is here to reveal the truth to everyone. When Fat meets Sophia<sup>18</sup>, the embodiment of wisdom and truth in the world, she commands him to become whole. And at that moment, “Fat was gone. Nothing remained of him. Horselover Fat was gone forever. As if he had never existed” (*VALIS* 190). Sophia destroys Fat in order to make Phil whole. Furthermore, layers of reality begin to merge. Despite being healed of the split, Phil interrogates Sophia about suffering. She responds, “some answers are meaningless” (*VALIS* 191). And the truth of this message lies directly in the dissolution of Horselover Fat: “In one instant that child cleared up your mind. You stopped believing you were two people. You stopped believing in Horselover Fat as a separate person. And no therapist and no therapy over the years since Gloria’s death, has ever been able to accomplish that” (*VALIS* 197). Fat’s second breakthrough occurs here. The first happened when Maurice believed his theory about psychosis. He felt listened to. He felt he was spreading the good news. This scene is even more important because while affirming his revelation, it gives him more direction and purpose. He now has a cosmic ally and, with this ally, a lost connection is now rebuilt.

The paradigm used by Žižek is shown as successful in liberating a person from the BIP or the hold of the big Other. Through the use of language, we can free ourselves. And it is the memory of our power over language that will serve as our weapon. It is this memory that destroys Fat when he is no longer useful. Sophia is displeased with Horselover’s presence because it represents yet another layer of the BIP as it affects an individual. But an individual

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<sup>18</sup> Classical Wisdom personified.

can see the truth. The individual consciously receives messages from VALIS. It is actively trying to convert others to a new way of thinking. On the surface, Horselover seems to be doing exactly what Sophia wants from the Rhipidon Society. Sophia/Wisdom must teach Phil that Fat is simply another prison keeping him from reunion with the Source. Horselover cannot fully give himself to his recovered memories and his connection to VALIS because part of him is still chained to the BIP. McKee reinforces the notion of revealed gnosis: “The Absolute breaks into our world through either anamnesis or revelation, which Dick seems to have considered identical experiences. It is by these methods that we perceive ultimate reality” (55). Thus, Sophia/Wisdom is the guide to our recovered memories.

Tragically, however, in the final chapters of *VALIS* the attempt at liberation through Logos, through memory of our true selves, through acknowledgment of our own complicity in the creation of a broken world of suffering, fails through Brent Mini’s selfish desire to know all things at once, effectively over-burdening his mind and body and killing Sophia in one final information download. This development within Dick’s novel arguably succeeds in its utopian goals “strictly through failure, its impotence its potency. Neither map nor vehicle, but challenge and impetus, story is the candle that burns itself in order to illuminate. In a sense, it is both mimetic and transgressive, and neither: it represents and embodies the toxicity of dualism while whispering of the release of its own dualistic structures” (Schroeder 20-1). A short circuit in some ways describes how we are unable to confront and accept the Real. Instead we construct an Imaginary world based on metaphors and Symbols that approximate only what we are willing to accept. We cannot deal with the world without these barriers, the feints. These barriers

protect us from the Real—our own ontological nakedness. For centuries, humanity has been struggling for freedom from the ills of society that are mostly caused by us. PKD simply uses science fictional world building to discuss the possibility of incremental revision in order to get that much closer to an unencumbered existence and a reunion with the Source of all things. The text isn't a failure. It is one step in a process of recovery.

In Žižekian terms, the Real exists as a place of raw emotion and experience prior to our emergence as subjects. Our only way of understanding this emotion and experience is to reduce it to language and thereby obfuscate its truth, its essence. This transformative Logos leads to perceiving reality:

The extraterrestrial plasmate—which lies dormant in esoteric religious texts until 'awakened' by a reader—fulfills the transformative function of the *logos*. The transformation of perspective brought about by the *logos* is depicted as a symbiotic relationship in which the living word gradually reconstructs the individual, shaping him or her in such a manner that he or she can perceive the absolute reality underlying the phenomenal world. (Mckee 43)

Recognizing and understanding reconstruction allows for what Jameson misses in his argument against utopias. Small revisions to the existing world, incremental movements in the direction of the Monad, the Source, or God relieve us from the weight of otherness. Each step forward is a step toward reunion with God and thereby with each other, reducing the chasm of alterity slowly and systematically. By narrating the revelation of a new cosmogony, PKD explains how we might overcome our own postmodern isolation. The process of inquiry that began with himself in an attempt to understand the problem of suffering is thus taken up by the reader. PKD

posits the institution of an Other of the Other that will bring society ever closer to union with the Creator through the utopian remainder. Words heal the brokenness caused by the distinct disconnection and otherness that we all feel. Isolation and fragmentation is common to postmodern literature, but what is not common is the drive toward repair and reconnection. It is this drive that signals a utopian theme in science fiction. And it is this impulse that drives PKD to keep asking his three big questions.

## CHAPTER 2.

### THE HACKER CODE

According to Aaron Krieder<sup>19</sup>, a web developer and open source activist, when people think of hacking, generally they think of crackers—those using their skills with computers to cause mischief, spread chaos, or steal money and/or identities from others. But hacking began not as a means to terrorize the nations of the world as a method of stealing money or power from others. Instead hacking began as an avenue for those who love puzzles and challenges. Krieder outlined the Hacker Code in his online publication, “Ambiguous Definitions of Hacker: Conflicting discourses and their impact upon the possibilities of resistance”:

1. Access to computers - and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works - should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the Hands-On imperative!
2. All information should be free.
3. Mistrust authority - promote decentralization.
4. Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position.
5. You can create art and beauty on a computer.
6. Computers can change your life for the better.

In the earliest days, hackers broke into others’ systems for the challenge. There was a joy and a thrill in the harmless illegality of hacking as well as an interest in freeing information and unlocking technology for the masses. Phone hacking, called phreaking, in the late 1970s is a good example of this impulse. Several hackers used recorded tones played into the receivers of public phones as a method of using these phones for free. Krieder explains the difference between hackers and crackers:

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<sup>19</sup> Aaron Krieder is a web developer and campus activist who runs <http://www.campusactivism.org/>. He published this paper online in 1999 while studying Sociology at Notre Dame.



The nostalgic discourse, as expressed by [Eric S.] Raymond and others, defines hackers as the people who were responsible for many important computer developments such as the Internet, the World Wide Web, and Unix [...]. However, where [Steven] Levy leaves space open for hackers to gain access by illegal means, the nostalgics draw a strict line against illegal means. They call hackers who break into systems "crackers" who deserve jail, and disdain them and phreaks for being stupid kids. (Krieder)

This youthful mischief (so-called because most hackers in the beginning were college students at schools like MIT) captured the excitement of the burgeoning home computer craze that would define the next several generations in America, reaching one billion units shipped worldwide in June 2002 according to several international news sources. The home computer was positioned to revolutionize accounting, marketing, publishing and communication technologies. Since the mass production of the personal computer, methods of information storage have radically changed for businesses, allowing for better record-keeping and faster billing. Printing has become more accessible to these businesses as well, and by extension, marketing has entered new virtual arenas. These arenas have created opportunities for academics to publish more quickly and get information out to more people. Finally, people are more connected than ever through networking websites like Myspace and Facebook. Žižek observes, in *The Ticklish Subject*,

in his unpublished paper 'Ideology and Its Paradoxes', Glen Daly draws attention to the topic of 'cracking the code' in today's popular ideology, from New Age pseudo-scientific attempts to use computer technology to crack some sort of fundamental code which gives access to the future destiny of humanity (the Bible code, the code contained in the

Egyptian pyramids...) up to the paradigmatic scene of cyberspace thrillers in which the hero (or, more often the heroine, like Sandra Bullock in *The Net*), hunched over a computer, frantically works against time to overcome the obstacle of ‘Access Denied’ and gain access to the ultra-secret information (say, about the workings of a secret government agency involved in plot against freedom and democracy, or some equally severe crime). Does this topic not represent a desperate attempt to reassert the big Other’s existence, that is, to posit some secret Code or Order that bears witness to the presence of some Agent which actually pulls the strings of our chaotic life? (364)

Erik Davis, in *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, notes, “The moment we invent a significant new device for communication—talking drums, papyrus scrolls, printed books, crystal sets, computers, pagers—we partially reconstruct the self and its world, creating new opportunities (and new traps) for thought, perception, and social experience” (7). With a faster-paced, better-connected society comes the obvious concern about quality of life and physical isolation. If people are hooking up and hacking into each other’s lives via the personal computer, then the issues of identity, control of information, and socio-economic power become central issues in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Literature, since its earliest days, has sought to interrogate these issues, but in an increasingly technologized world, traditional literature finds itself moving into realms previously covered by science fiction in order to adequately address technological progress and its effect on society.

Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* captures the joy and excitement of many new developments within the technologized world: anonymity within virtual worlds, rapid production, instant consumer satisfaction, and the accessibility of massive amounts of information. *Snow Crash* tells the story of would-be hacker heroes who subvert the mind

control schemes of an evangelical media mogul through their skills with writing computer code and their belief that free will is still essential to humanity. Stephenson begins his novel by introducing the primary hero, Hiro Protagonist. Hiro now delivers pizzas for the mob, but once upon a time, he was on the team that designed the Metaverse, a virtual space where people use avatars for socializing and commerce. At the center of the virtual world lies The Black Sun, a club run by Hiro's old friend, Da5id. At the club, celebrities, businessmen, and programmers rub virtual shoulders and set the standard for what is hip and worth doing in the Metaverse. When Da5id becomes physically ill from a virtual drug passed to him through a business card in the Metaverse, Hiro and Juanita, Da5id's ex-wife and Hiro's old girlfriend, must find out who is responsible for distributing a drug that can affect both virtual and real spaces.

Hiro and Juanita enlist the help of Y.T., an adventurous and street-smart 15-year old skateboard courier, in their quest and discover that the drug, called Snow Crash, is a virus that affects computer codes at the binary level as well as the deep structural neurological processes of the human brain. With the help of Dr. Emanuel Lagos and his virtual Librarian, Hiro learns that the virus originated in ancient Sumer. Snow Crash, the virus, is based on Sumerian *me*, described to him by the Librarian as “[r]ules or principles that control the operation of society, like a code of laws, but on a more fundamental level” (Stephenson 251). The Librarian explains further that these rules

are like algorithms for carrying out certain activities essential to the society [...] Some explain how to carry out religious ceremonies. Some relate to the arts of war and diplomacy. Many of them are about the arts and crafts: music, carpentry, smithing, tanning, building, farming, even such simple tasks as lighting fires. (Stephenson 257)

The gods of Sumer infected the people with these skills using *me* so that their civilization would prosper. Hiro discovers that at some point in history, a man named Enki learned how to write his own *me*, or nam-shub, that blocked the use of the primordial language of Sumer so that people would not be susceptible to verbal viruses, making him the first white hat hacker in history. This righteous hack accounts for the Tower of Babel story. All people had to learn new languages since the original language, the language of Sumer, was no longer accessible. L. Bob Rife, a fiber-optics magnate, spends years collecting all artifacts associated with Sumer and its nam-shubs so that he can revive the language of Sumer, unblock access to the deep structure of the brain, and control people, making him a contemporary black hat hacker. He developed Snow Crash to infect people in the Metaverse as well as spread the real-life version through Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates franchise, which indoctrinates followers with a nam-shub, or meta-virus, that reformats a person's brain and enables him to reprogram those brains any way he sees fit. Juanita, Hiro, and Y.T. set out to subvert the virus in both the Metaverse and the real world of the novel by learning Enki's nam-shub, the original cure for the meta-virus. At the end of the novel, Hiro defeats Rife's assassin and blocks Snow Crash in the Metaverse and Juanita and Y.T. stop Rife in the real world with the help of the mob boss, Uncle Enzo, and Mr. Lee, the head of Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong franchulate. At the end of the novel, the meta-virus is once again blocked and people are out from under the thrall of Rife. And, perhaps most significantly, Juanita walks away as the only known living person who can hack the brainstem using the nam-shub of Enki.

*The Battle for Control of Language 2.0*

The battle for control in literature is nothing new. It is the cyberpunk version of the struggle that occurs in the Gnostic exploration of self-deification: “Gnostic lore also provides a mythic key for the kind of infomania and conspiratorial thinking that comes to haunt the post-war world, with its terror of nefarious cabals, narcotic technologies, and invisible messengers of deception” (Davis 97). This struggle also resembles the Žižekian death of the postmodern big Other. While not original in design, the synthesis of these mystical and psychological approaches makes the articulation of this struggle unique. In *Snow Crash*, virtual reality and the Symbolic come crashing together so that in order to save those in the real world, the protagonist must actually stop the spread of information and defeat the virus in the virtual world, subverting what Žižek considers the superficial facsimile and once again giving agency to humans to revolt against language and the pervasive and controlling big Other. Stephenson’s novel plays with Žižek’s notion that “The prospect we are confronting is thus that both the communicational network we use and the genetic language we are made of will be owned and controlled by corporations (or even a corporation) out of public control” (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 357).

In *Snow Crash*, the replacement of the big Other manifests as characters construct a revised and updated Other of their own, within their own control, by resituating the power of language in the hands of the speaker/user of that language. *Snow Crash* seems to convey a sense of the possible, a heroic solution, and ultimately an element of rational human control—rendering society no longer a collective of helpless automata moving about in a cage constructed of signifiers. In the novel, control appears in many forms: manipulation of technology, history,

people, and most importantly, language. I argue that *Snow Crash* illustrates a view of language that, in the end, enables and enlightens rather than blinds and controls.

Stephenson's novel has attracted much critical attention since its publication in 1992. N. Katherine Hayles has discussed the novel in terms of its rendering of posthumanist ideals, William Haney ruminates on Stephenson's use of neurology and mythology, and Sabine Heuser argues that the Metaverse within the novel is but one more Interzone among a list of many used by postmodern authors to illustrate the intersecting social and technological realities in today's world. These are all useful theoretical positions that have informed my argument that the novel's use of Logos is used to free society from the current Symbolic order. In N. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, she addresses the issue of humans and machines as part of the same system. Once the human interacts with the machine, she argues, the human becomes posthuman. It is now interfaced with the machine so that one must in some way depend on the other to function properly.

Hayles claims that we are becoming more like machines in our metaphorical expressions of ourselves because the machine is now so integral to the operations of most systems in our society. Therefore, it is not surprising that she turns her attention to *Snow Crash* as a metaphorical rendering of social and symbolic architecture. She observes, "Neal Stephenson reasons that there must exist in humans a basic programming level, comparable to machine code in computers [...] *Snow Crash* depicts the violent stripping away of consciousness when humans crash back down to the basic level" (272). Explicitly equating consciousness with various programs running on automatic, Hayles offers Stephenson's metaphoric depictions of people

who can be hacked and controlled depending on the skills of the hackers. She argues that these skills include reading and writing computer code as well as the ability to understand historical and linguistic aspects of Sumer, Sumerian artifacts, and the Nag Hammadi codices—Gnostic and apocryphal Gospels. This information is necessary to bridge the subject gap between technology and the history of language development. Stephenson uses language development to explain how cultures have evolved and flourished while exposing a deep structural connection between language and action. Philosophers, psychologists, and linguists, since the formation of each discipline, have explored this connection. All have done so because they understand that what is known is also mediated by what can be expressed through language. Hayles explains the connection between language and action using Chomskian terminology. She argues, “in performative utterances *saying is doing* because the action performed is symbolic in nature and does not require physical action in the world, at the basic level of computation *doing is saying* because physical actions also have a symbolic dimension that corresponds directly with computation” (275).

Noted science fiction critic, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. breaks down Hayles’ argument for posthumanism to four main points:

- 1) it privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, viewing the biological substrate as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life;
- 2) it considers consciousness, traditionally regarded in Western thought as the seat of human identity, as an epiphenomenon, "a minor evolutionary sideshow";
- 3) it considers the body to be a prosthesis, only the first in a potential series of material prostheses;
- 4) it

configures the human body so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. (“Till We Have Interfaces”)

This philosophical view corresponds to Stephenson’s text in that in the novel, language was originally responsible for transmitting instructions and programming people with certain necessary skills which enabled those people to form into civilizations. Language defines the parameters of a group and exposes the level of their technical proficiency. Because language is the method of transmitting information rather than the voice of consciousness, Stephenson is able to treat humans as machines that can be wiped clean and reprogrammed to satisfy the needs of the programmer. As portrayed in the novel, a code that can be manipulated deep within the brain has been buried for centuries and it requires an archeologist, historian, and theologian to unearth the gate that will enable access to these deep structures. Stephenson uses the term Logos to explain control through language because the word itself is connected to historical and theological study<sup>20</sup>. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, just as God created everything with the Word by metaphorically executing the first command in His operating system of nature, L. Bob Rife will be able to access the operating system of every human within earshot by understanding a long-lost Logos and using it to control the minds of others.

Logos, or the word, for Stephenson is a tool for constructing and controlling worlds. William Haney, in *Cyberculture, Cyborgs, and Science Fiction: Consciousness and the Posthuman*, however, argues, “*Snow Crash* suggests that there is no access to Logos today except through silence”—that Logos exists in the space between “name and form, sound and meaning” (120-1). This position indicates a focus on the ephemeral quality of language, but

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<sup>20</sup> From the Greek’s use of Logos as logic or reason in the development of rhetorical instruction to the first century Christian acquisition of Logos as the organizing principle of the universe uttered by God himself at the moment of creation, this term has been influential to many subsequent disciplines including psychology and philosophy.



Stephenson is nothing if not concrete in his use of empowering language. To insist that his use is anything metaphysical is to misconstrue his means and his message. In the text, people are affected by language through deep structures in their brain that dictate their ability to perform tasks. Together, these tasks, like baking bread or working with iron, construct a system of people working for and with each other. But, within this system is another. The Metaverse, a virtual reality constructed by computer programmers, is also manipulated by the codes used to literally create the virtual space.

In both the physical and the real world of the text, language is depicted as the most powerful tool for change and/or domination because people can be reprogrammed either by language or code. Haney disagrees with this view of language: “The nature of language in humans differs radically from that in computers, even though both seem to include a performative level in which saying is doing” (117). Instead, he argues that there is and must be a spiritual aspect to the language and consciousness of humans. We are not organic automata that simply shuffle through the motions of life and accept whatever memes come our way without the ability to reject them and make decisions for ourselves. Haney argues: “Snow crash as a virus is designed specifically to subvert the self and all of its characteristics in order to render humans as malleable as non-conscious machines to benefit the elite at the expense of the masses” (Haney 126). While the society depicted in the novel is decidedly, Haney believes the novel epitomizes all that postmodern society fears but is resigned to—institutional control, oppression, loss of free will, and zombification. The ultimate nightmare then becomes the destruction of humanity: “by simulating an equation between humans and computers, the snow crash infection entails a loss of humanity, making humans even more like computers” (Haney

130). Haney sees more in humans than machines that run according to their programming since their automation signals not only a link to machines, but, more specifically, a loss of what has traditionally made them more than machine—their ability to choose.

In the novel, these groups are represented by the cult of Asherah and the L. Bob Rife-funded Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates evangelical movement—a thinly veiled caricature of L. Ron Hubbard's formulation of Scientology.<sup>21</sup> According to historian Bendt Alster, the story of Enki and Asherah explains the move from the singular Creator to the binary male/female act of reproduction. The Librarian in *Snow Crash* further explains that Asherah's Caananite name was Hawwa, or Eve, both of which are related to serpent goddesses. Emmanuel Lagos and Juanita had previously surmised that the cult of Asherah was spreading a sexually transmitted viral infection that “was able to transmute itself from a biologically transmitted string of DNA to a set of behaviors” (Stephenson 230). Lagos believed that Enki saw Asherah as a threat to Sumer because she knew how to manipulate *me*—deep structural and unalterable rules for behavior—to suit her desires and her need to be worshipped. Therefore, Enki spread an anti-virus called the nam-shub of Enki that wiped the ability to speak Sumerian from everyone's mind. Enki's myth explains the Tower of Babel story. However, Asherah was not defeated entirely. Her followers spread her biological version of *me* through sexual contact and breast milk. Hiro surmises that the Hebrew Deuteronomists used Asherah's relationship to Eve to introduce the binary concept of good and evil in order to advocate for the need for more severe laws. The Deuteronomists

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<sup>21</sup> Created by L. Ron Hubbard in the 1950s, Scientology built on ideas first expressed in his *Dianetics* (1950) concerning the connection between the mind, body, and the spirit. Hubbard relates to Dick's depiction of humanity's alien origin as well as his rejection of formal psychotherapy. In Stephenson's novel, Hubbard is characterized as a meglomaniacal opportunist who exploits people in desperate need for answers, inducting them and brainwashing them using the Sumarian *me*, or the engram of Hubbard's Scientology.

effectively outlawed the worship of Asherah, restricted the sexual rites involved in her worship, and reinforced their hold over the religious and social mores of the Hebrews with a meta-virus of their own imbedded within the Torah. Thanks to the Deuteronomists, Judaism “was much less susceptible to viral infection because it was based on fixed, written records. This was the reason for the veneration of the Torah and the exacting care used when making new copies of it—informational hygiene” (Stephenson 230). With Reverend Wayne’s Pearly Gates franchise, L. Bob Rife finds a way to reintroduce the Sumerian language, a language that accesses the deep centers of the brainstem and, with it, *me* would act as a neurolinguistic virus capable of reprogramming those infected with it, just as Asherah had attempted with her cult prostitutes. Both groups—the cult of Asherah and those under the employ of L. Bob Rife—use tools that tap into deep structures in the brain that control our actions, skills, beliefs, and consciousness.

#### *Neurobiological Viruses and Žižek’s Lacan*

These deep structures function similar to the way in which, in Lacanian theory, the Symbolic order provides the framework for the Imaginary order. In other words, by understanding how people use language to orient themselves to each other and the physical world surrounding them, a person can use this knowledge, like a skilled rhetorician, to influence the thoughts and actions, and perhaps more insidiously, the ideology of the intended audience. Likewise, Stephenson imagines a world with a lost mythology that can be used to revise subjective reality by manipulating the transmission, understanding, and acceptance of information. Sabine Heuser in *Virtual Geographies: Cyberpunk at the Intersection of the Postmodern and Science Fiction*, celebrates the world building initiative: “[Stephenson] adopts

computing terms like BIOS, virus, daemon, port, or scrolling, and re-inscribes them with new meaning, thus reviving their metaphorical roots. Computer jargon abounds with catachreses, constantly naming new objects into existence” (173). By adopting this new language, Stephenson utilizes Samuel Delany’s paraspaces—those places particular to science fiction and postmodern literature where metaphor becomes something more, something literal. Heuser claims, “Stephenson thus re-invests the dead metaphor of the computer virus with new meaning, simply by reversing the direction of the semantic exchange from technology to biology. The more often a figurative meaning is used, the closer it comes to being accepted as literalized common sense” (Heuser 177). By consciously utilizing literalized metaphors, Stephenson draws attention to the fact that a “multilayered concept of the virus is the novel’s central metaphor. This plague to both humans and computers throws everything into question: language (371), ideas (373), ideologies (327), religions (214) all become prey to the chaos” (Heuser 175). Chaos is exactly what Stephenson is gunning for; the author is playing on the very real and current issue of technology shaping society so that the two become, in many ways, synonymous. The metaphor of the computer virus then becomes acceptable as a technological, biological, and social malady simultaneously.

Heusers’ approach to the novel is understandable since Stephenson’s novel has been labeled a post-cyberpunk novel or postmodern science fiction novel. In *VALIS*, the symbolic construction of the world, a labyrinth of our own enlightened and alien design cripples our insight and traps us in a world of suffering and pain. It is artificial and false, built of language and directly reflects the Lacanian Symbolic order that constructs the walls of the Imaginary order, keeping us unaware of and displaced from the Lacanian Real. Stephenson utilizes the

deep structure and theoretical Universal Grammar of our neural architecture to first threaten and finally liberate us from outside control. Carl Boehm notes that “Hiro understands the disorder of the physical world, an ironically shadowy world that is a reflection of the ideal world he has created in the Metaverse, so he reverse engineers a utopia based on justice by understanding the imperfections of his ‘real’ world and thus encoding a truth in the virtual realm based on those imperfections he finds in the physical world” (Boehm 398). In other words, Hiro intends to vindicate the natural world in the novel by constructing a better world in the Metaverse. He designs trap doors that deal with trash and other problems that arise there. He is able to control the Metaverse in a way that he is unable to do in the natural world: “By controlling the virtual realm, a programmer can create and maintain a utopia by simply rewriting software in response to any problem that may arise in an attempt to establish justice” (Boehm 398). Boehm argues that Hiro, Juanita, and Y.T. desire justice in the real world and free will to remain intact so they fight against those forces, Rife and Raven—much like strife and death—so that humanity will remain free in the real and virtual worlds. Hiro’s world building in the Metaverse is then a positive instance of labyrinthine construction but with the knowledge of the way out. Hiro, unlike the alien ancestors to humanity in *VALIS*, has not forgotten the way out. He is constantly building more escape routes as problems arise. And it is this ability that is the key to symbolic constructions. We can allow these symbolic constructions to inhibit and control us if we allow them to or if we forget we have control over them. However, if we constantly update and modify these symbols, then we retain our own volition and remain free.

*Stephenson's Postmodern Data-Dump*

Stephenson blends mythology, history, techno and pop culture to build a post-cyberpunk world: “Both the mythical figure of an author of the universe and the physical laws and technical details behind the universe’s command line are important to Stephenson’s imagination and art. In other words: he needs both figurative language and code language to render his version of contemporary culture” (Raab 248). These matters are explicit in the plot, but, traditionally, the very nature of Logos argues for exceptional skill, secrecy, or mysticism, much like the awareness of the Imaginary as a construct eludes popular acknowledgement. For this reason Stephenson selects a small group who can know/use Logos for the betterment of humanity, specifically Hiro in the Metaverse and Juanita in the real world of the novel. This cabal is charged with defeating the threat posed by Rife and those, like Asherah, who would use this knowledge to manipulate and enslave the world. Using mythological technology, these power-hungry groups could eradicate any kind of traditional humanity by removing free will. Removing free will from the human equation would then reduce the population to a collection of metaphorical androids running whatever program was fed to them. Our hacker heroes obtain the ability to hack the brainstem, but unlike Rife, use this knowledge to ensure this power is not used to harm or abuse others. The heroic hacker oversight committee is not nefarious like the common conception of Orwell’s Big Brother or Žižek’s postmodern big Other. Instead, the heroes of the novel must also act as guardians and keepers of the metanarrative, or organizing deep structure, just as Enki did thousands of years ago. Stephenson seems to be replacing the big Other of postmodern ideology with a new, hopeful, and empowering Other defined by those who take part in its oversight. And those who come away with this charge are not simply the

heroes of the novel; the reader learns a valuable lesson through the metaphor of the neurolinguistic virus used in the book. So cyberpunk has been revised to accept the marginalized characters and rapid technological growth because there remains a metanarrative at work, organizing and overseeing it all.

### *Memes, Myth and Mes*

The view of language as the infrastructure of the Imaginary order is certainly nothing new. It has even been given a scientific, rational name. In 1976, Richard Dawkins, in his seminal work *The Selfish Gene*, compared cultural data to genetic data in order to describe how certain social behaviors might be inherited or passed down through centuries of human development. Likewise, Lacan observes “language is a gift as dangerous to humanity as the horse was to the Trojans: it offers itself to our use free of charge, but once we accept it, it colonizes us” (Žižek 11-12). In order to understand what Stephenson fictionalizes in his novel, a background of memetics, as it is now called, is needed. *Snow Crash* describes a world that is both controlled by technology and infected by cultural viruses. These viruses attack the memes by hacking through the meta-linguistic framework, or codes, underpinning the framework of the brain in order to bring about a change in their cultural system. These codes are rules designed to enforce a system of order.

Susan Blackmore, in her book *The Meme Machine*, extends Dawkins’ metaphor beyond the suggestion that memes exist and that they act in similar ways to genes. She argues rather pragmatically, “Language would have allowed our ancestors to acquire information and pass it on far faster than biological evolution could achieve, giving them a decisive advantage in

competition with other species” (Blackmore 95). She explains this physical phenomenon as a result of biological determinism. While biological determinism is at odds with Lacanian theory, Stephenson uses Dawkins’ suggestion of the meme to inform his plot and make it scientifically as well as psychologically engaging. Blackmore extends Dawkins’ metaphor by posing an evolutionary origin of memes. She suggests that out of necessity, our ancestors evolved into speech, leaving the physically incapable to die out. She claims that a number of neurological and physical changes had to occur, such as changes to the construction of the neck, mouth and throat. This change could have happened for any number of reasons; but more significantly, those with these changes would have had another skill set that placed them above those who did not possess these differences. Blackmore explains the alteration and its influence on speech: “people will both preferentially copy and preferentially mate with the people with the best memes—in this case the best language. These people then pass on genetically whatever it was about their brains that made them good at copying these particularly successful sounds” (Blackmore 104). Blackmore makes a reasoned argument for a comparison of memes and genes, focusing on their common requirements for survival. Both are essentially bound by the same requirements of “fidelity, fecundity, and longevity” (Blackmore 104). Certainly these can be noted in cultural memes. Beliefs, in order to continue to have a presence in society, must not be watered down, must have a solid group who still believe them, and must have historical precedents.

However, Kate Distin disagrees with Blackmore’s comparison. In her book, *The Selfish Meme*, Distin contends, “In contrast to genes—which, in conjunction with an appropriate



environment, generate survival machines that may be “hijacked” by biological viruses—memes do not create the replicative mechanisms” (76). In other words, Distin believes that memes must depend on the host’s ability to spread them to others. They cannot grow in isolation; they must be spread. By looking at memes as viruses instead of genes, Distin turns the discussion from a neutral biological metaphor to one that is encoded with negative proliferation or diabolical implications. Distin argues that memes are not self-perpetuating; rather, people *infected* with these ideas pass them on, intentionally or unintentionally. Memes cannot pass themselves on of their own accord.

William Burroughs in his article “The Electronic Revolution,” also argues this position. He reasons that a virus passed down to following generations causes alteration to the inner throat, and because of the new skill, enabled by illness, the host never deems the alteration as negative. He explains, “We now have a new virus that can be communicated and indeed the subject may be desperate [sic] to communicate this thing that is bursting inside him. He is heavy with the load. Could this load be good and beautiful? Is it possible to create a virus that will communicate calm and sweet reasonableness? A virus must parasitise a host in order to survive.” (Burroughs). Burroughs notes this same philosophy in the writings and subsequent philosophy of L. Ron Hubbard. Burroughs states, “Hubbard bases the power he attributes to words on his theory of engrams. An engram is defined as word, sound, image recorded by the subject in a period of pain and unconsciousness. Some of his material may be reassuring: “I think he’s going to be alright.” Reassuring material is an ally engram. Ally engrams, according to Mr. Hubbard, are just as bad as hostile as pain engrams” (Burroughs). These engrams, ally or not, manipulate a person’s mood and direct a person to act a certain way. It is difficult to believe that Stephenson

was not influenced by all of these intersections when researching the topic of memes. While neither Hubbard nor Burroughs are considered experts in the field (many even consider them quacks of the highest order), Ruth Garrett Millikan's research supports these theories:

Language enters as just one among the many other media by which information about the disposition, among other such things in the environment, of an empirical object, kind, stuff, or property can manifest itself to the senses. Just as there are conditions under which patterns of light striking the retina will vary systematically with certain properties of the distal objects reflecting it, there are conditions under which the sentences that a person hears will vary systematically according to the dispositions of things in the world that originated them. (Millikan)

Stephenson appears to be using these approaches to the connection between language and society to engage in the question of free will and agency in the postmodern era. The author legitimizes the concept of the meme and mythologizes it by attributing it to the ancient and fallen cradle of civilization, Sumer. Once the common language of Sumer was abolished, people had to write new instructions for society. Since these instructions were already hardwired by this point, there was no need for a viral version. Languages adapted, with the help of Enki, and early language programmer, into less invasive codes. Viral language was forgotten, much like the labyrinth in *VALIS* was forgotten.

Like the scattering described by the Tower of Babel story, Stephenson's particular take on the broken world is a Los Angeles consisting of separate antagonistic, walled, armed, and guarded Burbclaves of different ethnic/religious/corporate interest groups. Antithetically, the Metaverse—an online virtual world—appears to provide a slightly less segregated society

similar to the one in which we now live, divided not by literal walls, but by appearance and affluence. Both postmodern literature and its apotheosis, cyberpunk, often strip power and control from their characters, exposing the senselessness of a unified and total vision of society, or revealing the overriding influence of corporations and the progress of technology, respectively.

Stephenson accomplishes this engagement by unearthing a unified vision of language lost to history. Once L. Bob Rife, the fictional version of L. Ron Hubbard, discovers stories of Asherah and Enki, he develops a communicable neurolinguistic virus on par with the herpes simplex virus. He then releases it at Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates franchulate and the virus's virtual analog, Snow Crash, infiltrates the Metaverse, taking the battle to erase free will and making humans mindless automata to both the real and virtual streets. Stephenson imagines language as a virus in order to make several points. He posits that language can have power over people. Few would argue against the persuasive potential of words, spoken or written. Throughout human history, language has indicated with whom we align ourselves, and allowed expression of our philosophical/political/religious beliefs. All of these ideologies depend upon rhetoric to persuade, instruct, and propagate. For Carl Boehm, "Stephenson parallels computer language with human language to the extent that the language can be deadly. From the intersection of computer code and human language comes an exposition of similarities between the two, in which human language functions to replicate an idea or object in the same way virtual reality replicated the physical world" (398-9). In Stephenson's text, these codes are both wet and dry, biological and linguistic respectively; they impose order on humans as well as virtual avatars and the world these avatars inhabit. This comparison appears several times in the novel.

Hiro even states, “all information looks like noise until you break the code” (Stephenson 74). When Hiro first learns of Snow Crash, he asks, “is it a virus, a drug, or a religion?” Juanita, a newly converted Christian and former hacker, answers that it is all three. (Stephenson 200).

The threat to society is simultaneously Symbolic and biologic—it has the power to change belief and physical behavior. As any system of codes would suggest, a change in the rules enforces a new, updated order under the control of those who write the code. Hackers understood this better than anyone at the dawn of information technology. They reveled and rejoiced in the potential control they could exert over their lives now that so much information was being archived and made into bits of data in the burgeoning datasphere that would soon become known as cyberspace, or for this novel, the Metaverse. But hacking the brainstem simultaneously makes the mysterious scientific, the ancient modern, and the connected subsequently fragmented. Erik Davis has made these connections his personal research project. Davis believes, “Today, there is so much pressure on information—the word, the concept, the stuff itself—that it crackles with energy, drawing to itself mythologies, metaphysics, hints of arcane magic” (Davis 11). He argues that despite our scientific and technological progress, many still need to view the world as imbued with some kind of divine or spiritual spark represented by histories or religions or mythologies. Stephenson seems to be using the mystical desire, the need for a metanarrative beyond our understanding, as the crux of his novel. In many ways, *Logos*, is the re-introduction of the modernist metanarrative. Clearly at odds with much of postmodern theory, I argue that Stephenson, like Dick and Delany, believes in an over-arching Truth or totalizing framework but is unable to explain or characterize it clearly. Therefore he

flirts with it, hints at it, and finally leaves on character, Juanita, in charge of policing a newly revived human programming language at the end of the novel.

Stephenson explores language programming and situates Logos in the ancient and lost language of Sumer. According to the text, the language of Sumer was actually a string of syllables rather than formal words. These syllables sound like babble to the modern ear causing several characters to refer to those infected with the meta-virus as *Falabalas*. (Stephenson 177) These syllables represent memes, or *me*. Each *me* instructs the user in the skill for which it was designed. There were *mes* for baking bread, working with stone, being a mother, etc. Without these *mes*, the culture of Sumer would not have survived or flourished. By using the *me* of Enki, which Stephenson describes as “rules or principles that control the operation of society, like a code of laws, but on a more fundamental level,” he makes a direct comparison to Dawkins’ meme (Stephenson 251). But the comparison doesn’t stop there; Daniel Grassian notes Stephenson’s use of the meme is similar to Blackmore and Dawkins’ version: “One possibility is definitely an informational Darwinism, in which the informational adept are the ones who ultimately dominate and evolve, while the others are left by the wayside” (Grassian 265). But Grassian also agrees Burroughs, Hubbard, and Distin’s view of memes:

not only is language a kind of virus, but so is virtually all information. He empowers texts and images with a power independent from that of human. He takes an additional step beyond the Derridian notion that the fictionalized world or “reality” is or has become a text to proclaim that the text is independent and in some ways superior to the reader. The reader is not necessarily the one who dominates the text; rather, the text can dominate the reader. (262)

While both seem to be at work in the novel, I believe that these views are shortsighted. Stephenson offers free will as humanity's saving grace. Stephenson uses it without making it the solution to the problems of the world. Instead, it is sufficient that a small band of heroes, similar to the tradition of white hat hackers, *can* tap into the organizing structure of humanity. By defeating Rife, these heroes acknowledge the existence and power of the metanarrative, or Žižek's big Other, and recast it as they choose—exercising this power only when presented with a challenge, similar to those white hat hackers from the late seventies and early eighties.

### *Gnosticism as Mortar and Pestle*

The synthesis of literary theory, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and hacker culture all find an odd, but surprisingly well-suited, proving ground in Gnosticism. Perhaps as a representative of the metanarrative, Gnostic thought allows for all of these theories to work with and for each other under one single mysterious canopy. Erik Davis explains:

From the moment that humans began etching grooves into ancient wizard bones to mark the cycles of the moon, the process of encoding thought and experience into a vehicle of expression has influenced the changing nature of the self. Information technology tweaks our perceptions, communicates our picture of the world to one another, and constructs remarkable and sometimes insidious forms of control over the cultural stories that shape our sense of the world. The moment we invent a significant new device for communication—talking drums, papyrus scrolls, printed books, crystal sets, computers, pagers—we partially reconstruct the self and its world, creating new opportunities (and new traps) for thought, perception, and social experience. (Davis 6-7)

Stephenson recalls Gnostic thought from the buried Dead Sea scrolls and weaves it into his criticism of society. His novel raises concerns for the loss of free will in a society that is becoming increasingly dependent on technology. As society adopts more automated technology, people release control over many operations within that society. This release is directly related to how we see ourselves as agents within society. Technology seems to allow more control over certain parts of our lives, but it can also distance us from our lives, the people we know, and the work we do, ultimately resulting in a crisis of the self. Instead of making his novel a blatant warning against this crisis, Stephenson places the threat centuries in the past, suggesting that the crisis has existed throughout history and is only now a real threat. For example, according to the novel, the Sumerian language was eventually erased because Enki realized that a language used for building a civilization could also be used to enslave that nation, so he went about dismantling language to ensure the freedom and the free will of the people.

The interpretation of history found in this novel recalls Philip K. Dick's *Black Iron Prison* and his readings of the Gnostics in *VALIS*: "The Gnostics sought the pure signal that overrides the noise and corrosive babel of the world—an ineffable rush tinged with the Platonic exaltation of mind, a first-person encounter with the Logos etched into the heart of the divine self within" (Davis 114). L. Bob Rife has "heard the signal" and wants to use the information that he has stolen from Dr. Emmanuel Lagos (Logos) to enslave humanity, making himself a god among men—also representative of the Gnostic belief of man's deification. According to the Librarian (a program available in the Metaverse similar to a personified search engine), Lagos is a researcher at the Library of Congress who studied everything in an attempt to find previously unnoticed connections. He is also a self-taught programmer who designed the Librarian. Lagos

is a compiler and synthesizer as well as a creator. He appears in the text as a gargoyle, a person continuously tapped into the Metaverse and constantly privy to all of its information. It is through Logos (Logos) that characters are exposed to the peculiarities of the ancient language of Sumer and the mythologized memes that were transmitted through it. In *Snow Crash*, the individual survives the reprogramming of the unified. Thus the novel, through its use of both wet and dry encoding, simultaneously makes a connection between all living things but quickly sends them scattering as the individual resists being reprogrammed through the power enabled by Logos.

#### *Metaverse as Metaphor*

Looking at the two worlds in *Snow Crash*, it appears that Stephenson admires individuality and creativity in computer hackers and considers these important to the differentiation of humans from the natural world. By contrast, the posthuman Infocalypse serves to “undermine the uniqueness of human nature” (Haney 127). The commentary on uniqueness, or as Žižek would argue, the authenticity, of human experience plays out in the articulation of the Metaverse. Ironically, according to Žižek, a virtual world, like the Metaverse, “provides reality itself divested of its substance, of the resisting hard kernel of the Real—in the same way that decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real thing, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so” (Žižek 38). However, feminist critic Barbara Browning argues, “*Snow Crash* refuses to isolate the Metaverse as metaphor, as hypothetical world opposed to a real one” (Browning 50). As Hiro Protagonist stands for the man of the future, the avatars represent Hiro in the Metaverse. These avatars can be generic or specialized



and they are designed to travel within a landscape that defies traditional boundaries and denies the laws of physics. One can appear in pixilated monochrome colors or high definition vibrancy. One can drive hundreds of miles per hour forever without reaching a boundary. One can be invisible and float above the heads of other avatars or walk on the Street sampling the millions of wares available to anyone.

With all of these options, it is easy to forget that there must still be rules that control the composition of the avatars and their environment. The neurolinguistic pathways that Sumerian works across are similar to the ways in which programming languages must run an operating system—there must always be rules. For example, “When Hiro wrote the Black Sun’s sword-fighting algorithms, code that was later picked up and adopted by the entire Metaverse—he discovered that there was no good way to handle the aftermath....So Hiro had to kludge something together, in order that the Metaverse would not, over time, become littered with inert, dismembered avatars that never decayed” (Stephenson 102). Like the real world in the novel, the Metaverse must be adapted to deal with real problems—like trash. And with this trash comes the difficulty of all operating systems. Who controls it? Who has agency? Erik Davis contends, “Gnostic myth anticipates the more extreme dreams of today’s mechanistic mutants and cyberspace cowboys, especially their libertarian drive toward freedom and self-divination, and their dualistic rejection of matter for the incorporeal possibilities of mind” (97). Self-empowerment sits at the center of the problem of the postmodern big Other. We desire freedom idealized and without strings attached, but this kind of freedom scares us. Freedom to be who we are and say what we want is overwhelming, so we have devised ways of relating to the world that obscures any true understanding or communication. The deception is of our own design and

it is through language that we are most deceived. However, embedded within language are desires to be free from misdirection; hopes of pure connection; and yearnings for personal freedom. Stephenson equates this deception and the complicity of language with a virus. The word virus encapsulates all the fear and concern for a loss of control both in the virtual world of computers as well as the physical world.

When a virus is unleashed in the Metaverse, it threatens those who are jacked in because the virus targets the brainstem. It is described to Hiro as similar to learning computer code. As he becomes more proficient at writing code, he actually remaps his neural pathways: “You were forming pathways in your brain. Deep structures. Your nerves grow new connections as you used them--...your bioware self-modifies—the software becomes part of the hardware. So now you’re vulnerable—all hackers are—to a *nam-shub*” (Stephenson 126). It is precisely for this reason that Hiro must do something about the virus being unleashed upon the hackers in the Metaverse. A virus could reprogram all of the people who write code for the Metaverse and place them under the control of one person, depriving them of agency and reducing them to automata.

### *Postmodernism Interrogated*

L. Bob Rife’s desire for the unified encoding of humanity is disrupted by human rationality and the subsequent attempt at individuation. The current Symbolic order is subverted in favor of the individual’s right to program himself/herself. Stephenson’s distrust of the Imaginary order symbolized by Dawkins’ memes and the assimilated Sumerian civilization is finally exorcised by his hero’s programming savvy and his struggle for individuation: “Hiro

recognizes that language of any sort is only a signifying tool by which one conveys ideas to another, and he realizes that his process is flawed because language itself is a shadowy replication of truth. Hiro sees past the replication of language into the true process of communication” (Boehm 400). He finally understands the essence of language as code, subverts the big Other, and constructs a new Other that will not bind all who dwell within it. He enables others to act as their own agents of change and control. I believe that it is in fact a product of consciousness that produces the ability to withstand the preset Symbolic order. This order, or deep structural programming, signals the postmodern cynicism and resultant paranoia or ennui. Just as Hiro’s Snow Scan antivirus provides a vaccine for the digital Snow Crash, the nam-shub of Enki, the literal speech that acts, the Logos, inoculates those who would come in contact with the physical virus. But it isn’t enough to imagine a vaccine. Stephenson ends the novel with two figures whose code changes reality, either Virtual or Physical—Hiro and Juanita. While Hiro is capable of designing and manipulating the Metaverse, Juanita leaves the scene with the power to reprogram people in reality. Juanita can theoretically design and manipulate people because she has learned the nam-shub of Enki. I believe it is unnecessary for Stephenson to show Juanita using this new ability. It has already been considered in the case of L. Bob Rife. Instead, Stephenson leaves us with two figures, one of science and one of faith, who possess the ability to change reality in order to present the total solution. The natural world is not favored over the virtual world. They are the same. Science and faith are on equal footing as well. Furthermore, neither character will engage in schemes to control the world, like L. Bob Rife. Instead, like hackers, the skill and knowledge is sufficient and they will wait like watchdogs for any other

cracker threat posed to free will. The very fact that a person can possess this ability and that people throughout history have manifested it—Enki, the Deuteronomists of Judaism in their writing of the living Word, the Torah, Christ, and now Juanita—proves that humans have agency and are not relegated to automata of the Lacanian big Other.

Žižek argues that postmodern cynicism, paranoia, and helplessness are caused by the destabilization of the big Other, the Imaginary order, and a frustration with its institutions. This frustration leads to a kind of Symbolic revolution, inevitably culminating in the formulation of an Other of the Other and a new and improved Symbolic order. An idealized version is Logos, the original world-builder, creator, and freedom-giver. In *Snow Crash* we have an articulation of this revolution. Stephenson imagines a society that upon the threat of a more oppressive big Other replaces the postmodern operating system of helplessness with a Logos operating system that allows for empowerment, agency, and ultimate control over religion, knowledge, history, and language, ushering in a new and improved Symbolic order of our own conscious design. Erik Davis sums up the connection between technology, spirituality, and hope rather well in his introduction to *Techgnosis*:

technology has helped disenchant the world, forcing the ancestral symbolic networks of old to give way to the crisp, secular game plans of economic development, skeptical inquiry, and material progress. But the old phantasms and metaphysical longings did not exactly disappear. In many cases, they disguised themselves and went underground, worming their way into the cultural, psychological, and mythological motivations that form the foundations of the modern world. (5)

We have never shaken the spirituality that has existed with us since the time before historical record. I suppose that the return to ephemeral explanations betrays, despite modern movements to transcend the body through the application and installation of technology, the depth of which we are rooted in the natural world. We are still “meat” as early cyberpunk authors would have said. The more we invent to remove ourselves from this meatspace, the more we seem to imbue technology with spirituality. Stephenson has captured this fascination with history, secret or forgotten knowledge, and technology and made a statement that strikes at the heart of the postmodern era. But it also betrays a desire to reclaim agency. It re-introduces the desire for the modernist metanarrative and a totalizing structure that is not evil, malicious, or indifferent. Instead, this structure is of our own creation and we are responsible for its revision and cultivation. Reclamation involves language, bodies, technology, and corporate institutions. And while this power through language is not used in the end of the novel, the recovery of knowledge and the re-empowerment of people speaks volumes about our desires for freedom from oppression and slavery as well as our hopes for a new world of our own design.

## CHAPTER 3.

## ARCHITECTS OF REALITY

Samuel Delany's *Babel-17* recounts how a brilliant poet saved the known universe from war. Rydra Wong, the orphaned child of a communication engineer and a court translator, lost her parents during the second embargo on the Outer Worlds during the war between the Alliance and the Invaders. She had been a prodigious learner of languages, picking up seven Earth and five alien languages by the time she was twelve. Then the embargo ravaged the outpost on Uranus where she lived and she returned to Earth, malnourished and a victim of neurosciatic plague, to live with her aunt and uncle. While recovering from her wounds, both physical and psychological, she fine-tuned a perfect verbal recall she had used to some degree in years past to learn so many languages so quickly. She also discovered a knack for cryptography while working as a translator for the government one summer and began a short, but illustrious, career as a cryptographer until she decided to focus on writing poetry for which she is known across five galaxies, inspiring millions to "delve [her] imagery and meaning for the answers to the riddles of language, love, and isolation" (Delany 10). At the beginning of the novel, she is sought by the General Forester, a high-ranking official for the Alliance for her extraordinary cryptographic skills. The government has intercepted a complex code, named Babel-17, that seems to coincide with several acts of sabotage against the Alliance and Forester's team of cryptographers are having difficulty breaking the code.

This meeting sets the stage for the motivations of Rydra and the ultimate conclusion to the war. Her interests in translating, cryptography, and poetry all point to the same nagging issue—difficulties in communication. She is weighed down by isolation and troubled by disconnection with others. She has studied and thought about this problem for so long that she

has developed what she believes to be an ability to read other's thoughts by interpreting body language. She exhibits this skill in her meeting with General Forester, but she is ultimately discouraged by this skill because what she reads is his frustration at not being able to communicate his admiration of her as they are parting. Rydra characterizes this moment to her friend and therapist, Dr. Marksu T'mwarba, as "all the misunderstandings that tie the world up and keep people apart [...] quivering before me at once, waiting for me to untangle them, explain them, and I couldn't. I didn't know the words, the grammar, the syntax" (Delany 21). As a result, she sets out to crack the code, named Babel-17, discover who is using it, and understand its connection to a new way of thinking that may help her connect with others.

Rydra enlists the help of a rag-tag crew, evincing an astonishing knowledge of people from all walks of life and heads off to the site of what she considers to be the next target for sabotage. She witnesses the assassination of a weapons manufacturer for the Alliance and escapes only to be caught by marauder loosely affiliated with the Alliance. While in their care she meets an imposing ex-convict and second in command of the pirate ship, aptly named, the Butcher. She is instantly drawn to him because of his reticence and his odd speech pattern. As she learns more about Babel-17, she discovers that it is not a code but a language that reprograms the speaker with the values imbedded within it. She also discovers that, somehow, the Butcher thinks in Babel-17. Eventually, she and the Butcher telepathically link to one another and she learns that he is actually the son of a weapons manufacturer as well as his biologically-altered soldier prototype, stolen by the Invaders and reprogrammed using Babel-17 to commit acts of sabotage against the Alliance. Rydra frees him from this mind-control using her newly honed telepathy thanks to her mastery of Babel-17. In the final scenes of the novel, Rydra and the Butcher rewrite Babel-17, renaming it Babel-18, and send a coded message to the leaders of the

Alliance and the Invaders that will force them to end the war within the next six months. Because Rydra is able to utilize Babel-17 to fully comprehend her own telepathic gift, she connects with the Butcher, returning the memory of his past to him. Through this act, both characters find themselves in relation to each other and set out to save the rest of the known universe from war and Otherness.

I believe this novel fictionalizes the breaking with Jacques Lacan's conception of radical alterity by returning to the modernist grand narrative more concretely than Stephenson did in *Snow Crash*. If, according to Kenneth Burke and Slavoj Žižek, we only understand ourselves and the world around us by defining ourselves and the world against what they are not, in Delany, we can only truly know ourselves *through* the eyes of the Other. If we agree with Burke and Žižek's view, we understand tolerance because we see intolerance in the world. The intolerance may be sexual, racial, religious, or political in nature and it may program us to operate in certain ways that appear to bind us together, but in reality it further separates us from others and their concrete experiences. We, at the core, are different from others; we have different goals, drives, and desires. All of these differences make communication and true communion impossible because no one can completely relate to another person. Ideologies then act as a substitute by filling in the gaps of ourselves that we are reluctant to reveal to others and ourselves. But in Delany's novel, the desperate need to know others betrays our deeper need to see the world through the eyes and ears of the Other so that we can then know ourselves completely.

While the inter-galactic war frames the story of *Babel-17*, an awakening of telepathic ability and its link to language acquisition, language mastery, and the construction of social reality through shared language runs throughout the novel and rises to the surface as the



dominant theme. Delany also appears to subvert the relationship between language and social reality by empowering characters to rise above the programming and construction of Žižek's big Other and assume control over the tie that binds language to the social construction of reality. Delany's *Babel-17* quickly moves beyond its simple space opera plotline to reveal an exploration of language and its role in constructing reality. While Delany locates the inhibiting nature of language in the foreign code of the Invaders, this maneuver obviously criticizes the appearance of good and evil on either side of the war. By using the terms "Invader" and "Alliance," Delany highlights this bias toward one side and allows Rydra to recognize this bias as she awakens to a new understanding of reality through her use of Babel-17. Furthermore, the use of a main character that is both a poet and cryptographer illuminates the tension felt in many science fiction stories between art and science. Rydra bridges the gaps between language and understanding for the reader just as she does for the characters in the novel. She is able to act as this intermediary because she understands the connection between language and the self.

#### *Telepathy, Empathy, and/or Body Language*

Rydra's mastery of language is the result of her synthesis of her skills in translating, cryptography, and poetry, highlighting the difficulties in communication. She has studied and thought about this problem for so long that she has developed what she believes to be an ability to read other's thoughts by interpreting body language. She exhibits this skill in her meeting with General Forester, but she is ultimately discouraged by her skill because what she reads is his frustration at not being able to communicate his admiration of her as they are parting. He feels silly, fawning, and old so he keeps his thoughts to himself, causing him to emotionally

withdraw just before they physically part. Rydra is all too familiar with moments like this; she has watched the frustration and fear of connection her entire life.

While waiting for her to meet him to discuss her aid, General Forester thinks about what has happened since this war broke out and how people have been reduced to savagery. They have all lived through “embargoes, broken windows, looted, run screaming before firehoses, torn flesh from a corpse’s arm with decalcified teeth” (*Babel-17* 3). He finishes his thought with the question: “Who is this animal man?” (3). The people, after twenty years of hardships and their government’s focus on defense against the Invaders, have suffered for their liberty. But at what cost? And who are the Invaders? The book never makes clear the initial reason for the war, only that it exists and persists. Rydra confirms this confusion by commenting, “Nobody likes the Invasion, but it goes on. It’s so big I never really thought about trying to get out of it before” (161-2). The universe built in the opening scenes of the novel constructs a society that suffers from the political machine’s relentless warmongering. The people have long forgotten the reason for the war and they have been reduced to animals that react and struggle for survival rather than taking control of their situation and reasoning out a solution.

In some ways, the society in this novel is similar to the one described in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Lullaby* and, on some levels, Philip K. Dick’s *VALIS*. Characters in *Lullaby* have stopped paying attention to what is going on around them and are afflicted with a kind of mass-mindlessness that results from the distraction of the constant noise-as-entertainment that society and the media machine emits. In Dick’s novel, the media machine is replaced with the Black

Iron Prison<sup>22</sup> that continually updates an illusory world, keeping people compliant and consequently suffering. Likewise, Rydra recognizes the alienation felt by people due to miscommunication, but not until midway through the story does she recognize that alienation leads to lack of social awareness and criticism. Once she begins to learn about Babel-17, she discovers that language is the glue binding society, people, and the self together. The people in the *Babel-17* are slaves to themselves because they cannot and do not communicate effectively with one another. This communication failure also inhibits people from interrogating their place in the world, making them victims of circumstances *within* their control. But the answer is not, nor has it ever been, to act as violent beasts; rather they must use language and reason to reconstruct their world and themselves for the better.

According to Carl Malmgren in his article “The Languages of Science Fiction: Samuel Delany's *Babel-17*,” Rydra “moves from a language frame in which reality is constrictive or uncertain or exigent through the language frame of Babel-17 to a new reality in which obstacles are overcome, dangers neutralized, conflicts resolved” (10). In other words, the world in the beginning of the novel is fragmented due to the otherness represented in language and thought. Things are defined through the negative, creating isolation and suspicion. But through the inverse prism of Babel-17, all fragments are brought together and reconciliation is achieved. As Rydra learns and uses Babel-17, the fragmented world begins to cohere and she is better able to

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<sup>22</sup> According to several characters in *VALIS*, the Black Iron Prison was an elaborate labyrinth designed by the three-eyed alien ancestors of humanity. The perfection and complexity of the labyrinth enthralled its architects and they lost themselves within its walls, forsaking their third eyes and becoming human. This Fall separated them from those who remained in space so a satellite, called Zebra, was designed to send signals to humanity that would leave virtual breadcrumbs out of the labyrinth and restore them to their former glory. The Demiurge, in a conflation of science fiction and Gnosticism, oversees this labyrinth, like some unrelenting AI, in order to make it seem real. This labyrinth is our perceived reality, broken and rife with suffering and pain. This pain keeps humanity from re-ascending to its former glory.

orchestrate a change. Otherness is abolished. In one final act, Delany provides a way out of an imposed view of reality through the conscious manipulation of language and the literal engineering of a new reality, or more specifically, the revision of the big Other. This revision of the big Other also betrays a desire for the return of the modernist meta-narrative. By fully grasping how social identity is formed through language, the divide between individuals contracts and people are empowered to make positive change in their society.

Lacan and Žižek would agree that language in fact does dictate an individual's relationship with his/her own reality and those who move around in reality. However, to these theorists, language is an effective inputting process *more* than it is an outputting, expressive tool. In other words, people are constructed by their language and ideologies. People are built by their environment and the language used to describe and explain this environment. Žižek contends that Lacan viewed language as a dangerous gift, and once it is accepted it is difficult to shake. Carl Malmgren, Seth McEvoy, Jane Weedman, and Sharon DeGraw have suggested in varying degrees that Delany's ethnicity, sexual orientation, or dyslexia have inspired his stories and directed his view and subsequent discussion of language and its role in the formulation of society and social constructs. We can extrapolate his belief in the power within language through his comments concerning writing instruction: "the vividness of fictional characters usually lies *between* rather than *in* the facts as we know them" (Delany, "Teaching S-F Writing" 144). Here, Delany admits that the most interesting thing about characters comes from the processing of the relationship between the signifier and the sign. The space between words and worlds leads to knowledge. In "About Five Thousand Seven Hundred and Fifty Words", Delany states this differently:

Is there such a thing as verbal information apart from the words used to inform? Most of the vocabulary of criticism is set up to imply there is. Information is carried by/with/in words. People are carried by/with/in cars. It should be as easy to separate the information from the word as it is to open the door of a Ford Mustang: *Content* means something that *is contained*. (22)

Delany once again points to his desire to unpack language and look at how it defines us. And his novels should, of course, be treated the same way.

### *A Widening of Focus*

It is easy to see how, during the 1960s, Delany's African Americanness, dyslexia, and homosexuality, not to mention his interest in writing science fiction, moved him further and further from the center of literary acknowledgement, but because of these separate disenfranchisements, he wrote inventive and startlingly literary treatments of science fiction that focused on world-building and the influence of language on the characters of the worlds he envisioned. Jane Weedman notes, "Delany has survived as a black writer in a predominantly white culture by mastering both white and black uses of similar languages and by adapting a predominately white literary genre to depict the conflicts between these two cultures and their psychological and linguistic affects on blacks" (41). Furthermore, Seth McEvoy suggests Delany's pervasive interests in language and text and the parts they play in the formulation of the self "might seem extreme until we remember Delany's dyslexia. One hypothesizes that once the young Delany had won his first few battles with the printed word, he had a special interest that most people do not have for word and reading" (McEvoy 46). He has personally confirmed in

interviews and essays that his dyslexia made understanding the world through the written word quite difficult. McEvoy contends Delany's theme "of loneliness and apartness is [...] not surprising since he was not an ordinary child: advanced intellectually but saddled with dyslexia, black in a white America, gay in a heterosexual society" (McEvoy 59). Delany used language to empower himself and he discovered through his difficulties with reading and writing how language was tied to power and recognition in society. Similarly, Sharon DeGraw contends, "Delany creates characters who change the known universe through their polyglot abilities. Overcoming linguistic, cultural, national, and/or racial barriers is the priority and not maintaining them" (140). I believe Rydra Wong's character in *Babel-17* illustrates Delany's desire to deconstruct and reconstruct reality through language and poetry. Weedman agrees that "Delany's sense of the development of the poet emphasizes the relationship between the selfhood of the writer, his material, and his society. Words are the symbols of thought. The poet puts these symbols into a special form that enhances their meaning for the reader through an increasing understanding of self-knowledge" (Weedman 48). Consequently, Rydra is known throughout the universe as an artist who strikes to the heart of the matter in her poetry in ways no one else has been able to before. In addition to this ability, she is a master cryptographer and a burgeoning telepath. Delany might like to think of himself as having some of these same capabilities because, by overcoming his dyslexia, he had to essentially become a detective and cryptographer. His racial background and his sexual orientation both might have contributed to an awareness of physicality as well as sensitivity to others' emotional landscapes because he was always forced to look between and behind actions and language to interpret meaning. However, readings of Delany's fiction that focus on his learning disability, sexuality, or race are ultimately

reductive. While they do provide clear arguments for the genesis of his social commentary, they should not be relegated to these realms as so much of the secondary criticism written on his fiction often is. Instead, perhaps it might be justifiable to look at his work as comments on the human condition and its sense of alienation and powerlessness. If *Babel-17* is read this way, without dyslexia, sex, or race, the story works well as a modernist exercise of a hero using her rational mind as well as her compassionate spirit to end a war and bind people together in a shared commonality.

Rydra's poetics have always involved sensing the alienation people feel and expressing the emotional isolation they are not able to communicate to others. Her work aims at untangling misunderstandings and finding the language with which to help ease the separation people feel from each other. Take, for instance, Rydra's crew. The pilot is a man who has been surgically altered to resemble a saber-toothed tiger. The navigators are a bisexual threesome comprised of a slow brute, wiry wiz, and a recently re-animated foreigner who does not speak their language. The hyperspace scanners<sup>23</sup> are operated by the Discorporates—disembodied Eyes, Ears, and Nose. Their job is explained as impossible for any living soul because “A live human scanning all that goes on in all those hyperstasis frequencies would—well, die first and go crazy second” (Delany, *Babel-17* 42). Finally, a platoon of fresh-faced marines rounds out the crew. All of these groups are as different as can be and Rydra, in order to succeed as captain, must find intersections and connections between all of them. *Babel-17* provides a gateway to formulating this language. On her road to learning this language she makes great strides in connecting

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<sup>23</sup> A fictional device that relies on the Discorporate entities, those without physical bodies, to scan vast amounts of space so as to avoid colliding with anything as the ship passes through to its desired location. It is noted that humans cannot operate the scanner because the void of space would drive them mad. A similar danger is expressed in Cordwainer Smith's “The Game of Rat and Dragon.”

people. One crewmember attests to her ability to remove the chasm of radical alterity and bind others together: “She cut through worlds, and joined them—that’s the important part—so that both became bigger” (205). Because of Rydra and her interpersonal abilities, the crewmembers no longer feel alone in their small worlds; instead they are able to connect to one another, allowing their worlds to intersect and become richer through these connections. Another crewmember explains to Rydra’s psychiatrist at the end of the novel that this new awareness of others leads to “thinking that maybe those people who live on other worlds—like Calli says—where people write books or make weapons, are real. If you believe in them, you’re a little more ready to believe in yourself. And when somebody who can do that needs help, you help” (204). So Rydra, through strategic empathy and language manipulation, is able to contradict the radical difference Lacan and Žižek describe and introduce a new system that does not pretend or approximate connection but actually allows people to connect with and understand one another.

Delany envisions Rydra Wong as a character capable of self-actualized language usage—meaning she can predict and eventually control the actions of others to varying degrees by understanding the physical and spoken languages used in their presence. Rydra acknowledges this ability before she has a firm grasp on Babel-17, indicating her already exceptional understanding of language before Babel-17 boosts her awareness beyond all others. When she and her crew are captured by the pirates aboard Jebel Tarik she waits for her captors to speak because, “[a] word would release identification: Alliance or Invader. Her mind was ready to spring on whatever tongue they spoke, to extract what she knew of its thinking habits, tendencies toward logical ambiguities, absence of presence of verbal rigor, in whatever areas she might take advantage of” (114). Earlier in the novel she explains this ability as simply understanding the



cultural and personal biases imbedded in language and vocabulary. She believes, “when you learn another tongue, you learn the way another people see the world, the universe” (Delany *Babel-17* 23).

Most language theorists would agree with this statement’s simple axiom, although there are many variables that Rydra excludes from this statement that make it infinitely more complex. Rydra acknowledges language’s role in the composition of a person and their particular place in society. This is one reason why she takes the Customs Officer to the seedier parts of town to find her crew in the beginning of the novel. She opens a new world to him, one that he becomes so engaged in that he begins the slow process of reformatting himself to fit in this new environment. He frequents these places after meeting Rydra and even goes so far as to get a flame-breathing dragon surgically implanted in his shoulder as a way of associating himself with a different subculture, much like the tattooed subculture today. He explains this change from fear of another subculture to love to Dr. T’mwarba: “I saw a bunch of the weirdest, oddest people I had ever met in my life, who thought different, and acted different, and even made love different. And they made me laugh, and get angry, and be happy, and be sad, and excited and even fall in love a little myself [...] And they didn’t seem so weird or strange anymore” (194). Delany imagines that exposure leads to connection through growing comfortable with social conventions and increasingly shared cultural and vocabulary. Names for groups in particular become very important to those within and without minority populations. Gaining access to certain vocabulary leads to identification with the group and the control of this vocabulary used to describe the group.

*Language and Self-Knowledge*

Words and their link to ideas and mastery of those ideas lie at the center of this novel. But Rydra also acknowledges the basic need for an individual to know himself or herself before any real connection can occur. Rydra seems to know herself well, which is why she is capable of bridging the gap between people. Her understanding of language stems from her understanding of herself. Once the self is known, then language becomes a tool rather than a barrier. But her knowledge is not confined to verbal language; it also includes body language and eventually the emission of radio signals from the nervous system. With mastery of these three languages, she is able to calculate a person's reactions to events and statements that aid in her quest to connect with others.

Rydra exhibits the ability to connect disparate groups several times in the novel. The first stage of her development as a bridge between people occurs in her childhood. She encounters a myna bird, much like a large parrot, that has been trained to greet her by her psychologist. He manages this trick by feeding the bird earthworms near in size to the bird itself as reward for speaking. When the bird speaks to her she reads its desire for an earthworm and envisions a large earthworm behind her. This moment traumatizes Rydra. First, she does not understand the image's origin. She fails to acknowledge the connection she and the bird have with each other. She has never connected to anything this clearly and deeply. Second, this image reminds her of the suffering she endured after an attack on her planet by the Invaders left her an orphan, foraging for herself in the barren wilderness of a decimated planet. This event acts as a precursor to her ability to connect all people at the end of the book by ending the war

and bringing peace to the galaxy. Another example occurs at the beginning of the novel. In the first scene, Rydra meets with General Forester to discuss cracking Babel-17 for the Alliance. At this meeting, Rydra speaks verbatim what the General was thinking at that moment. Both events are explained as the novel progresses. Rydra argues that language begins in the brain, passes through the body and finally becomes speech. Rydra Wong professes to be able to read the language the body speaks that the mouth has yet to possess. She understands it later as an uncanny sensitivity to the radio noise that the human nervous system broadcasts. Either way, this telepathy is later augmented by her ability to think in Babel-17: “It was not only a language, she understood now, but a flexible matrix of analytical possibilities where the same ‘word’ defined the stresses in a webbing of medical bandage, or a defensive grid of spaceships. What would it do with the tensions and yearnings in a human face?” (Delany *Babel-17* 140). She realizes that, given the structure of Babel-17 and its exacting analytical nature, she can use this new language to augment her already uncanny ability to read others.

Delany adds another layer to this discussion by imagining the possible structure of language as analogous to computer programming—except the subject being programmed is human instead of machine. Both McEvoy and Weedman address this comparison. McEvoy insinuates this comparison by coming to it through the job of the cryptographer: “Rydra quickly discovers that the code is really a language, the language called Babel-17. Delany comes up with what seems like a unique and powerful concept: Babel-17’s language is such that if one understands it, one is compelled to follow its logic, and therefore do what is commanded in its language!” (McEvoy 56). McEvoy notes that the code commands the hearer to follow its

proscribed logic regardless of the will of the hearer. Weedman treats this comparison more directly by noting that “‘Babel-17’s’ one major disadvantage, however, is that it destroys the identity of the speaker. Just as a computer cannot correct its own programming or even be aware of the cause of any malfunctions in its programming, the ‘Babel-17’ language is similarly structured” (Weedman 42). These negative byproducts of language in the novel can easily be noted in the author’s world. Easily pegged by others as having a learning disability, writing genre fiction, homosexual and black, Delany points to the identity that can sometimes be forced on an individual as soon as he/she is labeled. So, Delany, compares humans to machines that can be controlled and directed through the reordering of their language protocols, thereby changing their view of the world around them as well as their identities, which are based on these views and the language that mediates that experience. By the end of the book Rydra explains to the military the function of the Invaders’ code:

If you turn somebody with no memory loose in a foreign country with only the words for tools and machine parts, don’t be surprised if he ends up a mechanic. By manipulating his vocabulary properly you can just as easily make him a sailor, or an artist. Also, Babel-17 is such an exact analytical language, it almost assures you a technical mastery of any situation you look at. And the lack of an ‘I’ blinds you to the fact that though it’s highly useful way to look at things, it isn’t the only way. (215)

The argument of the text not only posits people can be reprogrammed, but in addition, people are already programmed—the war goes on and on, but the people have forgotten why they are fighting. And the language they use to discuss the conflict, Alliance versus Invader, binds them to these actions, perpetually. Not surprisingly, the Invaders develop the language of Babel-17

that encodes the listener with information sympathetic to the Invaders' viewpoint so that the hearer of Babel-17 will consider the Invaders the good guys. For example, "the word for Alliance in Babel-17 translates literally into English as: one-who-has-invaded. You take it from there. It has all sorts of little diabolisms programmed into it" (215).

### *Hacking through Language to the Other*

Rydra makes only academic progress with understanding the code until a pirate ship that is loosely affiliated with the Alliance captures her and her crew. While on this ship she meets the Butcher. She is instantly drawn to him because of his reticence and his odd speech pattern. She also discovers that, somehow, the Butcher thinks in Babel-17, which causes him to deal with others and himself differently. As she learns more about the Butcher, she confirms that Babel-17 is not a code but a language that reprograms the speaker with the values imbedded within it. Eventually, she and the Butcher telepathically link to one another and she learns that he is actually the son of the weapons manufacturer and his biologically-altered soldier prototype who was stolen by the Invaders and reprogrammed using Babel-17 to commit acts of sabotage against the Alliance. When the Butcher was kidnapped by the Invaders and discovered to be the prototype of an Alliance super-soldier, they reprogrammed him using Babel-17 to be a secret agent for their side. They did this by erasing any memory of who he once was, removing the concept of "I" from his language set, and placing him in prison, thereby establishing him as a criminal. The Butcher explain this process to General Forester at the end of the novel:

They did discover that I was an Alliance weapon [...] they never learned I was in control of the rest [of the super-soldiers]. But they had just come up with their own secret

weapon: Babel-17. They gave me a thorough case of amnesia, left me with not communication facilities save Babel-17, then let me escape from Nueva-nueva York back into Alliance territory. I didn't get any instructions to sabotage you. The powers I had, the contact with the other spies dawned on me very painfully and very slowly. And my whole life as a saboteur masquerading as a criminal just grew up. How or why I still don't know yet. (214)

Using a computer metaphor, Rydra explains that his criminal behavior was part of the programming of Babel-17: "You can program a computer to make mistakes, and you do it not by crossing the wires, but by manipulating the 'language' you teach it to 'think' in. The lack of an 'I' precludes any self-critical process. In fact it cuts out any awareness of the symbolic process at all—which is the way we distinguish between reality and our expression of reality" (214). This language, like all language, establishes cultural biases in favor of the Invaders. Therefore, the Invaders, having caught a saboteur for the Alliance, wipe his memory and reprogram him to see the Alliance as the enemy. He continues to sabotage because that was his mission before his capture; he has only been redirected due to the language in which he now thinks. And because the Invaders have erased the concept of "I" from his language, he cannot see what he is doing as either good or bad. It is simply what must be done. Rydra suggests that the removal of the Butcher's symbolic understanding of the world around him makes him an automaton that cannot stop the destruction for which he is designed. By re-teaching about his "self" through language, she is able to break down his programming and return his memories. She frees him from this mind-control with the help of Dr. T'mwarba and learns that she is indeed telepathic, not simply

perceptive. Because Rydra is able to utilize Babel-17 to fully comprehend her own telepathic gift, she connects with the Butcher, returning the memory of his past to him. Through this act, both characters find themselves in relation to the other and set out to save the rest of the known universe from war and otherness.

The Butcher's painful recovery of this self-hood is reflected in Lacan's explanation of the Freudian mirror-stage in which the subject must come to terms with sensation of fragmentation and lack in the face of a perceived whole reflected in the mirror. The Butcher acts without understanding his need for action, much like the respondents to the embargoes mentioned at the beginning of the novel as well as those characters in *Lullaby* who are distracted and entertained into complacency. Once the Butcher is taught what "I" means, his actions are re-integrated into the world as having significance to the whole and can be attributed to him as a member of that whole like a child learning to associate its actions with the image of the self seen in the mirror. Thus, crisis ensues until he is able to cope with the weight of the responsibility for his actions. This crisis also appears in *VALIS*. In *VALIS*, Phil Dick splits into Horselover Fat in order to deal with problem of suffering in his world. Like the Butcher, he has lost his identity due to trauma. Only when trauma is dealt with directly by recognizing that the Black Iron Prison is self-imposed does Fat re-integrate with Dick. This period of adjustment is only possible because Rydra, connected through telepathy, acts as the Other/mother figure, assuring him that he can accept the weight of this responsibility. Although Lacan argues that true self-identification is impossible, Žižek reinterprets this moment of self-awareness as always existing outside of the subject. In the context of Žižek's argument, the Butcher's self-identification is false because he looks inward and depends on symbolic language to associate himself with the world around him.

Žižek would argue that this moment does not reveal the self; rather it reveals the Symbolic order in which the self operates. The self, or the subject, exists as that thing between the mirror and the image, and is thusly intangible. Delany subverts both of these by situating the formulation of the self/subject in the communion of the other. In his article, “How Language Helps Us Think,” Ray Jackendoff, Seth Merrin Professor of Philosophy and Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, argues, “language enhances the power of thought” by allowing for collective knowledge, providing grounds for abstract ideas, and finally enables introspection and analysis of reality (27-28). Because the Butcher learns self-identity through language and connection with Rydra, Delany seems to suggest an understanding of the world and the self is dependent on the identification and connection with the other. This connection has always been difficult if not impossible because language is approximate and imperfect, but now that they are connected by telepathy and through the filter of Babel-17, this connection is more pure and accurate.

*The Structure of Language Reveals the Path*

Babel-17 represents a language whose very phonemes represent pictorially the items and actions they are meant to represent linguistically. Babel-17 is “the most analytically exact language imaginable [...]and ideas come in huge numbers of congruent sets, governed by the same words” (210). Even though Lacan and Žižek would contend that this kind of complete knowledge is impossible, Delany uses this metanarrative strategy to deliver hope to a war-torn universe, subverting the hopelessness and disconnection felt by postmodernists and reinstating the belief in a unified theory of behavior and communion. By translating objects as Rydra



understands them in her native tongue into Babel-17, Rydra literally grasps these items more fully through a seemingly mathematical process. For example, when a marauding Alliance-friendly ship captures Rydra and her crew, she is able to free herself from a net that binds them all by thinking of the word for the net in Babel-17. This translation enables her to more fully grasp how the net is made and ultimately find its weak points. Shortly afterward, Rydra is allowed to watch a skirmish between the pirates and the Invaders. While watching this skirmish, she translates the Invaders' battle pattern into Babel-17 and finds the weak point, allowing the pirates to easily defeat their enemy. The description of this battle possesses added significance to our discussion in that the battle plan is codenamed Asylum and all of the pirate squadrons are likewise named Inmates, Psychotics, Neurotics, and Criminally Insane. These names also indicate their movements within the battle plan. The command for initial engagement is "drop your straitjackets" (Delany *Babel-17* 126). Other commands correspond to the squadron names:

Neurotics advance. Maintain contact to avoid separation anxiety [...] Let the criminally insane schiz out [...] Neurotics proceed with delusions of grandeur [...] Stimulate severe depression, noncommunicative, with repressed hostility [...] Commence the first psychotic episode [...] Administer active therapy to the right. Be as directive as you can. Let the center enjoy the pleasure principle [...] Advance for group therapy. (126-9)

The jargon of psychiatry frames the action of the battle for the pirates because it, like all other interactions, involves people and connection. This altercation is a metaphor for radical otherness. Coincidentally, Rydra and her band of misfits and the squadrons of psyche patients end the strife of the war and the skirmish, respectively, by seeing events and actions clearly and

communicating a solution. Rydra sees the Invader's battle plan like she sees the net that held her earlier. She understands the battle like she understands the pain of otherness felt by those she observes in life and puts an end to the suffering of otherness and alienation by sorting it out, writing it plainly, expressing it clearly for all to see and understand. Babel-17 literally maps objects, people, and actions in such a way as to completely *know* them. While both Žižek and Lacan would insist this knowledge is unattainable, Rydra connects completely with the Butcher through telepathy that is clearly a metaphor for complete openness with another person.

The origin of this depiction of language as rooted in the visual representation of things might be explained by Delany's own problems with dyslexia. He has described learning to read texts as the ability to make sense of alternately spinning letters within spinning words on spinning pages. Pictographic representations would make the deciphering of texts much easier for a dyslexic. Also, mystifying words and imbuing them with the ability to sway others tangibly seems consistent with a person who found the learning of them to be a seemingly insurmountable task. In addition to the pictographic representation of sign to signifier in Babel-17, this code is imbued with cultural biases, removing words that run counter to the belief system of the Invaders and substituting negative terms for those that would refer to Rydra and her people. This effectively reprograms the guidance of the big Other to favor the interests of the re-programmer. But for Delany and Rydra, this new language is not only useful as a weapon. This is only one application of a language system used for optimum effectiveness during wartime. Examples of the empowering nature of language are explained in the novel as aiding the language learner in obtaining a complete mastery of a certain craft by simplifying the language they speak to such a degree that the only set of vocabulary they know and use is that language

that enables them to understand their task completely. This mastery is comparable to Sumerian *me* in *Snow Crash*<sup>24</sup>. These *me* were instructions imprinted on the hearer, encoded with skills like bread-making. In the case of Babel-17, as with Sumerian, all other language sets are theoretically unnecessary and superfluous. The difference between these two novels, then, is that Delany imagines the discovery and development of a master language and Stephenson describes the loss and recovery of a master language. Despite their differences, both novels end with a good and noble woman acting as a steward of this language for the betterment of society.

As a result of this utilization of Babel-17 she is able to avert a murder and incapacitate the assassin on the pirate ship. This moment represents the most pivotal growth in her development as a telepath. Once she decides to use her understanding of Babel-17 to interpret body language or radio transmissions emitted by a person's nervous system, she experiences "the opening, the widening, the mind forced to sudden growth. But this, this was like the sudden focusing of a lens blurry for years" (113). As a result of this newly honed ability, she is able to bring the Butcher back to consciousness, stop incidents of sabotage against the Alliance, and end the war. She writes a letter to both sides calling for an end to the war that "will make its round of all the top officials; and they'll ponder over it and the possibility will be semantically imprinted in their minds, which is a good bit of the job. And we have Babel-17 corrected—perhaps I should call it Babel-18—which is the best tool conceivable to build it toward truth" (218). Through Babel-17 and the redesigned Babel-18, she steps beyond using poetry to connect

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<sup>24</sup> The *me* in *Snow Crash* allow a person to speak information that is downloaded directly into the deepest parts of the brain, essentially imprinting the listener with new information that he/she will use with expertise as if he/she has always known the information. In Sumeria, these *mes* were used to impart skills to the entire civilization so that they thrived. Examples are breadmaking, masonry, and farming. These *mes* were ostensibly sent from the gods,

others and uses her linguistic education to purposefully end a war that has been raging for twenty years.

This language ability directly contradicts Lacan and Žižek, who believe the attempt to know someone is ultimately a failure because the other will always be separate and foreign.

Žižek would argue that language is fundamentally unable to produce connection:

we somehow “feel” that no words can adequately represent our innermost subjectivity, that its proper content can only be alluded to; yet simultaneously we “feel” that a speech which functions as pure, transparent medium of designation is in a way “subjectless”; that one can detect the presence of a subject through the elements of style, metaphoric devices, and so on—in short: through all the elements which, from the viewpoint of transmitting information, present a superfluous “noise.” (*For They Know Not What They Do* 49)

However, Delany draws Rydra’s ability to use language as the ability to build a bridge across the “unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness” and provides a hope for others to connect (Žižek 43).

Rydra initiates connection to others even if these others cannot and they are made whole in the cases of the Butcher’s reclamation of his lost memories and the Customs Officer, who finds love in the arms of Discorporates and identification with those who modify their bodies. As a famous poet, she describes this attempt at connection as listening

to other people, stumbling about with their half thoughts and half sentences and their clumsy feelings that they can’t express—and it hurts me. So I go home and burnish it and polish it and weld it to a rhythmic frame, make all the dull colors gleam, mute the

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but eventually, humans learned to write their own *me*, thus starting a cycle of abuse of language that carries into the modern day of the novel.

garish artificiality to pastels, so it doesn't hurt anymore: that's my poem. I know what they want to say, and I say it for them. (18)

She forces this connection on all who cross her path even if they do not understand it, from General Forester to the Customs Officer who finds love in a questionable area of town, and finally to her crew of misfits and outcasts. She even has access to the "Real" in the novel by telepathically communicating with the Discorporates who are constantly engaged with the vastness of space that would drive normal humans crazy or kill them (42). Again, Žižek would offer the counter argument, "if we try to define the Real in its relation to the function of writing [...] we must, of course, in a first approach state that the Real cannot be inscribed, that it escapes inscription [...] but at the same time, the Real is the writing itself as opposed to the signifier" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 171). Žižek states that the Real cannot be written but the act of writing is the expression of the Real. So, Rydra succeeds in bringing people together by first writing poetry that speaks directly to people about their deeper selves and finally by writing the letter to the commanders of the Alliance and the Invaders. These acts expose people to the Real while simultaneously constructing a new Other (Babel-18) to replace the big Other (the war that created Babel-17).

*The Implications of Change*

Delany has accomplished this transformation in another novel, *Dhalgren*<sup>25</sup>. In this novel, the city of Bellona is suffering from an unexplained catastrophe that it shares with no other city in America. And nothing can be done about it. Some people leave the city and others flock to it. It is one of Delany's paraspaces or an example of Csicsery-Ronay's sublime chronotopes. But amidst all of the chaos of a city that has degenerated to constant looting and violence, the main character serves as a catalyst for those left behind to follow. He is a poet who garners the attention of what is left of the establishment and his size and violence commands the respect of the gang who have taken over the streets. Even his bisexuality serves as a means of connecting psycho-sexually different people. The Kid, as he is called throughout the novel, is the glue at the center of this new order. Likewise Rydra is the glue in *Babel-17*. This comparison is significant to this particular argument because both main characters use poetry to connect with others. While Rydra does this intentionally, The Kid seems to come by this ability accidentally and without any memory of writing in the first place. So while Rydra commands language to bridge the gap of radical alterity, The Kid uses writing to rediscover who he is and instead helps others discover who they are.

Delany's use of memory recovery first appears in *Babel-17*. The Butcher, the right-hand and enforcer of the leader of the band of Alliance-friendly pirates, has a past shrouded in mystery, even to himself. Rydra learns, by joining her mind with his in the final scenes of the novel, that he is the son of a brilliant Alliance arms manufacturer and was kidnapped and

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<sup>25</sup> First published in 1975 by Bantam, *Dhalgren* is Delany's most ambitious science fiction work. Dealing with the decline of formal civilization and the new order that rises from the ashes, the novel imagines one city in America, and no other, beset with unexplainable communication failures, odd atmospheric shifts, endlessly burning buildings that are never consumed, and pockets of people surviving in different burroughs of the city with no intention of

brainwashed with Babel-17 by the Invaders and unleashed in Alliance territory. He was of particular importance because his father had outfitted him with the newest biological augmentations. By wiping his mind clean, the Invaders turn him into a very powerful weapon to be used against the Alliance while simultaneously removing his understanding of himself, thereby making him ruthless and unable to identify with the Invaders in any tangible or sympathetic way. Rydra notices that he is unable to conceive of or use the word “I”. While trying to teach the Butcher about the self she explains:

Sometimes you want to say things, and you’re missing an idea to make them with, and missing a word to make the idea with. In the beginning was the word [...] Until something is named, it doesn’t exist. And it’s something the brain needs to have exist, otherwise you wouldn’t have to beat your chest, or strike your fist on your palm. The brain wants it to exist. Let me teach it the word. (151)

Rydra teaches the Butcher how to use language and helps him to form his idea of the self through language; this knowledge leads to the creation of his new reality. By empowering the Butcher through language, Rydra returns his agency that, in turn, stops the team of saboteurs from attacking the Alliance. Therefore, in the novel, Delany effectively returns power to the language user and allows for understanding of the motives and actions of others *through* an understanding of language construction and use. This is an active and controlled use of language. And while many would say propaganda is an example of this usage, Delany seems to act against this kind of cynicism and allows for positive social change to result from language programming by putting

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leaving despite the lawlessness and chaos surrounding them. The Kid, an enigmatic bisexual poet amnesiac, narrates the tale and binds disparate groups together amidst the chaos, sometimes despite himself.

an end to the war within the novel. Rydra constructs, using Babel-17, a letter designed to de-escalate tensions between the Invaders and the Alliance. She claims that within six months, the war will be over because when both sides read the letter the “possibility will be semantically imprinted in their minds” (218). By coding the Symbolic order with Babel-18, Rydra is able to reassign the rules dictated by the big Other to coerce the leaders on both sides to lay down their arms. Rydra acknowledges to the Butcher that they are replacing the established order of endless war and antagonism with a new order of peace, reconciliation, and communion. This replacement directly corresponds to Žižek’s call for the replacement of the big Other and the construction of an Other of the Other that people do not fear, despise, or suspect. According to Žižek, we can never eliminate the Imaginary order because to be faced with the Real is too horrifying, but we are capable of redesigning the Other to better suit our current cultural Ideology. So, today, we are not post-Ideological, rather we have revolted against past ideologies and replaced them with new ones.

In the end, Rydra arrives at what Lacan and Žižek advocate—“the true awakening: not only from sleep, but from the spell of fantasy that controls us even more when we are awake” (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 60). Rydra has become a self-actualized language user who has escaped the traps set by language and culture that ensnare and dominate most others. Furthermore, her awakening supports the possibility that we are not “mere epiphenomena...with no real power of our own,” rather we can make our own decisions and control our actions if we take responsibility for the language that constructs our culture. Language itself was once a tool of war. In Rydra’s hands, it is a tool of peace. Out of the hands of the big Other and into the hands of the self, an awakening begins that seeks to bridge the gaps caused by the big Other. No



longer will the individual “live in a world of isolated communities, each hardly touching its neighbor, each speaking, as it were, a different language” (Delany, *Babel-17* 73). Instead, Rydra designs a new language out of Babel-17 in order to “build it toward truth” and bring about communication between separate worlds (Delany *Babel-17* 218). Delany’s metanarrative depends on humanity’s redesign of the Symbolic, exposing a hope that it is not simply a pawn of its own language system. It is, instead, the architect of a reality that shapes this language system. Furthermore, as the architect of this reality, humanity can reduce the chasm of alterity between its members.

Delany ends the novel as the heroes make the changes necessary to end the suffering and war that has raged for 20 years. He ends on this high note not because he naively believes all is right with the world and that humanity will enjoy peace and prosperity for eternity. He ends the novel here, like Dick, to show that progress is gradual. In *VALIS*, Fat sits waiting for a sign from the next incarnation of Logos to tell him what to do. But he has progressed. He now understands why there is suffering in the world and no longer feels crazy or suicidal. He has hope. Likewise, in *Babel-17*, while the novel ends with a more typical victory, a letter sent to the leaders of each side of the war will not solve all of the smaller individual instances of alienation and otherness that we encounter everyday. But it is a start. The war is over. Now, as they say, the real work can begin. Utopian projects rarely imagine a perfect system for everyone, but they are often closer than what came before. This is why they are not called dystopias. Taking cues from the Frankfurt School theorists, the desire for social change must be followed by rational actions that must then be re-evaluated and re-drawn as they inevitably fail to produce the expected results. But the fragment that does succeed becomes the kernel for the next attempt at utopia. *Babel-17* imagines a successful redesign of the existing order through mastering

language and connecting people in order to bring about the end of war. But, the work is far from over.

## CHAPTER 4.

## RETURN TO THE MYSTERIOUS

Chuck Palahniuk's book, *Lullaby*, tells the story of Carl Streator, a small-time newspaper reporter assigned to cover a rise in incidents of crib death in the area. Carl notices, in every child's bedroom that the same book, *Poems and Rhymes from Around the World*, is open to the same lullaby. This lullaby turns out to be an ancient Zulu spell that tells the hearer to die. In the collection of international verses, the poem's short introduction is described as "a culling song. In some ancient cultures, they sang it to children during famines or droughts, anytime the tribe had outgrown its land. You sing it to warriors crippled in battle and people stricken with disease, anyone you hope will die soon. To end their pain. It's a lullaby" (Palahniuk 36). The novel recounts Carl's discovery of the source of the poem and what happens when others discover its power. On his quest to destroy all copies of the lullaby in libraries and stores across the country, several others join him, not because they share his concern, but in many ways because they either want the song for their own use or they are even more interested in finding the original source of the song—what they suspect might be a book of spells called a Grimoire. The others on the quest want to use the Grimoire as the ultimate weapon against the various injustices they have noted in the world. Mona, Oyster, and Helen join Carl, "a disintegrating protagonist through an absurd modernity on the road to reinvention," hoping to uncover a solution to their own social grievances. (Dunn) Their different solutions to these grievances drive the story and ultimately illustrate the difficulty of finding a solution to the emptiness, helplessness, and violence that is associated with the contemporary world of the novel. I contend Palahniuk believes by recognizing and acknowledging the power that language exerts on

people through media, political groups, or religious institutions, society can moderate this control and think more clearly for itself.

Palahniuk's inspiration for this novel came from a tragic event in his own life. In 1999, his father and his father's girlfriend were both shot and left in a burning building where they died by the girlfriend's ex-husband. The shooter was captured, put on trial, convicted, and sentenced to death. During the trial, Palahniuk was asked "to make a statement about the extent of [his] suffering caused by this crime. As part of that statement, [he] had to decide: was [he] for or against the death sentence. This is the story behind the story in *Lullaby*" ("The Story Behind Lullaby" Freak Speak). He continues: "What had started out as a dark, funny book about witchcraft became a story about the constant power struggle that is life. The struggle between generations. Between people and animals. Between men and women. Rich and poor. Individuals and corporations. Between cultures" ("The Story Behind Lullaby" Freak Speak). The novel faithfully contemplates these issues accompanied by a sense of helplessness and disconnection. While *Lullaby* is obviously not science fiction like the other three novels discussed in previous chapters, it does explore similar questions about society and its connection to language. However, unlike the other science fiction authors, Palahniuk attempts to answer these questions using magic. Sorcery is the agent of change in the world of the novel because science and technology are the enemy. Science fails society by providing too many distractions through innovations in technology—music, film, and television. Science has also allowed for the alteration and displacement of the natural habitat, corrupting what was once without need of

correction. If science, or the use of science, is the means of disconnection and destruction, then an element other than science must be introduced, or reintroduced, in order to redeem the world.

### *The Players and Their Campaigns*

One of the characters in the book, Mona Sabbat, declares in her Book of Mirrors, a personal journal kept by aspiring witches, “*Magic is the tuning of needed energy for natural change*” (Palahniuk 76). She highlights the need for natural rather than technological change because she, like Carl, sees the negative impact of technology on society. In *Lullaby*, Palahniuk does not imagine a world that is alien to our own as a science fiction novel might in order to preserve enough cognitive distance from the social critique. Instead, he describes a world that is our own, down to the trailer parks, big city congestion, noisy neighbors, and soulless journalism. The only tweaking done to this world is the reintegration of magic. This is an interesting trend in current fiction and gaming. The reasons magic is spilling outside of its traditional home of fantasy are varied. I would argue for several causes of this infiltration: 1) science fiction has always flirted with the idea that once this world collapses, due to any number of catastrophes, an older order that time has forgotten will re-emerge to command society and its operations. Examples of this storyline can be found in Jack Vance’s *Dying Earth* series, *Thundarr the Barbarian*, the PC-based RPG *Shadowrun*, and Gene Wolfe’s series *The Book of the New Sun*, *The Book of the Long Sun*, *The Book of the Short Sun*, and the single volume, *The Urth of the*

*New Sun*;<sup>26</sup> 2) as science fiction becomes more integrated into society through our dependence on technology, its sister-genre, fantasy, is brought into the mainstream daylight; 3) the exponential growth of gaming consoles and the numbers of fantasy role-playing games (RPGs) like *Shadowrun*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *World of Warcraft*, *Everquest*, and *Elder Scrolls* have made a new generation interested in these fantastic worlds of magicians, goblins, and elves. Although, I would be remiss if I did not mention the non-electronic granddaddy of all RPGs, *Dungeons and Dragons*<sup>27</sup> as being the possible inspiration for many of the electronic RPGs that have now flooded the market. Clearly, the reintegration of magic into society is not a new idea, nor is it limited, because of the fantastic elements presented, to dealing with fantastic realms. In most of the cases mentioned above, these stories commented on and simulated real problems and concerns for the real world. One of the most interesting developments to arise from the renewal of magic is the emphasis on language and its role in these realms. For this reason, science fiction that deals with mind control and oppressive institutions and fantasy that uses spells and evil magicians to enslave people might not be so very different. Likewise, *Lullaby* confronts the same concerns as the previous novels within this study but substitutes scientific explanations for magical ones. Palahniuk uses *Lullaby* to discuss the control that the media and the entertainment industry exerts on a population that mindlessly accepts it as an authority and the rise of magic as nature's way of fighting back against this technological threat.

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<sup>26</sup> Vance's series depicts a cooling Earth thousands of years in the future and the resurgence of magic. Wolfe's books also deal with a cooling Earth and the return to medieval culture, although several science fictional elements remain, such as aliens, androids, and space travel. Likewise, *Shadowrun* imagines magic and futuristic scientific

*Flash Backward to the Future*

Palahniuk uses magic in place of the science and technology that has made his characters and their world so mindless. Carl Streater blames this mindlessness on Big Brother. But unlike the literary reference<sup>28</sup>, this Big Brother

isn't watching. He's singing and dancing. He's pulling rabbits out a hat. Big Brother's busy holding your attention every moment you're awake. He's making sure you're always distracted. He's making sure you're fully absorbed. He's making sure your imagination withers. Until it's as useful as your appendix. He's making sure your attention is always filled. And this being fed, it's worse than being watched. With the world always filling you, no one has to worry about what's in your mind. With everyone's imagination atrophied, no one will ever be a threat to the world. (Palahniuk 18-19).

Palahniuk inverts the typical view of totalitarian control by making less about the strict adherence to rules that would guide behavior to the lobotomization of society through its own repressive need for distraction. Palahniuk's Carl represents Žižek's postmodern paranoid:

The belief in the big Other which exists in the Real is, of course, the most succinct definition of paranoia; for this reason, two features which characterize today's ideological stance—cynical distance and full reliance on paranoid fantasy—are strictly

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weaponry exist simultaneously as a result of magic returning to Earth according to the Mayan calendar's predictions for 2012 of radical change.

<sup>27</sup> *Dungeons and Dragons* owes a great deal to Jack Vance's *Dying Earth* series.

<sup>28</sup> Big Brother refers to the totalitarian dictator of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The term has since been popularized and refers to any kind of intrusive authority or government oversight.

codependent: the typical subject today is the one who, while displaying cynical distrust of any public ideology, indulges without restraint in paranoid fantasies about conspiracies, threats, and excessive forms of enjoyment of the Other. (*The Ticklish Subject* 362)

Palahniuk, through Carl, also echoes the Frankfurt School<sup>29</sup> and those sentiments expressed by Theodor Adorno in his *Negative Dialectics*. Joan Alway, in her book *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas*, argues that in the works of Horkheimer and Adorno, culture is something administered from above in the interests of the powers that be....It produces for mass consumption and largely determines how and what the masses will think and consume. It reinforces and strengthens dominant interpretations of reality. It informs, entertains, amuses, distracts, and distorts. It is the means by which the consciousness of individuals is encroached upon, shaped, and pacified.... (40)

As in the novel, Horkheimer and Adorno explain that while most people believe they choose what is popular and interesting, in large part those decisions are made for us by controlling of the market, actually making consumers less involved in the process of decision-making. Carl believes that the media machine keeps the masses dull and compliant, reducing their humanity. Carl's diatribes on culture and media over-saturation clearly reveal Palahniuk's belief that the system of control over society has switched from the totalitarian dictators depicted in George Orwell or Aldous Huxley's dystopian novels<sup>30</sup> to an entertaining and prolific controller whose

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<sup>29</sup> A group of social theorists in Germany in the 1930s who devoted their work to developing a neo-Marxist critical theory of society that stressed practical application and social change leading to individual moral autonomy rather than critical theory, the purely scientific and objective observation of society and the literature that it produces.

<sup>30</sup> *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *A Brave New World* both of which depict totalitarian governments whose aims might have been noble in the beginning.



ability to distract and produce consumable products ultimately enables control over society through the atrophy of imagination. Alway continues, arguing that

Horkheimer and Adorno speak of how the culture industry teaches us how and what to think, of how it stunts the ability of individuals to be imaginative and spontaneous, of how the “flood of detailed information and candy-floss entertainment simultaneously instructs and stultifies mankind.”.... the culture industry sets into motion a circle of manipulation and need which, feeding on itself, grows stronger and stronger. Within this circle of cultural progress, the individual, as an autonomous thinking agent, is destroyed.

(41)

This loss of autonomy is the central problem that must be solved in each of the four novels discussed in this dissertation. *Lullaby's* Big Brother has been constructed and allowed to run amok like *VALIS's* Black Iron Prison, making us captives and removing any kind of self-awareness. Similarly, this new Big Brother seems to have succeeded where L. Bob Rife failed in *Snow Crash*. It broadcasts a message of complacency through the radio and television, reducing society to mindless “Falabalas” who happily accept whatever this new Big Brother decides to broadcast to them. Finally, this complacency keeps people from interrogating their situation and taking steps to change it like those characters in *Babel-17* who have long since forgotten why they are at war. They are satisfied that the war must go on to keep them safe, but they no longer know exactly who is threatening them and for what reasons. Furthermore, just as *Babel-17* develops out of the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement in America, pitting one group against an Other, *VALIS* draws from drug experiences and political scandals in and around 1974, and *Snow Crash* reflects the movements in business, computer development, and the rise of

suburbs in the 1980s, *Lullaby* captures the cultural zeitgeist of a highly volatile time in American history—one that has radically altered the American social fabric.

*Advertising, Language, and the Suppression of Society*

Palahniuk, like the other authors, speaks through his characters about the power of language in society to construct and control attitudes and behaviors that ultimately results in an abdication of free will. He names the metaphorical Big Brother—the media, advertising agencies, and the entertainment industry—as the cause of all of our problems. Big Brother has filled society with garbage and noise so that people cannot think clearly. Individuals in society have lost their sense of their selves. They buy and accept things mindlessly; they are empty and alone. Carl Streater has noticed this and cannot seem to escape this trap, either, until the lullaby comes into his possession. Jeffrey Sartain, in his article “‘Even the Mona Lisa's Falling Apart': The Cultural Assimilation of Scientific Epistemologies in Palahniuk's Fiction,” argues that

In order to preserve meaning and diversity, entropic noise must be introduced into the system from the outside, and the actions of Palahniuk's various characters from *Fight Club*, *Choke*, and his later fiction introduce noise and open the system. They disrupt, disturb, and destroy the carefully arranged workings of contemporary society. Their actions preserve the ultimate capacity of the human race for change and diversity by fending off totalizing order. In Palahniuk's apparent vision of the future, humans must act entropically to counter the ultimate heat death of the soul...If humans do not preserve anarchistic, entropic impulses, humanity suffers an Orwellian nightmare of a society, where everyone is the same and no diversity is possible. (Sartain 35)

However, instead of introducing noise to a carefully constructed society bent on conformity in order to awaken a dulled cultural consciousness, in *Lullaby* Palahniuk inverts his noisy revolution and makes the cause of society's problem the mindless and distracting noise that it produces. Where his other novels present a carefully controlled society that rigidly adheres to a propriety and conformity, *Lullaby* offers a world that conforms through the static and white noise produced by all of the consumable products. The effect is the same, but the illustration is different. The chaos advocated in *Lullaby* is another kind of chaos that reinstates free will and personal autonomy. In *Lullaby*, this noise is threatening on several levels, in order to free the people from complacency and a kind of mental and spiritual death. Once Carl learns about the lullaby's power, he is armed with a weapon that can change the world, but he is not altogether happy about his new power or mission. He continually asks himself if he has the right to be the savior of everyone. I believe this discomfort represents the uneasy re-introduction of the modernist metanarrative within a postmodern novel. The heroes of the novel, if they can be called that, steeped in postmodern paranoia, subjectivism, and relativism see the problems of their world, rotten with technology and the violence and mindlessness that accompanies this decay, and they deeply desire a revolution enabled by the power represented by the lullaby and the book of spells from which it originates. However, they each differ in their approach to this change. Carl seeks to control the damage he sees around him, not wanting to make it worse, and Helen is the opportunist, having spent the previous decades using the lullaby and other magical knowledge for profit. Oyster represents the violent anarchist that is most familiar in Palahniuk's fiction and Mona acts as his foil in her peaceful idealism. Jesse Kavadlo, in "The Fiction of

Self-destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, *Closet Moralist*,” notes the reader must expect these disparate voices and solutions in Palahniuk’s work:

Count on fragments. And fragmentation. But, somehow, you keep reading. And after you wipe the pulp from your eyes, you realize something. That the world is not broken. Somehow, the world feels more together than before you started. This is what it feels like to read Chuck Palahniuk. Broken, but something disturbing and beautiful recreated in its place. And when you’re done, you realize that everything really is all right. When you’re done, you find yourself thinking about the books. And, maybe, if you’re lucky, sounding like them. This essay will focus on the ways in which beauty, hope, and romance remain Palahniuk’s central values throughout his seemingly ugly, existential, and nihilistic works. (Kavadlo 3-4)

Palahniuk blends the individualized postmodern approach with a sincere desire to find a solution. In other words, he presents four solutions and using the plot and each other as counterpoints, reasons out the best solution. This impulse does not mean he succeeds in finding a solution; rather he is hopeful that there is a solution out there, somewhere, and he provides the reader with several in this novel. None are perfect, but they all empower the individual.

### *Society Just Got Bigger and Multidimensional*

This empowerment is situated in spells and magic that are central to the plot of the text, but the message is decidedly one about isolation, loss, environmental destruction through scientific practice, and the juxtaposition of natural and supernatural worlds. As society becomes more globally connected, more people within that society seem to be isolated from their physical

neighbors. Palahniuk often depicts science as a curse, not unlike many science fiction authors. Many science fiction stories treat the misuse of science as something to fear and to watch<sup>31</sup>. For instance, in *Babel-17*, the Alliance seems to be prolonging the war and exacerbating the issue with experimental science and super soldiers who can be turned against them in order to sabotage their efforts against the Invaders. In *VALIS*, an alien God tries to reconnect to the people of Earth through a satellite, but an over-eager follower destroys the savior by using lasers to directly feed transmissions from God to him through the savior. In this novel, mechanical engineering is depicted as the connective material that ultimately leads to the destruction of the connection with the savior of humankind just as science was used to fight the war in *Babel-17* but actually prolongs the fighting. In *Snow Crash*, ancient neuroscience threatens to brainwash everyone until it is eventually redirected to empower and defend against the threat. It is obvious that science is both the cause for and solution to our problems in these stories. While today we are on the threshold of some of these fictional sciences, at the time these stories were written, they seemed as improbable as the spells in *Lullaby*.

The story depends on the acceptance of this new “Interzone” that allows for magic to be real. Furthermore, by superimposing a detective story with witchcraft and mass scale brainwashing, Palahniuk effectively blends genres making this a recognizable postmodern pastiche. Palahniuk also employs an unreliable anti-hero. Carl is unreliable throughout because he acknowledges he is part of the problem that plagues society. He admits he does not know himself—“I don’t know what I know. I don’t know what’s true. I doubt I really know anything.

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<sup>31</sup> The recent A&E remake of *The Andromeda Strain* by Michael Crichton deals with concern about the military’s interest in developing, storing, and experimenting with biological weapons that could decimate

I say, tell me”—nor can he be sure of his motives as a result of being so isolated and warped by Big Brother. (Palahniuk 229) In fact, he spends a great deal of the book lamenting his inability to understand his own motivations:

I don't know the difference between what I want and what I'm trained to want. I can't tell what I really want and what I've been tricked into wanting. What I'm talking about is free will. Do we have it, or does God dictate and script everything we do and say and want? Do we have free will, or do the mass media and our culture control us, our desires and actions, from the moment we're born? Do I have it, or is my mind under the control of Helen's spell? (Palahniuk 228)

But the unreliability is not only located within the characters; the problem exists in language. Carl bemoans, “*The problem with every story is you tell it after the fact.... Another problem is the teller. The who, what, where, when, and why of the reporter. The media bias. How the messenger shapes the facts. What journalists call The Gatekeeper. How the presentation is everything*” (Palahniuk 7). Aware of the mindlessness and distractions that typify the world of the novel, Carl wonders if he is trust-worthy and capable of breaking free from the control of the dancing and singing Big Brother. The narration also skips back and forth between two time periods—the present where Helen and Carl chase after Mona and Oyster and the past where the four discover the culling song and locate the Grimoire—until the two finally collide in the final chapters. They are only distinguishable by the use of italics for the chapters written in the present and the absence of italics for the chapters that explain the past events leading to the present. It is up to the reader to make sense of the timeline. Finally, the story emulates magic in

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the world's population within a matter of hours.

form by constantly repeating phrases as if constantly chanting or casting spells on the reader. Some of these phrases are: “This is how we must look to God;” “The more people die, the more things stay the same;” and “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but...” appear numerous times throughout the novel, like incantations intended to have an effect on the reader. The first pokes fun at our limited perspectives and lack of objectivity. The second reinforces our ineffectiveness at changing the world. The final phrase changes each time it is invoked depending on the situation within the novel, but it points to the absurd notion that language has no effect on society. Like other postmodern texts that often take on the form of what they are describing, magic is described as being tied to its formatting as well:

Some witches write their spells in runes, secret coded symbols. According to Mona, some witches write backward so the spell can only be read in a mirror. They write spells in spirals, starting in the center of the page and curving outward. Some write like the ancient Greek curse tablets with one line running from left to right, then the next running right to left and the next, left to right. This, they call the *boustrophedon* form because it mimics the back-and-forth pacing of an ox tied to a tether. To mimic a snake, Mona says, some write each line so it branches in a different direction.... the more hidden, the more twisted, the more powerful the spell. (Palahniuk 201)

The pictographic quality of the spell indicates its function and potency. Texts like *House of Leaves* and *The Journal of Albion Moonlight* also use marginalia to emulate and intensify the stories being told. The former uses marginalia, diagrams, and footnotes to graphically depict the architectural aspect of the novel while reinforcing the multiple levels of reality intersecting

within the house. Likewise, in *The Journal of Albion Moonlight*, the concurrent conversations running alongside one another on the page in different columns illustrate the fracturing of the narrative and the mind of the speaker. I would even argue that it is common in postmodern texts to include a discussion of typographic and pictographic representations in books as a means to heighten the experience of the reader or approximate the psychological state of the narrator than actually using them. All of these techniques—pastiche, temporal skips, marginalia, even the reclamation of lost/fictional truth in the form of spells—serve to intensify the concerns with waywardness of contemporary society and attempt to resolve this waywardness.

### *The Revival of Golden Age Sentiments*

With the breakdown of text/society, the return of interest in the metanarrative might not seem so absurd. Trust in the rational world and science is turned against itself as the rational world and science seems to cause more harm than good. In the novel, trust in science causes the breakdown and enslavement of society. The metanarrative impulse is then revived in order to explain how society reached this point and what might be done to correct it. Palahniuk has even commented, “That’s what all my books have been about, bringing people who are not in community back into a *form* of community and giving them a cause that keeps them together” (Dunn). Postmodern texts, while constructing a cognitive map, provide a key riddled with false information and irony, forcing the reader to decide whether the map is correct or even real. Carl, as journalist, is caught in this machine, producing information that may or may not be true. As soon as he discovers a path to redemption, he discovers he might be too damaged to walk it, as are the others who travel with him, but they are not too damaged to see it. Carl, as a journalist



and observer, finds it almost impossible to refrain from noting causal relationships. At one point he compares Dr. Sara Lowenstein, a thinly veiled representation of Dr. Laura Schlessinger, and God. Carl explains how each might have become corrupted. This same passage exists elsewhere in the book with Dr. Sara substituted for God:

I say how maybe God didn't start out by attacking and berating everybody who prayed.

I say, maybe it was after years and years of getting the same prayers about unwanted pregnancies, about divorces, about family squabbles. Maybe it was because God's

audience grew and more people were making demands. Maybe it was the more praise

He got. Maybe power corrupts, but He wasn't always a bastard. (Palahniuk 173)

Carl blames the constant neediness and selfishness of humanity for creating such a broken world. Because of this, the media stepped in to anaesthetize the masses so they could function, like a cultural sedation. Adorno would argue that society demanded less engagement and our culture industry provided means by which we can fake our way through life. A similar explanation for the broken world appears in *VALIS*; our alien ancestors constructed the Black Iron Prison as an exercise to test our ability to create an effective maze. Then we willingly entered it and lost ourselves. Likewise, while *Lullaby's* Big Brother does dance and entertain, we are complicit in its construction installation. Palahniuk, in *Lullaby*, provides a situation that breaks from these problems, confronts them, and seeks to solve them. Generally, postmodern literature achieves the first two, but does not fare as well with the final solution. It tends to claim all is hopelessly bound by ideologies and Man's immutable inhumanity to Man. According to Joel Whitebook, in his chapter entitled, "Weighty Objects: On Adorno's Kant-Freud Interpretation," the author

suggests that Adorno would reject this postmodern position: “in contrast to central tendencies in postmodernism, Adorno is not content to rest with the aporia of the Nietzschean-geneticist position. Instead he is continually compelled to move back to the truth content of what might be called the Kantian-idealist position to correct its deficiencies” (55-56). In other words, Adorno sees constant hope left in the remainder of the social dialectic. Every revolution generates a product and a remainder. While this product can never fulfill the needs of the revolution, the hope lies in the remainder, the ideal, the “truth content” that inspired the revolution in the first place. This process was named the “negative dialectic” by Adorno because it focused not on the product, but the chaff as the building blocks for the next inevitable revolution.

Science fiction, growing out of Utopian literature, adventure stories, and a growing fascination with and reliance on science, blends literary modernism’s grand narrative and utopian fantasies with literary postmodernism’s outlook, suspicion, innovation, and playfulness to produce social criticism whose solution is derived from the very thing that creates the most problems—science. Here the comparison between the use of science and utilization of language as a science is broken down to a code capable of changing the physical world or the minds of those who inhabit the physical. In the text, the world is broken and needs fixing. And the people are separate and desperate. Out of desperation they act in their own interests, without concern for others who they can never know. Carl comments, “Imperfect and messy, this is the world I live in. This far from God, these are the people I’m left with. Everybody grabbing for power. Mona and Helen and Nash and Oyster. The only people who know me hate me. We all hate each other. We all fear each other. The whole world is my enemy” (Palahniuk 235).

Žižek's position on radical alterity and the persistent separation of individuals is due a dependence on language and society that is built upon the separation of people through ideological identification. According to Whitebook, Adorno

argues that sublimation constitutes a flight into a false reconciliation that denies that antagonistic character of the contemporary social reality. In today's totally administered world, he argues, "every 'image of man' must be ideological except the negative one" and every anticipation of "a more human existence" must be damaged rather than harmonious. Under these conditions, the synthesis of the diffuse elements of inner nature into an apparently well-integrated self can be accomplished through violence. (57)

Carl, Helen, Oyster, and Mona all represent different incarnations of this damaged human existence through which society might violently break from the culture of industry, and in many ways Žižek's big Other. The totally administered world within *Lullaby* is described by Carl as deadly:

There are worse things than finding your wife and child dead. You can watch the world do it. You can watch your wife get old and bored. You can watch your kids discover everything in the world you've tried to save them from. Drugs, divorce, conformity, disease. All the nice clean books, music, television. Distraction. These people with the dead child, you want to tell them, go ahead. Blame yourself. There are worse things you can do to the people you love than kill them. The regular way is just to watch the world do it. Just read the newspaper. (Palahniuk 19)

Carl considers the distractions posed by society and the resulting ethical and moral bankruptcy worse than death because it is born out of passivity and has no end. A final death stroke is

preferable to the ongoing rotting away of a person by society and noise it emits. The allowance of this rot and decay of humanity illustrates the separation and isolation for which Žižek argues, but here, the lack of action or language, clearly aggravates the situation. But, if this was not allowed to happen, if people fought against the decay, then it could be avoided. They simply lack the tools to break them free. They need a secret weapon, like Sophia, a nam-shub, or Babel-18. And Carl Streater finds his secret weapon in the lost book of spells.

*Connections to Our Past Point to Our Future*

*Lullaby*, like *Snow Crash*, centers on the recovery of ancient knowledge. Where in Stephenson's text, this knowledge is found on Sumerian tablets and the Dead Sea Scrolls, in Palahniuk's novel, this knowledge is collected in a book of magic referred to as a Grimoire. From this lost tome, a killer lullaby has been taken, published in a children's book, and subsequently caused the death of children for the last 20 years. Carl Streater, Helen Hoover Boyle, Mona Sabbat, and her boyfriend Oyster are on a search and destroy mission to find all of the copies of the children's book so that no more deaths result from the reading of this lullaby. On this mission, they debate what they should do with the Grimoire if and when they find it. Each has a different design on the source material and the possibilities that it could represent for changing the world. Carl wants to destroy it, fearing the mishandling for this forgotten knowledge and the terror that might ensue should society learn that hearing things could literally kill them. He claims it would be the end of mass communication and lead society into another

Dark Age. Despite his concern, Carl continually lashes out at people who bother him by using the lullaby in exactly the same way he fears others might.

Helen, who has been using the lullaby for the last several years to become an assassin for the highest bidder, wants to find a spell that will bring her son back to life then *perhaps* destroy the Grimoire. She wants to change her own life by restoring her son, but cares little for the world outside of how it might benefit her. Her official profession, real estate agent, best illustrates her opportunism. She is a realtor who resells haunted houses to unsuspecting families. Once the families move in, they discover the houses are haunted and eventually agree to “give [Helen] exclusive rights to sell the house” rather than allow the deed to become the bank’s. (Palahniuk 5) Most buyers resort to this because they want to get ruin their credit and they can not deal with “blood running down the walls....ice-cold invisible hands that pull children out of bed at nights....[and] blazing red eyes in the dark at the foot of the basement stairs” (Palahniuk 4). But, like the other characters, her opportunism comes from a dissatisfaction with the impermanence of life. What she does with the homes she sells is mirrored in her habit of going to antique stores and marring the furniture so that it is worth less than it is being sold for. She defends her actions by claiming that the furniture is a “parasite surviving the host. A big fat predator looking for its next meal” (Palahniuk 52). She strips the furniture of handles and scratches sold wood surfaces so that the sellers will cut the price to what it might have been when it was new. She cannot stomach furniture enduring while people fade. She sees the immortality of objects as a grave injustice.

Antithetically, Mona advocates the responsible use of magic for the benefit of all. As Helen's assistant, she continually attempts to help the spirits that haunt Helen's houses find resolution so that they might move on. But she is not entirely unselfish in her actions; Mona wants to increase her skills as a witch and celebrate the ancient knowledge reclaimed. She claims a right to this information: "It's a Book of Shadows, a *real* Book of Shadows. It belongs with a real witch. Just let me translate it. I'll tell you what I find. I promise" (Palahniuk 204). Mona stands as an example of youthful idealism and the naïveté that puts people at risk of being manipulated by people like Helen and Oyster.

Finally, Oyster, an anarchist and naturist, wants to kill all humans and restore the environment to its former glory before humans interfered and replaced natural habitats with more familiar flora and fauna, causing certain things to become scarce, or at worst, extinct. Clearly, he represents radical change. Throughout the novel we see him placing ads in every town they drive through and slandering upscale businesses in order to "undermine the illusion of safety and comfort in people's lives" (Palahniuk 152). Through his self-proclaimed "antiadvertising," Oyster hopes to strike back in the name of the natural environment that had to be subjugated so that people could waste away in leisure and self-indulgence. He is the most radical of all of them, but they are all bound by a desire to change what they see as the problem of our society. For Carl, it is the noise that keeps people brain-dead; for Helen, humans have become devalued and replaced by objects; for Mona, a sensitivity and respect for knowledge and the natural world has been forgotten; and for Oyster, humans have raped the earth and destroyed natural diversity in favor of an easily tended landscape. They have all joined together because they see what

Adorno refers to as the culture of industry crippling our minds and bodies and devaluing our lives in the process. They want to unseat this culture of industry and disable Carl's Big Brother by reclaiming agency through the spells found in the Grimoire. These ancient spells, previously lost to time, have been unearthed to reprogram Žižek's big Other and resolve those problems the characters see as crippling us.

### *Language as Domination/Empowerment*

Throughout *Lullaby*, language is frequently illustrated in various examples of domination. Awareness of this domination pervades the discussion between the four principal characters. Domination in the form of advertising, noise, the introduction of foreign flora and fauna, murder, work hierarchies, real estate fraud, witchcraft, and journalism all reflect power struggles in different ways. In advertising, the seller must convince the buyer that an item is needed either through appealing to the buyer's emotions or reason. Fraud uses the same techniques but rather than be bound by some semblance of truth, fraud can stray into lies. Both of these are often language based. The hearer must be convinced through the text that the item is necessary or preferable. The seller is then dominating the buyer through language. Carl even notes that noise, like advertising, actually coerces the listener to stop thinking and simply accept what is being offered. Carl argues successful advertising depends on convincing the hearer, with as little critical thought as possible, what is being offered to him/her is preferable to what he/she already has. Advertising is capitalism's greatest tool. Under the pretenses of statistics and market research, ads present the consumer with products that will make the consumer's life easier. Jarvis astutely notes that for Adorno, "It is not that capitalism invents mystification but

that in capitalism mystification presents itself, to an unprecedented extent, as demystification. Adorno's view is not that capitalism is too enlightened, disenchanted, or liberal but that it is not even enlightened, disenchanted, or liberal" (93-4). While the consumer, or society in general, thinks he/she is being convinced of the need for something, what is actually happening is the willing suspension of critical thought, a mystification if you will, that results in more pervasive homogeneity and the repression of free will and individuality.

*Lullaby's* band of magical revolutionaries, while ostensibly containing the power of the culling song, is actually attempting a true demystification of society. Noise and advertising keep people in a constant state of non-thinking. They are passive. This novel itself is an example of domination through language, forcing the reader to consider his/her complicity in the problems reflected in the novel. But unlike the noise that the world spews to distract us, Palahniuk effectively infects the reader with a revolutionary spirit. As the book moves forward, the reader begins to understand the ways in which he or she is constantly bombarded by media, distracting and effectively mystifying the reader by keeping him/her from thinking too critically about the world. This passivity can be seen in many life situations. For example, work hierarchies rely on the notion that the one below believes that the one above them has more power and can tell them what to do, ostensibly for the benefit of the employer and thereby the employees. But this is still a system of domination that relies on the belief in that arbitrary system. Civil law relies on the same belief—everyone is better off if the rules in place are obeyed. Those that break those rules, by their actions are rebelling against the domination of the powers that be and placing their own rules above the ones established by society. Finally, journalism, like advertising sells to the



reader that certain news is important to know while the absence of certain events in the news is not “news-worthy.”

All of these separate dominations in the text are bound by language, either through law or communication. The transmission of information then is an act of control. Palahniuk articulates this in the final pages of the novel:

*You are the culture medium. The host. Some people still think they run their own lives. You are the possessed. We're all of us haunting and haunted. Something foreign is always living itself through you. Your whole life is the vehicle for something to come to earth. An evil spirit. A theory. A marketing campaign. A political strategy. A religious doctrine.* (Palahniuk 258-9)

Palahniuk locates these dominations in language because society is more connected than ever by modes of contact—the Internet, email, file sharing, music, news, television, video games, and magazines all connect people globally in ways that were not previously available. It is this pervasive connection that Carl considers the biggest concern because through these innovations in technology come more threats. Ultimately, this thought convinces Carl that the culling song, despite the opportunities it creates for good, has more potential for ill:

Imagine a world of silence where any sound loud enough or long enough to harbor a deadly poem would be banned. No more motorcycles, lawn mowers, jet planes, electric blenders, hair dryers. A world where people are afraid to listen, afraid they'll hear something behind the din of traffic. Some toxic words buried in the loud music playing next door. Imagine a higher and higher resistance to language. No one talks

because no one dares to listen. The deaf shall inherit the earth. And the illiterate. The isolated. Imagine a world of hermits. (Palahniuk 43)

Carl is right about his concerns of mass hysteria should the culling song be revealed to the public. It could cause all modes of discourse to cease and become suspect. No one would allow anything to be heard or said that wasn't already checked and double-checked by authorities in charge of the safety of all. Carl suspects that if the masses realized that they could be manipulated or even killed by hearing something, all sounds might carry dire consequences. There would be a revolt against all sound effectively destroying any kind of community. No one would trust one another; no one would trust information. It would be the ultimate instance of alterity and alienation. We would no longer be passive; instead society would actively secure individual solitude at all costs, destroying all of the good that results from human interaction and society. Learning, friendship, love, connection would all disappear in favor of isolation, suspicion, paranoia, and selfish self-preservation would become the standard. Palahniuk seems to be advocating in this novel the dissolution of postmodern tendencies and the reinstatement of the connection, solidarity, and hope that is more often associated with modernism.

### *Historical Con-text*

What is almost eerie about the subject of this text was that it was reportedly submitted for final proofs on September 10, 2001, one day before America began to revise its policies on domestic threats due to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. In light of this event, what topic could be more appropriate than a discussion of people taking action against a system, government, or nation that seems inherently corrupt and continually

interferes in the affairs of nations and cultures all over the planet that do not share its beliefs and ideologies? Americans and their allies have become increasingly paranoid and suspicious since September 11, 2001, and many institutions have been scrutinized in the years that followed for their involvement or their complicity in the attacks. The American government is not blameless and certain Middle Eastern nations as well as those in Latin America resent America meddling in their affairs. Many groups would like to see things set right and America held accountable for its actions in the so-called name of freedom and democracy.

Fifty years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is perhaps time to discuss America's effect on the world in the same way that this question was examined after dropping the atomic bomb. How far have we progressed technologically and socially? What has become of us? Palahniuk answers loudly and clearly—we are mindless; we avoid thought; we anaesthetize ourselves with television, movies, and music. These facts result in Big Brother's control over us. The noise we are addicted to in *Lullaby*, like the Metaverse in *Snow Crash*, are the very things seen as the most lucrative and business savvy technologies of the decade, and they are threatening to destroy us. And also like Stephenson's book, forgotten knowledge is the key to the cause and solution of the threat dramatized in the text. This duality is present in modernist and postmodernist texts. The former treats this forgotten or ancient knowledge as the key to truth and salvation; the latter uses this kind of knowledge to lampoon the efforts of the modernist texts and to create discontinuities in time and space, confusion, paranoia, and a sense of impotence that leads to resignation. Both of these approaches can be located in *Lullaby*. Certainly, Palahniuk, in his trademark

transgressive<sup>32</sup> and cynical way, is utilizing forgotten knowledge as lethal, ominous, and possibly capable of anything. But he is also very clear that it may take something lethal, ominous, and all-powerful to reverse society's self-administered lobotomy.

In *Lullaby*, several characters try to reverse this effect through minimally effective means. As stated above, all of the principle characters attempt to control their small spheres of existence. Carl Streater, having lost his wife and child to unknown causes, although some believe that he read the poem to his family, runs for fear of being accused of murdering them, spends the next twenty years being pushed around at his job and punishing himself for the death of his family. His guilt about his possible complicity in their deaths motivates him to repeatedly buy, construct, and stomp barefooted on models of buildings. Palahniuk thusly envisions a man, lost to his family and sense of self due to the maddening guilt over their deaths. Because of this guilt, he abuses himself by lodging the plastic pieces of models in his foot and allowing the foot to become infected. In one scene, Mona attends to Carl's damaged foot:

With a needle, she lances a yellow blister and something drops out. A little brown piece of plastic, it's covered in stinking ooze and blood and lands on the towel.... With one hand she holds my toes, and with the other she lances another blister. The yellow sprays out in a little blast, and there on the towel is half of a factory smokestack... She lances another blister, and out pops the onion dome from a mosque, covered in blood and slime.

With her tweezers, Mona pulls a tiny dinner plate out of my foot. It's hand-painted with

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<sup>32</sup> Palahniuk is known for employing either plots or characters that, by unconventional and often illegal means, attempt to break free from middle-class consumer conformity. He frequently uses sex and violence as methods of instilling meaning in his characters' lives.

a border of red roses.... Out of another blister oozes the pediment from a Georgian bank building. (152-3)

Like a postmodern hairshirt<sup>33</sup>, Carl meticulously constructs and then destroys symbols of the postmodern world carrying around the wreckage in the sole of his foot to remind him of the loss of his family. In his desperation, he creates a new life for himself. And in this life he builds small buildings that represent those in the real world and once there are perfectly assembled, he smashes them sustaining injuries to his bare feet by embedding the fragments of churches, bridges, schools, and other bits of model in the sole of he foot. He leaves these pieces in his foot like some kind of hairshirt to remind him how tenuous and fragile everything is and how quickly things can break apart. Žižek explains this self-abuse as a consequence to the symbolic inefficiency of the big Other: “on the one hand, this failure of the symbolic fiction induces the subject to cling increasingly to imaginary *simulacra*, to the sensual spectacles which bombard us today from all sides (*The Ticklish Subject* 369). On the other hand, “the aim of postmodern sado-maso practices of bodily mutilation is... to guarantee, to give access to, the ‘pain of existence’, the minimum of the bodily Real in the universe of symbolic simulacra” (Žižek *The Ticklish Subject* 372). Carl tries to connect with the Real in the face of the symbolic failure of the big Other. He is also the artificer who breaks what he builds, thus inverting the role of the builder and playing on modernism’s belief that the artist and builder can solve our fractured and broken world. Carl is the postmodern artificer who destroys what he builds because the meaning of what is built is either lost or broken. But his destruction is only small scale. When he

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<sup>33</sup> Hairshirts were employed by devout Christians to mortify their physical bodies in order to elevate their spiritual selves.

discovers the power and potential scope of the culling song he is compelled to destroy that which brings ultimate destruction and chaos to the Information Age. Carl fears

This could be the end of mass media. The culling song would be a plague unique to the Information Age. Imagine a world where people shun the television, the radio, movies, the Internet, magazines and newspapers.... Imagine a plague you can catch through your ears.... With mass media, we have so many new means of transmission. (Palahniuk 41-2)

Carl lists “A song. An overheard announcement. A news bulletin. A sermon. A street musician.... a telemarketer. A teacher. An Internet file. A birthday card. A fortune cookie” as the possible methods of transmission of death should this spell be modified. (41) I believe Palahniuk draws Carl as the reluctant anti-hero who knows what is right but has been beaten down by his Big Brother. But throughout the novel he slowly builds himself back up so that he can complete the heroic task of saving humanity from the misuse of the culling spell—society’s most pernicious version of noise/distraction. Carl reconstructs himself out of the shards left after the death of his family and binding these shards together with a purpose for living.

Helen Hoover Boyle has also lost her family, but in her case, the culling song is to blame for her loss. She discovers her son dead after reading the lullaby to him. Her husband was not present for the reading so he does not die, however he blames Helen for negligence and treats her horribly. She guesses that the poem was to blame after discovering another death in the trailer park where she lived and uses the lullaby to kill her husband. She has spent the past twenty years trying to find the source of the culling song hoping that there might be another spell that

could resurrect her son. During this search, she has amassed wealth as a contract killer using the culling song as a weapon that cannot be traced back to her. Unlike Carl, Helen has turned her guilt into anger that is focused outward instead of inward. She destroys selectively, helping herself first and humanity second. She dominates as a result of being an injured wife and mother, unlike Carl who allows other things to dominate him during his 20 years of guilt.

Mona and Oyster, the metaphorical children of Helen and Carl, represent a different generation. Upon first meeting Mona and Oyster with Helen at a coven pot-luck dinner, Carl observes, “This might have been the life I had, if I had a life. My wife distant and drunk. My daughter exploring some crackpot cult. Embarrassed by us, her parents. Her boyfriend would be this hippie asshole, trying to pick a fight with me, her dad” (Palahniuk 102). Thus the generational gap is established that continues throughout the text. Too young to really have experienced any real heartache or tragedy, they are ready to change the world. They are both idealistic and energetic in a youthful way, but lack the knowledge, and perhaps the cynicism, that comes with age and life lessons. Mona is an amateur witch who dabbles in the idea of magic because she has not real magic to use. She is literally in love with the idea of humans communing with nature as she has read they once did. Oyster is a belligerent vegan who places ads in local papers about high-end local businesses. Mona explains that “the really rich ones, they pay him to cancel the ads. How much they pay, he says, reflects how true the ads probably are” (Palahniuk 152). Oyster believes that the culling song is as necessary now as it was in ancient times. And he sees it, in some ways like Mona, as his right and his duty, to use it to correct the crimes society has perpetrated. He tells Carl as they are driving around looking for

books to destroy, “I’m a fucking patriot....This culling poem is a blessing. Why do you think it was created in the first place? It will save millions of people from the slow terrible death we’re headed for from disease, from famine, drought, from solar radiation, from war, from all the places we’re headed” (Palahniuk 161). This kind of rhetoric is infectious and superficially persuasive, but it is exactly the kind of argument made by youthful reactionaries who are looking to change the world. Carl, clearly twenty years older than Oyster reacts as his generation would react to Oyster’s youthful exuberance:

Oyster and his tree-hugging, eco-bullshit, his bio-invasive, apocryphal bullshit. The virus of his information. What used to be a beautiful deep green jungle to me, it’s now a tragedy of English ivy choking everything else to death. The lovely shining black flocks of starlings, with their creepy whistling songs, they rob the nests of a hundred different native birds. Imagine an idea that occupies your mind the way an army occupies a city. (Palahniuk 157)

Carl voices his frustration at being brought to consciousness concerning the state of unnatural nature—those instances where settlers have destroyed the natural landscape in favor of more familiar flora and fauna. Now that Carl knows the truth about how certain species have been imported to new locations, he sees this as yet another invasion of technology, albeit natural technology.

### *The Dying Earth(lings)*

At the beginning of the novel, Carl understands how the city has been corrupted by technological dependency, but now he sees this sickness has spread outside the city limits and



infected the rest of the land. The language used to describe what Oyster says is important because it touches several key points found throughout this argument. First, note the use of the words “virus” and “invasive”. Both suggest colonization, which on the one hand suggests settlement, but on the other denotes infestation. Secondly, the use of the word apocryphal alerts the reader to the lost knowledge of the Grimoire. Why was this knowledge lost or hidden? Should knowledge this powerful be available to anyone or should it be obscured? In *VALIS* the origin of humanity and the creator of the world is lost so that humanity will not rebel against the world around it and accept it as their true reality. In *Snow Crash*, the language of ancient Sumer is lost so that no one would be enslaved by its neurolinguistic qualities. In both cases, the knowledge is lost for the benefit of mankind. However, this knowledge has the ability to free humanity from the binds of its own religions, laws, and science. Again, the very thing that keeps humanity in line reduces its humanity. No wonder postmodern texts throw their hands in the air and ask the individuals to decide for themselves whether they want to buck the system or fall complacently into it—no one has the answer. But still literature is written that tries and tries to pose some kind of solution to the problem of pain, loss, alienation, and otherness that seems to plague humanity. This knowledge or these ideas are taboo because they make the knower or thinker look critically and make a call, good or bad. Oyster is ready to kill all people to make way for nature. Helen has been killing people to earn money to carry on her investigation of the source of the culling song in the hopes that there might be a spell that could bring her cryogenically frozen son back from the dead. Mona wants to be taken seriously, feel important, and promote community. And Carl is afraid that if any one of these three had a free hand, they

would ruin everything. The Grimoire, as powerful as it is, needs to be destroyed, like the atom bomb, for fear of the intentions of all who might have access to this knowledge. Mona and Oyster are foils of Helen and Carl. The older couple wants to destroy the forgotten knowledge and the younger couple believes this knowledge can change the world for the better. Mona and Oyster do not necessarily agree on how to change the world—Mona is the nurturer and wants to help others commune with nature and Oyster takes the position that humanity needs to start over because it is irreparably selfish and exploitative. They intend to save humanity by using the forgotten and ancient knowledge recorded in the Grimoire. Once they have the Book of Spells, they take off with the few spells that have been translated, decoded from lost languages and written with faded bodily inks (urine, semen, blood) and do what they can to change the world. Seen as modern-day miracles by the media, Mona and Oyster gain notoriety through their supernatural and revolutionary acts. Mona levitates, masquerading as an angel, and tells an entire town to stop having babies and think about overpopulation. (7-9) Oyster revives road kill along the interstate, saving the animals that have been pushed off of their land. (105-7) They unleash an insuperable vine that destroys a town, roads and all, effectively giving the land back to nature. (165-7) Finally, one of them, probably Oyster, also inhabits a cow and speaks through its mouth to tell people to “reject [their] meat-eating ways” and consider regulating the human population. (191-4) Newspapers, radio stations, and television shows all cover these events, dubbing them the “The Flying Virgin,” “The Roadkill Christ,” “The Green Menace,” and “The Judas Cow.” The elder couple fears the repercussions of these “miracles” despite the good intentions. Palahniuk tests the protagonists in the novel to see if they are capable of being truly revolutionary, exhibiting “the heroic readiness to endure the conversion of the subversive

undermining of the existing System into the principle of a new positive Order which gives body to this negativity” (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 238).

These four characters treat the idea of information differently. Obviously, Carl, a journalist, is suspicious of how information and noise can either control or anaesthetize the public. Helen uses advertising as a ploy to resell haunted houses over and over again. Mona romanticizes forgotten information and desperately wants to recover it. Oyster uses information or more specifically suspicion through misinformation to destroy faith in businesses and environmental policies. Once they discover that forgotten knowledge can be retrieved and used to change the world, they each dream of a different kind of personalized solution. The race is on and the generation gap becomes more apparent. This gap is indicative of the conflict between literary modernism and postmodernism. Mona and Oyster represent the modernists in that they are aware of the broken and fragmented world and they see themselves as artists who can reveal the Truth for all to see. Helen and Carl represent the postmodernists who, despite the recovery of lost knowledge and the realization of myth, see no Truth to recovery, only damage to control.

The story ends like a detective story—the cop, Helen Hoover Boyle, our story’s femme fatale now in a man’s body after having been possessed and forced to commit suicide by Oyster, and Carl, the journalist, are trying to stop the criminals who are out to *destroy* the broken world. Never mind the destruction of a broken world might lead to a better world. In this case, “The detective is a shepherd, and we want the criminal back in the fold, returned to us. We love him. We miss him. We want to hug him” (Palahniuk 156). They want to reclaim Oyster and Mona because they need their metaphorical children returned to them. Their desire to stop the

destruction of the broken world is, of course, problematic in that the broken world needs to be destroyed, or rather put together again with hopefully the light of Truth to guide it. But no consensus is reached concerning what this Truth is and no one harbors illusions that this crusade will end with a new and perfected world full of Truth.

### *Where to Go from Here*

The ancient and forgotten knowledge now only *seems* to offer solutions to the problems of the world, but upon further inspection, the reader must see that the forgotten knowledge helps just as much as it must have in the past—not enough to create utopia, only enough to solve a few problems for a few people. And here is where utopians make their biggest mistake: Utopias are impossible. The word itself argues this point indirectly. Creating a perfect holistic system involves many complex social, religious, and political elements coming together to work toward equality and freedom. Striving for utopia, while a noble goal, will only lead to frustration. All of these systems are dependent on the ideas and actions of people with free will and a strong inclination to watch out for themselves. Frederic Jameson makes this very convincing argument in his book, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. In this text Jameson argues that utopian writers have difficulty building utopias in their fictions because they cannot imagine a system radically different from the ones in which they have grown up. He states: “we have been plagued by the perpetual reversion of difference and otherness into the same, and the discovery that our most energetic imaginative leaps into radical alternatives were little more than the projections of our own social moment and historical or subjective situation” (211). In other words, utopian aims are too unconsciously biased by the

specific problems of the system they are designed to replace to successfully construct a totally new and unbiased system without creating a whole new mess with its own particular problems and inequalities. Simon Jarvis, in his book chapter entitled “Adorno, Marx, Materialism,” explains that Adorno acknowledges this same problem with utopian aim and notes what must be considered when the utopian impulse strikes:

For Adorno himself, wanting to be a materialist means starting from, not a set of fixed metaphysical or methodological commitments, but something which could more accurately be named an impulse: the utopian wish for undeluded happiness, including bodily pleasure, the wish for an end to suffering. This wish may be simple, even naive; but it requires all the cunning of philosophical artifice if it is not to be deformed, turned into a parody of itself, from the outset. (80)

Palahniuk seems to anticipate this problem, perhaps because he is cynical that anything can really be done to solve the problems of the current system so long as people go about their business mindlessly accepting things as they are or things fed to them by the media. His characters, empowered by language and the ability to bend the laws of nature through speech, cannot adequately solve society's problems. In fact, they have diametrically opposed views on what that final solution should look like. Like the modernists and the postmodernists, the former thinks a solution is reachable and the latter asks whose solution can be deemed better than the others? And what about those who really wanted to try the solution no one agreed to? Will they be happy in this new world? Will they be free? Will they feel equal? Will they see the other choice as the perfect choice eventually? It would seem that a loss of free will would accompany these utopias, and then, Carl asks, what is there to live for? Maybe utopian texts only have the appearance of perfection but the details and answers to the pragmatic, systemic questions are

unsatisfying. Currently, dystopian fiction seems much more popular by virtue of the fact that it is easier to construct a misguided and failed utopia with good intentions that must be overthrown than a utopia with which everyone is pleased.

Each of the characters in *Lullaby* has an agenda for this addressing the failed modern utopia that is the twentieth century. They all look for lost knowledge and power offered within language. Palahniuk draws each as representing a different kind of domination. He focuses on domination as a method of re-engineering and re-empowering people. Most of his characters feel at the mercy of some other power. The end is positive, but in the end the problem with the solution is that two people have the ability to reconstruct society, using a language that is quite dangerous. Palahniuk confronts this postmodern caveat openly in his text. Who should have such a power? Ultimately, I believe Palahniuk argues in his story that the power over others that is found in language is always being exerted in some form in society—whether it is the media, political groups, or religious institutions—and that by recognizing this power, we reduce these instances of control. In other words, we are able to think more clearly for ourselves. And this clear thinking might lead to more clear thinking. The problems begin when an ancient idea is brought to light that promises some great solution. Carl recognizes there is no quick and easy solution to the problems of the world. There are always repercussions. Communism must still employ people who would adhere to the rules and a system that would enforce these rules without bias. But humans are always guilty of bias. So postmodernism takes the easy way out and says that it depends on perspective and life lessons and attachments to certain histories and philosophies and picto-typographic representations of whatever is being argued for any sense to be made. And even then, maybe nothing can be done. Palahniuk does not seem happy with this

solution, so the search is ongoing, as if the answer lies out there, but just out of reach. However, the answer still lies out there just as for Žižek, the unconscious is still out there. And the hope for a solution or reconciliation with the other is all that Palahniuk needs to set himself apart from the other postmodern authors. He knows that there is hope for the future, but that future will always be a work in progress.

## CONCLUSIONS

In addition to arguing that a study of science fiction yields important and increasingly relevant perspectives on who we are today and who we will be tomorrow, I believe this same study resurrects a faith in humanity and its coupling of passion, reason, and sheer doggedness to solve any problem it may face, a trait of many of the science fiction stories written during the Golden Age (1930-1950). As cultural pendulums go, it seems about time for the cynically distant notion that we are helpless, confused, and alienated in a broken world of irreconcilable perspectives to swing to a worldview that resituates command and direction in the hands of humanity that is more than capable of shouldering the load, straightening the mess, and addressing the needs of the many disparate voices. An approach to revealing the reappearance of faith and hope lies in the return to language and its power over society. One undeniable development in our culture is its dependence on the media to understand itself. The media flocks to Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Phil, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Sarah Palin and Barack Obama in order to orient society to current social, global, and political issues so that it might know how to understand its roles as a collective of opinionated by-standers under the delusion that it is “doing” something about all of the problems facing the world today. But orienting is a far-cry from acting. It is a half step to the work that needs doing. I believe many early science fiction authors understood humanity’s propensity to take half steps and tried to inspire readers through tales of scientific potential and human heroism. Science fiction written in the 1930s and 1940s inspired a generation of future aerospace engineers to want to break through the atmosphere and into a final frontier that had been imagined to be populated by strange and alien empires with vast scientific technologies and opportunities for individual heroism. And these authors inspired readers through words on a page. Children were swept up by the images conjured by these



words. Kids longed to save the alien princess and explore the Martian landscape in Edgar Rice Burroughs's series of novels that began with *A Princess of Mars* (published as a serial in 1912), or travel through time to the far distant future as in H.G Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895). The world-building aspect of this genre enchanted generations and inspired these generations to make those worlds more real as science and technology progressed. The power of language was not lost on these authors; therefore, it stands to reason that while some of these stories would imagine technological progress, other stories might deal specifically with the power of language, especially as postmodernist works began deconstructing relationships that are formed by this language.

It would, of course, be inaccurate to suggest that science fiction withstood the artistic and theoretical shift from modernism to postmodernism. New Wave science fiction followed the Golden Age, inspired by a distrust of science and a growing sense of isolation and despair. In many cases, these New Wave science fiction stories and mainstream postmodernist works were similar in method and message. But in the long run, the New Wave movement only served to provide the Golden Age nostalgics with new tools with which to craft their message of hope in reason and pride in human ingenuity. Lacan's maxim, "Do not compromise your desire!" illustrates this desire for change and reinvention. The way out is through. If the current system is unsatisfactory, then it must be changed through exercising reason and using what does work to fashion a system that is more manageable, knowing that the process must inevitably begin anew when this new system fails to deliver what it was designed to provide. This is the order of things. Dick understood this constant dialectic. He imagines a continual process inching us closer and closer to reunion with God. Adorno understood this process as our duty as thinking humans. And Žižek believes that the language we use to engage the world and others binds us to

this constant revision of the monitoring big Other. The trend of renewal and empowerment manifests in most literature, but the ways in which science fiction seems to actively engage this process is provocative and ultimately transformative. Jakober echoes this sentiment:

the possibilities explored in speculative fiction, precisely because they are speculative, are fluid. In this they are much like myths, with the potential to move from culture to culture and from age to age. Indeed, one might suggest that myths are simply the oldest form of speculative fiction. They were the stories humans told—often by inventing things that did not exist in their ordinary lives—to explain the unknown, the mysterious, the very good, the very evil, the very odd. Most importantly, they were—and are—the stories that cause us to wonder about all the things that have been lost in the world, and all the things that might yet be. (Jakober 31)

Jakober argues that the fluidity indicative of speculative fiction is preferable to realistic fiction because of its mercurial nature. Speculative fiction is best suited to be fiction whose interests lie in what will be in the future. Within the speculative or science fiction genre, utopian as well as dystopian experiments have found nearly equal representation. This balanced treatment of two diametrically opposed social constructs results from a focus on the future for which these particular genres are well known. Philip K. Dick's *VALIS*, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby*, more aptly characterized as speculative fiction because of its portrayal of magic against science, each tackle dystopian qualities of contemporary society by analyzing the power that language possesses in the formation of the self, its relation to others, and the propagation of ideology. The utopian goals of these texts advocate for a revision of postmodern cynicism because the authors have looked to the future for hopeful solutions to the

social and ideological problems of today as well as a return to the modernist metanarrative. Jacquelin Plante expresses this position another way: “Utopianism in this context becomes an action, a verb, a process or transformation, subversion, and experimentation, drawn from a desire for continuous movement toward unknown possibilities rather than self-contained, controlled bodies of academic effort working towards the justification of pre-existing beliefs” (176). In other words, utopianism does not intend to definitively solve social problems; rather it is the narrative dialectic intended to provoke thoughts and lead to eventual change.

Using Slavoj Žižek’s readings of Jacques Lacan and Theodor Adorno’s readings of Karl Marx for critical insight, I have argued that these four novels imagine language as the key to personal empowerment and social change. Furthermore, all of these texts pose a hopeful revision to postmodernism, but never a complete solution. These authors do not fall into the totalizing historical trap that ensnared the modernists. I believe these authors align their writing more closely with Adorno’s belief in the revival of reason and critical inquiry as a means to effect incremental positive social change in the world which is made clear by Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan’s big Other and the revision of oppressive postmodern ideologies.

The first novel, *VALIS*, contemplates the existential dilemma of suffering. The main character explains this dilemma of the origin and purpose of suffering and pain by adopting Gnostic theosophy and arguing that the world is managed by a deluded false god who wants to keep humans unaware of the imperfection of creation. The failed return of Logos (here used as the one true God/the proper code/the incorruptible language of creation/truth and order) suggests complete revision is impossible—utopia is unreachable—but still hoped and strived for. Adorno’s *Negative Dialectic* explains this failure is inevitable but the byproduct of revolution

provides the seed for the next attempt at social revision. The *impulse* for utopia is what matters most. This impulse indicates a hopefulness and desire to reinstate the modernist metanarrative. In *Snow Crash*, Neal Stephenson describes an instructional code (Logos) that exists as the phonemes of the lost language of Sumerian. Once again, social change revolves around language and its power over others. While neither Hiro nor Juanita actually solve social problems or change the world for the better, they do preserve free will and allow social change to be possible. Similarly, *Babel-17* imagines an intergalactic war and a human-programming enemy code, called Babel-17, which threatens the Alliance. By connecting to another, the main character is able control Babel-17 to rewrite it in order to bring about a peaceful conclusion to the war. Finally, Chuck Palahniuk imagines a magic-based code in *Lullaby* that taps into the operating system of nature. The characters in the novel struggle with the twin desires for using the Grimoire for social change and ridding the world of this dangerous power. At the end of the novel, the younger two saviors run from town to town returning the world to a state of nature while the older two attempt to manage the others's idealistic magical revolution.

In each novel, language is characterized as an agent of domination. Only through taking control of language can the characters end the cycle of domination and free themselves and their enslaved societies. This domination appears as the demiurge in *VALIS*, the increasing power of L. Bob Rife's many corporate holdings and controlling interest in key franchises in *Snow Crash*, the proliferation of war by both sides in *Babel-17*, and media saturation as well as environmental desecration in *Lullaby*. This culture of domination reflects the culture industry described by Horkheimer and Adorno. This culture industry controls and perpetuates the interests of the masses who are under the delusion that they dictate the production of consumable products.

Adorno and Horkheimer, taking from Hegel and Marx, argue that corporations manipulate the tastes of the masses, causing standardization and mindlessness in a society that thinks it is individual and analytical. The delusions of individualism and independent thought appear in each of these texts. Furthermore, the protagonists in these novels set out to deliver society from this culture industry machine/big Other by first seeing through the delusion constructed by language, re-engaging their own ability to produce thoughtful and purposeful language, and finally connecting with others using language as a newly successful medium of communication, understanding, and social architecture. Perhaps the domination of the big Other/culture industry is caused by a cyclical *view* of history. Critical social theory suggests that these trends are not cyclical, but spiral in seemingly similar patterns yet are always moving forward. Each problem faced is not the same problem faced in the past because the situations surrounding it must inevitably be different. So, if society is continuing forward constantly, any hiccup caused by ideological domination disrupts the natural evolution of society. It is the job of critical cultural theorists like Adorno and Žižek, as well as science fiction authors, to keep watch over the hiccups that occur because of the meddling of an oppressive big Other/culture industry or some excessively rigid ideology.

Each of these texts describes the need to revolt against the current situation and find a solution, through language, that will make the world different, not circle back on itself. None of these books *realize* a better world for all. Some worlds are better for certain groups, namely those in power. While none of the novels achieve their utopian goals, they each evince a belief that the *attempt* belies a return to the modernist metanarrative and a rejection of postmodern helplessness. Thus, each novel imagines the revision of Žižek's big Other through the remainders of Adorno's inevitably failed revolutions, injecting hope in a literary period that had long since lost

it. The problem centers on the shift from a view that language constricts and controls those who use it to the belief that language, rather than being an agent of enslavement, can actually function as an empowering tool allowing for world-building and ultimate freedom over one's own actions. Examples of this freedom and hope appear in various incarnations of post-postmodernism in the premeditated and designed social anarchism of the Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, Asimov's *Foundation* series and Dan Simmons *Hyperion Cantos*, as well as the open sourced and post-scarcity economies of Cory Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* and Charles Stross' *Accelerando*. Arguably naïve in their messages, these books imagine human freedom, not without struggle, and the removal of ideological oppression and the reinstatement of human autonomy.

These authors construct new Symbolic orders through world-building and ownership of language that will hopefully lead to connection and communion and away from a de-centered postmodern condition. While Žižek and others may argue that replacing one big Other for an Other still keeps us separate from the Real, enslaving us to the language that constructs the Imaginary, I would like to return to the hope found in Philip K. Dick. Dick's view of reality is constantly shifting and changing in his works, but he explains this fluidity by arguing that there might be many realities working out a cosmic dialectic. This dialectic will eventually lead to the final synthesis of this world and God. Likewise, the revolution in these novels may have only replaced one shadow with another, but I contend that this replacement moves us closer to, but not into, the Real and teaches us how to bear this exposure.

Perhaps science fiction makes strides beyond postmodernist literature in the inevitable path toward understanding our relationship to the Real. But more importantly, maybe science

fiction that deals with this social dialectic points to our literary future as well. Postmodernist fiction has been succeeded by many other movements that have resisted categorization. These movements have taken elements from Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism in order to make a new name for themselves. New names have been suggested for the last ten years by various social, literary, and cultural critics, but none of these (post-Postmodernism, Hyperrealism, Hysterical Realism, New Sincerity, and Reconstructivism) quite fit. This problem of naming the current period results in part from the de-centering of postmodernism as well as the difficulty of naming a thing as it occurs, before it can run its full course. This is the problem of the name for postmodernism. It does little to indicate the kind of literature, instead it places itself, ironically, on the timeline of literary movements. The current texts take from each of these movements those aspects that seem to fit best, to represent the story or intention of the tale. They spiral forward in search of the next revolution that will, as we know by now, come inevitably to make literature/society/the big Other/the Symbolic order more manageable and tolerable. But only until the next time. Perhaps there might be some truth to the names New Sincerity or Reconstructivism. We are constantly headed in exciting directions that perpetually reveal more details about who we are, who others are, how we can know them, and how we all might design a society that considers this connection. Speculative and science fiction seem perfectly poised to perform these functions for us, regardless of what we name the current literary period.

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