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**World Without End:
Historicity and the Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema**

by

Aaron E. N. Taylor, Hons. B. A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

School for Studies in Art and Culture

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
August 31, 2000
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“World Without End: Historicity and the Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema”

submitted by Aaron E.N. Taylor, B.A., Honours (Western)
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts.

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September 2000

Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of North American science fiction cinema, from 1985-1999, in which the role of history and historicity is evaluated. Time has always been a central preoccupation of SF, but the thematic importance of the past as temporality has long been undermined by critics. History plays a much more constructive role in contemporary SF than previous critics have allowed. The literal “presence” of signifiers of the “past” services narratives which are often fundamentally moralistic in nature. Science fiction’s historicity is employed to prevent the alienation of “future shock” - the estranging tendencies of new technologies - which necessitate new modes of epistemological and ontological adaptation. In such films, history plays the vital function of conscience. Representations of familiar futures are not necessarily conservative, but are indicative of a development in SF that refuses to celebrate progress at the expense of history.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks are owed to my supervisor, Chris Faulkner, for his exacting criticism throughout the writing of this thesis and his unflappable patience. His uncanny ability to talk me down from some of my more high-strung moments proved to be invaluable. My gratitude must also be extended to the rest of the faculty of Film Studies for their support, especially Laura Marks, George McKnight, and Charles O'Brien. Their input into the early stages of the thesis kept me on the straight and narrow. Additional thanks to the rest of my colleagues in Film Studies whose suggestions sent my research spiralling into unexpected, yet rewarding places.

I also owe my appreciation to the government of Ontario for an Ontario Graduate Scholarship and to the Faculty of Graduate Studies at Carleton University for a Carleton Graduate Scholarship. Without the generosity of their financial support, this project would not have been possible.

Finally, I give my thanks and love to my family for their patience and understanding, and to Amy Liversage, my wife and most honest critic, who represents the best of all possible futures.

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Introduction

Counting to Zero, Birthing the Future: The Contemporary Science Fiction Film

I hear the ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry, and time one livid final flame.

- James Joyce

This thesis is an examination of North American science fiction cinema from 1985 to 1999 - a cinema which articulates, at its most fundamental level perhaps, ways of aligning our current historical moment with what H. G. Wells designated and William Cameron Menzies depicted as “the shape of things to come.”¹ Throughout their representations, these films situate their subjects (both characters and spectators) in a highly ambiguous manner in relation to a newly realized “future.” Above all, this is a cinema about *change*; however, one that speaks of a fundamental problem in its subjects’ abilities to conceive of an unpredictable future. One of the distinctive features of the twentieth century has been described as “the unprecedented rapidity in the pace of change, which forces us, on the one hand, to look ahead but, on the other, makes it more difficult to do so” (Masini 1993, 127). It is this “impossible vision” that SF cinema attempts to delineate. My ambitions are to articulate the thematics of recent SF and how they represent a different “future” than the SF of the past. To do so is to map a filmic problematic that continually tests the conceptual limits of memory, personal agency, and history.

Contemporary SF has been described as an attempt “to map the new world space we

¹ Consult the filmography for a complete listing of the films discussed.

inhabit, to imagine other forms of being, to give us a picture of difference, sameness, boundaries, marginality” (Sobchack 1987, 301). To begin, it is necessary to trace out the manifold constituents of the genre which bravely undertake such a cartography. Several questions will structure our explorations. What precisely is science fiction? What sorts of films make up its corpus? What are their thematic concerns? What are the various discourses surrounding SF cinema and how do they inform the structure and thematics of its various representations?

These questions add up to what Annette Kuhn calls the “cultural instrumentality” of this cinema. Since my approach to SF will be a matter of discerning the value of its thematics for audiences, the idea of “cultural instrumentality” deserves elaboration. Kuhn introduces the genre of SF from the position of a cultural theorist, claiming that films

are always products - commodities of a very particular sort, perhaps, but nonetheless embodying use value in the cultural sphere as well as exchange value in the economic . . . Readings of individual science fiction films provoke questions about connections between films, genres, spectators, and other social practices - about their cultural instrumentalities, in other words (Kuhn 1990, 9).

SF is conditioned by and influences such “cultural instrumentalities.” In tracing out some of the characteristics of SF cinema we should simultaneously be able to discern its cultural instrumentality for particular audiences. Or, as Rick Altman succinctly asserts, “the relationship between the semantic and the syntactic constitutes the very site of negotiation between Hollywood and its audience, and thus between ritual and ideological uses of genre” (Altman 1984, 14). What Altman is pointing towards is an analysis of genre in which the

critic focuses on the structural makeup of a body of films and how this makeup is essentially put to “use” by its audience. Genre is never a given, but is constituted by many different authorities and activated during the viewing process in which the viewer situates the filmic text in relation to other texts with which he/she is familiar.

SF has always been a cinema preoccupied with time and temporality, but the role which time plays, and the function of history in particular has largely been underplayed and undermined by previous critics who are more concerned with the genre’s representation of “the future.” The past, and representations of “pastness” are vital to contemporary incarnations of the genre and their functionality deserves elaboration, especially in lieu of the genre’s penchant for endism, themes of transition, and tendency towards re-view. Generally speaking, SF is as much about yesterday as it is about tomorrow.

Fredric Jameson comments on the unique relationship between SF and history, stressing the former’s status as a genre and/or narrative form that is as much a product of the twentieth century as it is the ideal voice in which to speak its crisis in historicity.

If the historical novel ‘corresponded’ to the emergence of historicity, of a sense of history in its strong modern post-eighteenth century sense, science fiction equally corresponds to the waning or the blockage of that historicity, and, particularly in our own time . . . to its crisis and paralysis, its enfeeblement and repression. Only by means of a violent formal and narrative dislocation could a narrative apparatus come into being capable of restoring life and feeling to this only intermittently functioning organ that is our capacity to organize and live time historically (Jameson 1991, 284).

Vivian Sobchack is perhaps the pioneering critic who attempted to articulate the precise ways in which the SF of 1977-1985 went about reviving our “intermittently functioning” ability

to “organize and live time historically.” This thesis is essentially a resumption of Sobchack’s study, and an answer to her challenge to conceive of a SF cinema that is unafraid to be forward-looking while still acknowledging a debt to the past. It is my assertion that such a cinema exists, and moreover, that history plays a much more constructive role in it than she allows. The SF of 1985-1999 is a cinema in which the literal “presence” of the “past” is evidence of a strict adherence to a historical moralism that she is unwilling to credit and that has been ignored by other critics.

What is Science Fiction?

Before elaborating on Sobchack’s position, delineating a pragmatic definition of science fiction may prove fruitful. Coincidentally, Sobchack has provided the most helpful explication of the genre’s thematics: “the SF film is a film genre which emphasizes actual, extrapolative, or speculative science and the empirical method, interacting in a social context with the lesser emphasized, but still present, transcendentalism of magic and religion, in an attempt to reconcile man with the unknown” (Sobchack 1987, 63). One of the more implicitly philosophical genres, SF narratives feature a synthesis of science and the mystical, often for the purposes of forwarding a general ontology of being.

Sobchack later updates her definition to elaborate on science fiction’s ontological purpose: “SF has always taken as its distinctive generic task the cognitive mapping and poetic figuration of social relations as they are constituted and changed by new technological modes of ‘being in the world’” (Sobchack 1987, 225). Thus, the advent of new technologies (the Internet, virtual reality, and cybernetics in particular) that seem to affect the ontology of

immediate experience requires an *a posteriori* reconfiguration of the modalities of being. Or, in Heideggerian terms, SF represents a narrative measure for replotting our experience of the world in light of these technological tools.

Ideally, SF should allow its audience to formulate a stable conception of the world (or at least its illusion) in light of increasing - often technological - change. It should also provide a means for one to hypothesize a conception of self in relation to time, especially the uncertainties of the future. Heidegger argues that subjective human time is comprised of inseparable temporal phases - the past and the future are conceived to be as “real” as the present. The “authentic” self for Heidegger is “potentiality for action, characterized by its orientation towards the future, entailing possibilities and the constant necessity of choice” (Flew 1999, 144). Human “being” (or *dasein*) is essentially forward looking. SF cinema is the representational means by which one imagines a future that is as “real” as one’s present.

Before elaborating on the workings of its representations, it is important to remark on the social and cultural environment surrounding contemporary SF. Since I will posit that SF is often narratively concomitant with the discourses of a cultural event (the bimillennium) as well as the semantic/syntactic workings of other films, identifying their cultural instrumentalities is important. Annette Kuhn contends that there are five cultural instrumentalities of SF (I claim the italicized titles as my own). 1) *Reflective*: the genre embodies social trends and attitudes of its respective historical period. “Films are treated as . . . sociological evidence” (Kuhn 1990, 10). 2) *Mediative*: the genre relates to the social order through the performance and production of certain ideologies which “cannot always

be read off the films' surface contents" (ibid). 3) *Subtextual*: the genre articulates subconscious social anxieties. In this regard, the "films voice cultural repressions in 'unconscious' textual processes" which become manifest in their subject matter and aesthetics (ibid). 4) *Receptive*: the genre is taken up and used by viewers in various ways. Here, the task for the critic is to determine "what sorts of pleasures and fantasies" SF films "evoke and activate" for their viewers (ibid). 5) *Intertextual*: the genre is caught up in various intersecting avenues of meaning. During reception, one must be aware of the film's involvement in systemic networks of "cultural meanings and social discourses" (ibid).

Kuhn's model is certainly not genre specific. All film takes on these "cultural instrumentalities," and whether or not they are more transparent in SF than in other genres is arguable. Science fiction *is* a genre whose films "vividly embody ideological positions," and thus, "comparing science fiction films of the same era becomes an analysis of conflicting social visions" (Lev 1998, 30). However, its "embodiment" of "ideological positions" is not any more "vivid" than any other particular genre (the Western is a good example).

The phenomenology of time and history is integral to the particular cultural instrumentalities of SF.² Sobchack points to an obvious dilemma history poses to the production and reception of the genre. She argues that the "presentness" of SF's material production is unavoidably in opposition to the "futurity" of its representations, and "thus, the necessary and sufficient symbolic conditions that determine the genre's existence and

2 By phenomenology I mean arriving at an understanding of time and history through analyses of lived experience - or rather, the representations of lived experience.

identity are at odds with each other, even as they are completely dependent on each other” (Sobchack 1987, 303). In the reflective model, narrative themes are contingent on the period in which they are produced. The performance and production of ideology in current SF replies to that of previous films in the mediative model. Subconscious social anxieties are also historically contingent in the subtextual model, changing from decade to decade. Working within the receptive model typically entails a measurement of old “pleasures and fantasies” against new. Lastly, the intertextual model privileges an awareness of films’ relation to previous “cultural meanings and social discourses,” as well as the films’ relationship to earlier films.

Finally, a Jaussian super-awareness of the near-impossibility of being able to think or imagine outside one’s own historical horizon must also be maintained. A represented future must obviously be constrained by the limits of socio-historic particulars, of time and place. Recognizing such limits will be important later, especially in responding to SF critics who castigate filmmakers for their perceived inability to imagine the future. Vivian Sobchack is such a critic, as we shall see.

History and the SF Film: 1977-1985

Sobchack is probably the single most important critic to discuss SF’s second “Golden Age” - a period in Hollywood that was launched by the critical and box-office success of Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 1977 and that lasted (arguably) well into the mid-80’s. Few other critics have been as exhaustive in their attempts to delineate the thematics of contemporary SF. The period which she writes about is one in

which the postmodern SF cinema emerges. Indeed, her analysis is heavily influenced by Fredric Jameson's neo-Marxist conception of postmodernism outlined in his oft-cited manifesto, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. According to Sobchack, SF from 1977 to 1985 makes a concrete shift from modernism to postmodernism. It is a "symbolic comprehension of the 'end' of modernism, of 'futurism,' of the belief in 'progress'" in which the "future" is narrated as "past" (Sobchack 1987, 248).

Drawing heavily from Jameson, she claims that "the new depthlessness, the weakened historicity, the new emotional tone, and the new relationship to the 'new' (whether technological or biological) . . . constitute the features of a new SF aesthetics, one representative of the changed values and logic of late capitalism" (Sobchack 1987, 253). These four descriptors are the core elements of her analysis: the *new depthlessness* is "literalised as a deflation and inflation of space"; a *weakening of historicity* is "made concrete in the . . . pervasive conflation of time"; postmodernism's *new emotional tone* is articulated by the shift from "deep and private special affect" to "superficial and visible special effect"; and finally, the *new familiar relationship to otherness* is symbolized by SF's "embrace of the 'alien,' and its erasure of alien-ation" (ibid).

Responding to each of Sobchack's conditions would necessitate a much longer work than our space allows. For the purposes of this thesis, her concern with a perceived "weakening of historicity" evidenced in "postmodern" SF is my area of interest. The central question I will posit and attempt to answer is whether contemporary SF's approach to and employment of history is different from the period Sobchack discusses. Here, the idea of the

future being represented as either “past” or “present” is integral, for according to her study, the SF of 1977 to 1985 “either nostalgically locates the future in an imagined past and thus articulates it as ‘over,’ or it complacently locates the future in the present, celebrating it as ‘here’ and ‘now’” (Sobchack 1987, 300).

In order to understand her conjecture, we must first grasp the theoretical premise on which it is based - namely, the “deflation and inflation of space,” or the “new depthlessness” of postmodernism. While I do not propose to explore the minutiae of Jameson’s generalizations about such spatial flattening, I will elaborate on its cinematic applications. As represented in SF, this two-dimensional hyperspace “hyperbolizes material and surface detail while it schematizes (rather than represents) texture” (Sobchack 1987, 256). Such space is “more real than real,” signifying “a replication and clarification of the cinematographic image, an objectification of its vision accomplished from a space with no atmosphere, no respiration, no experience of depth or gravity” (ibid). Examples of this hyperspace can be found in *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irving Kershner, 1980), *The Last Starfighter* (Nick Castle, 1984), *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (Nicholas Meyer, 1982) *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982) and *War Games* (John Badham, 1983). The mise-en-scene of all of these “postmodern” SF films is all surface, all gloss, and all for appearances.

Additionally, the richness of the mise-en-scene’s detail - the excess scenography - has a similar result. “Constant busyness and motion are enhanced by the material clutter of excess scenography to distract the eye from locating itself in the fixed position from which the conception of personal movement, depth, and interiority (or subjectivity) becomes

possible” (Sobchack 1987, 270). Sobchack cites *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai* (W. D. Richter, 1984), *Dune* (David Lynch, 1984), *Escape from New York* (John Carpenter, 1981) and most importantly, *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) as examples of films containing such disorienting excesses. Viewers perceive a subconscious flattening of these future spaces caused by the sheer amount of detail presented - a “too-muchness” that threatens to override their depth perception and accentuates the flatness of the screen.

For Sobchack, the all-important result is that “the inflated value of space and surface has led to a deflation of temporal value, to a collapse of those temporal relationships that formulated time as a continuous and unifying flow - constituting the coherence of personal identity, history and narrative” (Sobchack 1987, 272). Thus, in SF, all temporalities become simultaneous in a two-dimensional synchrony where the present reigns supreme. “The new SF film tends to conflate past, present, and future - in decor constructed as temporal pastiche and/or in narratives that either temporally turn back on themselves to conflate past, present, and future, or are schizophrenically constituted as a ‘series of pure and unrelated presents in time’” (Sobchack 1987, 273-274). Its mise-en-scene is a hodgepodge of clashing historical styles, for “no-thing is lost in these films; every-thing remains. And ‘remaindered’ things begin to look both shabby and newly strange, begin to serve new functions, to adhere together in new combinations and take on a new style” (Sobchack 1987, 263). In other words, SF finds a use for everything and finds everything for which it has a use.

Furthermore, the genre’s penchant for intertextuality produces not real, but pseudo-history according to Sobchack. Constant appropriations of past aesthetics and conventions

result in a collapse of time and history, “which are no longer experienced in any radical, direct, or active way” (Sobchack 1987, 274). Even at its best, postmodern mainstream SF is characterized by *nostalgia*, while marginal SF embraces *pastiche* - “a nonhierarchical collection of heterogeneous forms and styles from a variety of heretofore distinguishable spaces and times” (Sobchack 1987, 230). In the postmodern recycling of old styles in SF, one can find useful parallels with Baudrillard’s model of historical simulation: “these earlier forms never resurface as they were; they never escape the destiny of extreme modernity. Their resurrection itself is hyper-real. The resuscitated values are themselves fluid, unstable, subject to the same fluctuations as fashion or stock-exchange capital” (Baudrillard 1997, 259). Thus, as Sobchack argues, viewers must content themselves with either the sickly-sweet yearnings for a postwar, suburban euphoria of a *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) or an *E. T.* (Steven Spielberg and Alan Daviau, 1982), or else the atemporal, collagist aesthetic of an *Explorers* (Joe Dante, 1985) or a *Repo Man* (Alex Cox, 1984).

From 1977-1985, SF is a cinema of simulation and simulacra, with little regard for historical specificity and preoccupied with spatial, and subsequently, temporal flattening. Sobchack is unequivocal in her castigation of the genre, characterizing its corpus of films as interesting but fundamentally flawed. For, “despite the SF film’s visible and blatant articulations of its own inventiveness, the genre’s most popular films work visually to produce not the novel, but its illusion, its replication, its simulacra” (Sobchack 1987, 304). In so representing the genre, Sobchack does a disservice to its frequent ingenuities and persistent flights of true inventiveness. It may be that the genre’s employment of history is

far more imaginative than she has been willing to credit.

New Days of Futures Past: 1985-1999

To his credit, Jameson admits that a “schizophrenic” relation to time does not necessarily have completely negative connotations because such a condition has now become “generalized as a cultural style” (Jameson 1991, 29). As a consequence, Sobchack is willing to concede that “the new postmodern SF film celebrates the ease (not the disease) of its ability to make temporal nonsense into spatial new sense” (Sobchack 1987, 281). Nonetheless, other than this brief concession, she does not offer an explanation as to how the genre accomplishes this task. Moreover, is it fair to characterize this condition as “temporal nonsense?” Sobchack seems content to acknowledge the postmodern SF film’s spatial innovations and reconfigurations, but does not make the same allowances for its temporal conceits. Indeed, “on the one hand, their lack of temporal imagination (and interest) is paralytic in regards to envisioning a future, but, on the other, it is dynamic in the intense attention it pays to the spatialized present” (Sobchack 1987, 302).

While much SF from 1985 to 1999 continues to borrow from, play on, and build upon old conventions and aesthetics, these retrophilic tendencies are not necessarily regressive. In fact, contemporary SF’s approach to time and temporality may represent a reintroduction of depth and differentiation to the flattening of history Sobchack finds evident in previous films. Three points of interest structure my argument: 1) *history and historicity*; 2) *individual and collective memory*; and 3) *personal agency*. Each of these concepts has much greater poignancy in SF, especially recent SF, than has been allowed in the past.

SF cinema from 1985 to 1999 continues to represent futures, or “futuristic” presents which engage with the past or, in other words, it continues to demonstrate a commitment to history or, more specifically, historicity. The future is produced in SF according to the same logics as the past is produced in works of history. Its underlying purpose - like historical narratives - is to construct narratives which are *moralistic* in nature. As we shall see, for several New Historicists, works of history are written as a way for a culture to come to terms with its past. As works of fiction, SF films are similarly designed to prevent the alienation of “future shock” - the estranging tendencies of scientific and technological progress - by adhering to a historical moralism. The introduction of new technologies often causes ontological shock or epistemological crises which require *new* modes of adaptation to language, thought, and behaviour. *History* acts as *conscience* (and not *con-science* as Sobchack articulates) in the formulation of these modes. Familiar futures, then, are not necessarily conservative. SF is a *cautionary* genre which celebrates progress, but not at the expense of history.

Secondly, individual and collective memory are also forms of personal history which contemporary SF explores narratively. Memory has been characterized as something of an endangered species in the SF film by Sobchack.

Today, privately experienced ‘interiority’ appears less and less a necessary condition of human being. Intrasubjective ‘personal’ vision once invisible to others has become publicly visible and commodified through media imagery. Our private ‘memory’ has been increasingly constituted from previously mediated ‘spectacle’ rather than from ‘direct’ experience (Sobchack 1987, 235).

While memory continues to be threatened by corporate penetration and the encroachment of digital virtuality in contemporary SF, the necessity of “interiority” is hardly disappearing. Many of these films speak to the phenomenological inadequacy of mediated memory. Replay, mediation, and exteriorized interiority is not always sufficient; such spectacles lack the texture, mortality, and ambiguity of memory. Moreover, characters are often obsessed with, and haunted or driven by personal memory. In an age whereby memory may be electronically or digitally preserved, it may also be manipulated, altered, and manufactured. As a result, these characters cling to a reaffirmation of personal memory, especially when shaken by the capacity of technology to fundamentally challenge their personal experience of “being in the world.”

Thirdly, I am concerned with the problematic of personal agency in the contemporary SF film or, more specifically, how characters are able to act and provide change in these times of historicity’s crisis. To live in a condition in which temporality is experienced as a series of “pure and unrelated presents in time” is to live without history, and hence, to live as an actor, rather than as an agent. SF is profoundly ambiguous about such a condition. Some characters are unable to align themselves with such a “schizophrenic” present and succumb to forces beyond their control, while others are able to act, to effect change, to influence time and history.

Sobchack, however, is unconcerned with the *lived* experience of characters within the spaces and times she discusses, and instead focusses on aesthetics. In doing so, she ignores how a “retrofitted” form is narratively activated and how characters in these films live within

futures preoccupied with history. True, the new postmodern sense of space is “flattened by the superficial electronic ‘dimensionality’ of movement as experienced as occurring on - not in - the screens of computer terminals” (Sobchack 1987, 230). But since the time of Sobchack’s writing, new digital technologies and VR seek to situate users *within* these flattened spaces. With the erasure of the terminal interface, we are perhaps beginning to see a reintroduction of depth to postmodern flattening. Similarly, then, contemporary SF often foregrounds the *experiential* conditions of the characters who live within these simulated temporalities of “pseudo-history,” and are somehow able to restore the dimension of time to their two dimensional lived hyperspaces.

“To Infinity and Beyond!” : The Thematics of Contemporary SF

Before I expound on the genre’s contemporary thematic preoccupations, it is necessary to clarify further what living within the context of a “pseudo-history” entails. Jameson applies the phrase “inverted millenarianism” to characterize the conditions of the postmodern experience, “in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that” (Jameson 1991, 1). What Jameson speaks of is a prevalent endism that does not function on a literal level; the potential “end of time” which postmodernity brings about is metaphorical.

According to political theorists such as Francis Fukayama and cultural critics like Jean Baudrillard, one can conceive of the end of this time as the termination of *history* proper, insofar as our ability to understand our place within time has somehow ceased toward the end of the twentieth century. For postmodernism’s proponents (François Lyotard and

Linda Hutcheon among them), this cessation can be thought to signify the arrival of “the future” itself - the paradigm shift which puts an end to the past’s old regimes. Alternatively, its critics argue that the birth of a new epoch is not necessarily presented in positive terms. Not only is our connection with the past severed, but the unspecificities of “the future.” now paradoxically materializing in the present, are likewise lost to us and made strange: “the settled pessimism of so much of the culture of the late twentieth century is in effect an absolute loss of the future: of any significant belief that it can be both different and better. The projection of dates is now more often an anxious calculation of possibilities of mere survival” (Williams 1982, 4). One of contemporary SF’s central subtextual cultural instrumentalities, then, is the articulation of an implicit fear that the possibility of claiming the future as “our own” - asserting control over its mysteries - is no longer possible.

Despite Kuhn’s claims that SF is a cinema of anxiety, rhetoric surrounding these fears is usually dichotomous. While on the one hand, for example, the new (“postmodern”) experience of time in contemporary SF may be considered as an “individual failure to know and to become aligned with history’s general upward progress toward perfection,” it may also be taken “as a sign of impending radical change” (Brummett 1991, 84). Another example includes SF’s relation to the categories of time and change. Contemporary SF often voices oppositions between circularity and linearity with reference to time, and continuity versus cataclysm with reference to change. These ideas of an incompatibility between an individual and his/her place within the future and the contrariety between teleology and circularity will become much more important to my analysis of SF in subsequent chapters.

For the moment, however, it is important to note one final science fictional dichotomy. Contemporary SF can be included among the popular genres currently undergoing a structural shift in focus. According to genre theorist John G. Cawelti,

the erosion of the traditional institutions of community, family, and home which had organized the life of ordinary Americans for generations have reached such a point that many people increasingly reject the modern ideology of individualism . . . The isolated individual hero is no longer the archetypal mythical figure which he was in the Western and related genres (Cawelti 1994, 129-130).

Therefore, the scope of contemporary SF generally represents a shift away from the individualism championed in earlier incarnations of the genre, to the social, or communal. For example, a fundamental question asked by this cinema seems to be “how are *we* going to survive the coming era?” Narratives often focus on the fate of a community in “the future,” or on an individual’s efforts to secure “the future” for a community.

Apprehensions about the “arrival” of “the future” are made manifest in popular SF films which typically feature a crisis scenario in an either utopian or dystopian environment. Within these speculative settings, an exigency in one (or more) of their cultural spheres threatens to disrupt social harmony, or they are always-already polluted and must be redeemed by collective action. True to the form of many other genres, the protagonist(s) must take corrective measures to ensure the restoration of the social order and to cleanse the spaces of contaminating agents, but unlike other genres, such communal redemption is not always synchronous with personal redemption.

Thus, it is only fitting that films with such an emphasis on community also have an

equally broad and heterogeneous thematic scope. Because the cultural instrumentalities of SF have always been informed by numerous avenues of discursive authority, I would like to suggest that the genre's thematics are primarily influenced by three intersecting cultural spheres: *political*, *religious*, and *technological*. It is expedient to organize the following chapters according to the thematic concerns their narratives address. Each sphere corresponds to a particular narrative theme: in discussing the political sphere, I will focus on utopian and dystopian narratives; with the religious sphere, I will discuss apocalyptic narratives; and mechanistic or scientific narratives coincide with the technological sphere.

In Chapter One, I will provide an historical context for contemporary SF and hypothesize how its aesthetics are used to implant a sense of history. In particular, I will focus on a few influential progenitors of contemporary SF, including *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926), *Things to Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), and *Blade Runner*, in order to determine how their representations of the future anticipate present conditions and how such predictions actually determine the shape of history. What role does history play in SF? Why is earlier SF often preoccupied with memory's relation to the future? How have the SF protagonists of previous generations been able to produce change in their fictive worlds?

Moving on to focus on narrative rather than aesthetics, films preoccupied with the workings of insidious political structures will be explored in Chapter Two. Characterised by dystopian attitudes, conspiracies, paranoia, tyrannous autocracies and/or monolithic corporate oligarchies, these narratives invariably explore the measures of rigorous state

control and their efforts to quash their subjects' sense of autonomy. In films such as *1984* (Michael Radford, 1985), *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985) *12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995), and *The X-Files* (Rob Bowman, 1998) political systems have devolved into hopelessly reticular and impersonal bureaucracies or crushingly domineering and fascistic technocracies. Who has control over history in these films and how is it exerted? When is personal memory employed in opposition to public history? How are individuals able to secure agency in dystopian environments?

Religious concerns preoccupy a second branch of contemporary SF and will be discussed in Chapter Three. Apocalyptic in tone, they evoke eschatological biblical rhetoric either explicitly, or implicitly, with the onset of a potential global holocaust. Those that draw on biblical discourse explicitly include *Dogma* (Kevin Smith, 1999) and *End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999), while the "end of the world" narratives of *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) and *Last Night* (Don McKellar, 1998) are more secular in tone. Additionally, an opposition exists between the individualism of the action films and the more communal focus of the comic narratives. How is the end of history represented in these films? Where does the act of remembering lead characters at the end of the world? What are some of the different ways in which characters assert themselves in the midst of apocalypticism?

Chapter Four examines films whose narratives address a perceived increasing level of technological determinism. Included are depictions of future societies in which control over technology is tenuous or the relationship between man and machine is problematic or antagonistic. *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991), and *Johnny Mnemonic*

(Robert Longo, 1995) each take particular positions on an enforced adjustment to technological change. Humankind is forced into fight-or-flight scenarios in which failure means assimilation into the machine, or else the films work out a problematic of the cyborg as a site of liminality. Here, formerly stable and confining concepts of self are redefined.

Finally, the second half of Chapter Four analyses several millennial films whose concerns are ultimately ontological in nature and explore one's phenomenological "givenness" as redefined by new technologies. Such narratives address the growing indistinguishability between actual and virtual realities and the use of technology to test the very grounds of "being in the world." Characters in *Strange Days* (Katherine Bigelow, 1995) and *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) undergo the alienation of having their fundamental notions of being undermined, which results in a subsequent dramatic reevaluation of selfhood. But their radical self-actualization is ironic: they may only access it through the realization that reality is just as constructed and artificial as the digital landscapes of a VR simulator. What impact, then, do such new technologies have on one's sense of time and history? Can the digital memory of cybernetics be employed in the service of retrieving, preserving, and/or constructing actual memory? Does new technology allow for new conceptions of agency?

It should be noted that the three cultural spheres which comprise the thematic branches of contemporary SF are not mutually exclusive. Their discursive intersections are indicative of the extremely hybridized nature of the genre. All of the aforementioned cultural spheres are *interdependent*, and within each film multiple thematic concerns may be evoked.

Some themes may even take precedence over others. The *science* quotient in the science fiction films *End of Days* and *Dogma*, for example, is extremely minimal, while a preoccupation with the religious receives priority. Nevertheless, it is the nature of SF to welcome amalgamation, as evidenced by our working definition of the genre as a cinema which synthesizes the scientific with the mystical, and encourages such interdependence.

Contemporary SF, as we have seen, carries an enormous amount of extratextual weight. The workings of its thematics are determined by many intersecting discourses (three of which have been outlined above). These, in turn, are filtered, condensed, and finally mediated by a network of cultural apparatuses. For critics of the Frankfurt school, these are the workings of a “culture industry” devoted to maintaining a repressive society determined by exchange values. In milder, less deterministic terms, one might instead regard the reliance of interpretive communities on extratextual materials as the impossibility of free reading practices. Because viewing is not radically subjective, then, surrounding cultural discourses largely determine the ways in which audiences process these films. *Reciprocity* drives their workings. In other words, the social energies/anxieties of an audience, whether manufactured (or, more democratically, “mediated”) or not, determine both the existence, structures and success of contemporary SF as cultural product.

The chapters to come will determine how contemporary SF filmic texts engage with history and historicity. My ambition is to develop a consideration of the potential ways they can be read and to theorize the cultural instrumentalities of their thematic concerns. One of these instrumentalities involves the situation of “the future” as a moment in history. Drawing

again on Altman:

Whereas genres once served as a monument to real world configurations and concerns, today's genres have increasingly taken on what we might call a pseudo-memorial function. That is, they count on spectator memory to work their magic, but like the 'Organization' in an increasing number of futuristic and spy films, they themselves implant in spectators the necessary memories, in the form of other genre films (Altman 1999, 191).

If contemporary SF does perform a "pseudo memorial function," is it consequently able to assist the viewer in placing "the future" within the workings of history? The next chapter is a consideration of SF's ability to represent a future that both acknowledges the past and is relevant to one's present circumstances.

Chapter 1

Back to the Future: Historicism and SF Cinema

Futurity invades our here-and-now, erecting beachheads in our language, in our architecture, 'til at last we're under occupation, and tomorrow's coups depose the rule of history.

- Alan Moore

Past *fin de siècle* movements have typically been backward looking, and articulations of re-view herald the materialization of new epochs: summations of where we have been in relation to where we are going now. A similar preoccupation with history may characterise the 90's.¹ For example, observing this past decade's list of Academy Award winners for "Best Picture" yields an interesting fact in relation to popular representations of yesteryear.

Academy Awards for "Best Picture" (1990-1999)

1999 - <i>American Beauty</i> (Sam Mendes)	1994 - <i>Forrest Gump</i> (Robert Zemeckis)
1998 - <i>Shakespeare in Love</i> (John Madden)	1993 - <i>Schindler's List</i> (Steven Spielberg)
1997 - <i>Titanic</i> (James Cameron)	1992 - <i>Unforgiven</i> (Clint Eastwood)
1996 - <i>English Patient</i> (Anthony Minghella)	1991 - <i>Silence of the Lambs</i> (John Demme)
1995 - <i>Braveheart</i> (Mel Gibson)	1990 - <i>Dances with Wolves</i> (Kevin Costner)

Eight out of the ten films feature narratives which are situated at least forty years prior to our own historical moment. I include *Forrest Gump*, for its historiographic, metafictional representations of some of the more tumultuous events of late twentieth century American history, albeit through the eyes of the naive, waif-like central protagonist. While the film drew much criticism for its "dumbing down" of history and apolitical (perhaps even

¹ In Canada, witness Global television's many "Millennial Moment" advertisements - short documentary featurettes presenting "important" events in and figures of the 20th century.

retrogressive) representations of historical events, I am more interested in *Forrest Gump* for its place within this “pantheon” of “historical” films, or occasionally (and certainly in *Gump*’s case) films about “history” itself. Excepting *Silence of the Lambs*, the only anomaly in the group is *American Beauty*. Mendes’ film, however, may not be as much of an aberration as first appears. While each of the Oscar winners re-present historical events (the American Civil War, the Holocaust, the Battle of Sterling, World War II, the sinking of the Titanic) or are largely “about” historical periods (the settling of the American West, Elizabethan England), the history presented in *American Beauty* is private, rather than public. Scant moments before his murder in the film’s final, climactic scene, Lester Burnham experiences an epiphany of Joycean proportions, in which his entire personal history is reviewed, contextualized, and made blissfully concrete. In these moments, Lester is briefly transfigured, opening himself up to a deluge of history that no longer hurts, but heals.

One wonders, then, at the end of the twentieth century, if there is a similar collective “openness” to the past in North American culture. Vivian Sobchack puts forward the notion that

one might say we are in a moment marked by a peculiarly novel ‘readiness’ for history among the general population. That is, people seem to carry themselves with a certain reflexive phenomenological comportment toward their ‘immediate’ immersion in the present, self-consciously grasping their own objective posture with an eye to its imminent future possibilities for representation (and commodification) as the historical past (Sobchack 1996, 4).

Sobchack points to a culture that implicitly recognizes the possibility of any given moment to become “historical,” and subsequently, to be mediated, or made representable in a not-too-

distant future. The novels of Douglas Coupland, for example, are often concerned with the “speeding up” of history, a late twentieth century condition in which the present is experienced nostalgically almost immediately after it occurs. Hardly over, the 1990’s, for example, are already “retro.”

At the very least, this “readiness for history” certainly helps to explain the North American public appetite for “historical” films. What it does not explain, however, is *why* films that garner the acclaim of the Academy look so readily to the past, and furthermore, why science fiction films about the future are not similarly lauded. All considerations of generic hierarchies aside, the fact that most of the ‘90’s Oscar winning films are set in or are about the past is remarkable, especially considering that the 1990’s were supposed to be the decade afflicted by “millennial fever.” One might be tempted to regard the Academy’s retrophilic tendencies and omission of futuristic (or even contemporary) narratives as the symptoms of a general cultural fear or apprehension about the future. Perhaps these Oscar winning films were part of the past decade’s penchant for frantic, last-minute historical “reviews” before the supposed “end of history” itself.

I would like to discuss some of the cultural instrumentalities involved in constructing films that represent such an end. In this chapter, I will consider the purposes for which “the future” is represented in film. What is the function of representing a temporality that is “yet to be?” Moreover, how do representations of “the future” hail the past and speak to present conditions? Finally, what is the role of “futures past” in the production of today’s SF?

In tracing out the history (or, more concisely, the historicism) of “the future” in the

cinema, I would like to concentrate on films produced *before* 1985 whose thematic concerns and visual designs have significantly influenced contemporary visions of the future - specifically: *Metropolis*, *Things to Come*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Blade Runner*. Why is earlier SF often unconsciously preoccupied with memory's relation to the future? What role, then, does history play in SF? How have the SF protagonists of previous generations been able to exact change in their fictive worlds? By reviewing such films, and subsequently reconsidering contemporary SF representations, we may begin to recognize a tacit cultural project: the neo-modernist manufacturing of yesterday's tomorrow today.

Historicism and the SF Film

The functionality of historical narratives according to New Historicists Louis O. Mink and Hayden White prompts several questions in the theorizing of futurity's construction. For Mink, history is a form of *cognition*, not mimesis. Works of history actually *produce* rather than simply represent the "events" they describe. The project of historians is to organize the randomness of history into logical, cause and effect narratives in which (radically speaking) the past does not "exist" before it is legitimised by "history." In relation to Mink's conjecture, then, how do historical representations of the future (rather than the past) actively shape our present? Can the future be produced according to the same logics as the past? Moreover, if "the past has in its own right a narrative structure which is discovered rather than constructed," what about the future (Mink 1978, 148)? How are speculative narrative structures formulated and why?

Hayden White too sees history as a narrative project. For White, the past can only

be accessed either through its representations or, in other words, its various artifacts. As White indicates, “it seems as difficult to conceive of a treatment of *historical* reality that would not use fictional techniques in the representation of events as it is to conceive of a modernist fiction that did not in some way or at some level make claims about the nature and meaning of history” (White 1996, 21). History is essentially narrativized in order to make sense of its workings and, naturally, it functions differently according to its respective authoritative teller. Often, the social purpose of history is to construct culturally sanctioned narratives about the past that are *moralistic* in nature. Even the most objective histories are written as a way for a culture to come to terms with its past, especially those events that are horrific. What is at stake, then, in constructing narratives about the future? Is it a similar moralistic project? A way to assuage/create anxiety? Or, perhaps, is it to ensure that the future will eventually take a particular, preordained shape?

Naturally, the extent to which *fiction* generates *material* history is questionable. However, it is hard to discount the fact that many futuristic narratives do not just mediate their respective historical contexts, but are in some ways uncannily prophetic. Arguing that we are living in our ancestor’s vision of the future is deterministic and simpleminded, but ignoring certain coincidences is difficult. To misuse Walter Benjamin slightly, even he has suggested that “there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth” (Benjamin 1969, 256). However much one struggles with teleology, futures past must be credited in the production of not only cinematic representations of the near future, but of our contemporary millennial environment.

Thus, in combining the historicism of Mink and White with Kuhn's conception of cultural instrumentalities, I would like to trace out the path by which SF cinema implants a sense of history. Exceeding the codes of representationalism, SF cinema not only speaks about but also *produces* futurity's various cultural energies and material realizations. Assisted by the formal obsessions of past texts, "futuristic" film dreams a dusty vision of tomorrow into being. Sobchack's postmodern SF is a genre preoccupied with history. She follows Jameson who begins his treatise on postmodernism by explaining its aesthetic as

an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place. In that case, it either 'expresses' some deeper irrepressible historical impulse (in however distorted a fashion) or effectively 'represses' and diverts it . . . Postmodernism . . . may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications (Jameson 1992, ix).

Contemporary SF cinema, then, would be for Jameson a quintessentially postmodernist film genre as it is preoccupied by such "sheer enumeration of changes and modifications." History, especially historical "futures" are referenced and appropriated in their representations as a way of grounding or contextualizing (read: "making bearable") the acceleration of change.

In considering the historical production of the future in SF film, I would like to keep in mind the meanings such historicism may have for its audience. Kuhn claims that various social anxieties fuel the genre of SF and become manifest both in the films' subject matter and their aesthetics. This "repressive" cultural instrumentality of science fiction regards these "texts a[s] site[s] of repressions . . . place[s] where the unspoken and the unspeakable

are occulted by the outwardly observable. In this view, representations speak the repressions of culture, which by their very nature cannot be spoken directly; and texts become repositories of unconscious meanings” (Kuhn 1990, 91). Cultural and social trepidations fuel the obsessions of SF, with the great unknown of “the future” as their *bête noire*. These films are often quite literally about a general fear of the future.

However, I would like to radicalise Kuhn’s position by suggesting that filmic patterns of anxiety not only “speak” to “unconscious meanings,” but simultaneously reinforce social tensions and may lead to the actual *production* of “the future” that we currently (and paradoxically) experience. Before continuing, I should offer a qualification. The most widely recognized and influential of these films are not self-fulfilling prophecies. Science fiction only accelerates the progress of science proper to a very limited extent. And yet, the most unsettling of SF operates *reciprocally* in culture. So, in order to historicize “the future” as event and cultural product, its various cinematic representations should be evaluated not only according to the reflective codes of verisimilitude, but actual *generative* logics. By focussing on the impact of these logics, one can determine how the reception of films about the future influences subsequent cultural and social production.

In other words, I am interested in how films made before our contemporary millennial environment perform the future into existence. Representations of the future in film have a long history, traceable as far back as Méliès’ *Le voyage dans la lune* in 1902. With each subsequent film, noticeable patterns begin to emerge. Through repetition, these patterns gain power glacially. Infecting imagination, these representations inspire change, almost

imperceptibly, at the cultural level. Strangely and incrementally, old futurities begin to appear in the present. *Déjà vu* becomes an increasingly familiar condition. In an effort to understand the familiarity with which the future is greeted in cinema and popular culture, I would like to consider the ways in which previous texts have informed the production of futurity and how past temporalities generate contemporary SF.

Metropolis, for example, is a film about modernization and its alienating potential, in which history is continually invoked, but perhaps ultimately teaches nothing. With *Things to Come*, technological progress is all determining, and history exists only to be surmounted and conquered. Human evolution outstrips a reliance on technology in *2001*, in which history is teleological - a logical progression - with transcendence as its denouement. Finally, in *Blade Runner*, a cultural obsession with “progress” has led to ruin and the dissolution of the new. History in this film has been reduced to pastiche and simulacrum, the condition which Sobchack claims is represented by the SF films of 1977-1985. And it is the condition to which I hope to respond in later chapters.

Rage Against the Machine

One of the first great dystopian films, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* is, at first glance, an essay on the dehumanizing potential of modern industrial capitalism. However, a closer inspection of the film’s narrative and formal strategies reveals a position which typically demonstrates a singular horror of the machine itself, rather than of the ideologies which it serves. “Not simply a dystopian vision, *Metropolis* analyses the seductive lures that propel our technology and *impel* our embrace of it. But to examine those forces it must first lay

them open, array them for all to see, and so risk invoking the same seductive power it cautions against” (Telotte 1995, 70). The film argues that it is technology itself that is inherently seductive and that an exposition of technology’s inner workings does not reduce, but instead heightens its seductive powers. More important, however, are the roles played by history and the past in the film. Both are evoked repeatedly, but their lessons may ultimately go unheeded. The collective memory of Metropolis’ citizens seems defective, and the characters seem plagued by a social amnesia. Personal agency seems irrelevant in the film, since the authority of historical power remains firmly in place by the film’s end.

In *Metropolis*, machines consume everything, produce nothing, and infiltrate nearly every aspect of social life.² The film opens with a series of geometric patterns which dissect the screen, abstractedly announcing the incisions made in the socio-cultural order by the blade of modernity. A towering cityscape dominates the next shot, its skyscrapers standing as testaments to high modernism’s rage for order. Unlike the mise-en-scene in the SF that Sobchack discusses, there is no excess of scenography in *Metropolis*. The architecture’s geometric minimalism represents the angularities of late expressionism and the formal precision of the Bauhaus school of design. Meanwhile, the decor of the pleasure garden for the ruling class seems highly baroque (almost Art Deco) by comparison. Interestingly, the film’s only natural setting (the garden) is a simulacrum as it is artificially maintained and located “high above” the worker’s city, presumably on the top of a skyscraper. Freder’s

2 Indeed, their sole function seems to be the warding off of the natural world’s elements.

female companion wears a geometrically-shaped hat in this scene, standing in for the encroachment of the city's cold formalism into the "natural" environment.

During the montage of industrial machinery which follows the shots of the cityscapes, images of machinery are crosscut with shots of a clock. Time and progress are already introduced as the enemy. Automaton workers also move rhythmically like the pistons of the machines, forced into geometric patterns by technocratic power and the insistencies of the time clock. The workers have been mechanized by their surroundings and are unable to renounce their industrialized world. When the android Maria asks rhetorically, "Who are the slaves of the machines," the proletariat ironically demonstrate that they in fact still wear their technologized shackles by following her. And yet, rebellion ultimately means self-destruction, as the workers not only rely on the machines for their income, but for their very survival. Following the destruction of the machines and the flooding of the worker's city, the foreman rages at them, "Who told you to destroy the machines, you fools - and thus destroy yourselves?" The workers have become as cybernetic as Rotwang, the demented inventor, or for that matter, the android Maria.

Unfortunately, the workers have no control over their technologically determined lives. It is Fredersen - "the Master of Metropolis" - who manages the technopolis from an elevated and removed position in his skyscraper office. His gaze is everywhere in the city, able to penetrate to its depths via video screens and even the catacombs through his network of spies. With his gestures, he orchestrates his clerks like a symphony conductor, but with none of the passion. Freder, his son, implores him to look out over the city with a measure

of compassion, but in the subsequent dissolves of the cityscape, it appears he “sees” nothing but the magnificence of urban space and technological wonders over which he has absolute (disinterested) control. Later, the sinister eyes of Rotwang behind his probing/penetrating flashlight will recall Fredersen’s piercing technologized gaze, one that transfixes as much as it becomes transfixed.

As in much of SF, it is human *vision* that is claimed by technology and, correspondingly, “both in his images and in the implications of his scripts, the focus of Lang’s *mise en scène* is so often vision itself” (Bellour 1981, 28). For the vision of Metropolis’ ruling class is as much captured by technology’s spectacle as that of the working class. For the male elite, the female android acts as fetishized technology. Appropriately, the false Maria emerges onstage from behind a giant “eye,” the movements of her dance recalling the motion of the industrial machinery seen earlier. The closeups of the staring bourgeoisie and the extreme closeups of their superimposed eyes are followed by a medium closeup of a bedridden, bug-eyed Freder, who is psychically linked to their voyeurism through the editing. Maria’s simulation thrives on spectacle and the crowds are attracted by the allure of surface and two-dimensionality, presaging the inhabitants of a flattened, postmodern hyperspace who are enraptured by simulacrum. Their party in the Yoshiwara brothel reaches a premillennial pitch as they follow the android into the street to “watch the world go to the devil.”

Despite his mastery, even Fredersen is bedazzled by the city’s various technological displays. He is apparently sexually attracted to the android Maria and, later, as he sits in his

office, is mesmerized by the City Lights until they abruptly go out. Further mystification by (and of) technology occurs during the transformation sequence in which lightning and alchemy are used in the appropriation of Maria's image. This time, it is the viewer who is the intended audience for such spectacle and is invited to be hypnotized by the ostentation of scientific wonderment. Only Rotwang seems entirely at home with the technology in the film. Perhaps his comfort is due to the fact that he is the only character who is literally part machine himself, but more likely it is because his approach to science is that of arcana or mysticism, evidenced by the pentagram above his door.

Regardless of the film's preoccupation with vision, characters in *Metropolis* actually "see" very little. In essence, they become too transfixed by technology, even during (and perhaps because of) the process of its interrogation. For example, Freder "discovers a montage image for the inhumanity of his father's patriarchy at the same time that he cloaks this inhumanity with an inappropriate mythical parallel . . . Although clearly coded as signifying revelation, Freder's heightened cinematic vision actually hides the truth that it seeks to represent" (Biro 1994, 88). Visiting the workers' city for the first time, he sees in the machine the demon-god "Moloch," rather than his father, and the veil of smoke in the factory emphasizes the obfuscation of his "vision." Freder tries to prevent the dehumanizing march of time and progress seen in his visions, in which the (appropriately named) Pater Noster machine becomes a giant clock and he becomes its sacrificial Christ. However, "by simply associating the torture of work with the instrumentalization of time, Freder's image hides the human and economic interests which also contribute to industrial labour's

potentially enslaving character. Freder's mystical vision ultimately seems to work for - and not against - his father's 'panoptic' and authoritarian gaze" (Biro 1994, 90). In a similar instance of blinding "insight," the proletariat destroy the machinery which "oppresses" them, rather than attempt to expropriate power, or later, accept responsibility for their folly. They choose a suitable location for the flaming pyre they build for the android Maria - a pile of industrial wreckage crowned by a ruined automobile - and yet, the robot only laughs at their desire for further spectacle.

Further problems in the film are caused by the historical amnesia of Metropolis' citizens and their inability to escape from a perpetually recurring historical loop. *Metropolis* may be said to have something of a penchant for historical signification: "while its early images of pumping cylinders and towering skyscrapers evoke the machine aesthetics of the period, and particularly what has come to be known as the moderne style, that style never quite breaks free from what we might term a past consciousness" (Telotte 1996, 162). For example: the stadium where the privileged youth play "recalls the Olympic ideal of classical Greece"; the Moloch-machine "evokes the ancient Semitic world"; the tower of Babel "links the futuristic world to the fallen culture of Babylon"; and the Gothic cathedral and Rotwang's cottage "call up images of Medieval Europe" (Telotte, 1996, 162).

But although the film superficially invokes historical signifiers, it appears that the characters within the film learn nothing from history. Indeed, the workings of the narrative are essentially a repetition of the Babel scenario Maria delineates for the crowd. During the Babel sequence, towering crosses are positioned behind Maria as well as devotional candles,

apparently to lend credence and authority to her narrative. However, such authority is deflated as the hubris-driven High Priest of Babel occupies precisely the same position on screen as Maria in a subsequent shot, and draws a similar worshipping congregation. “Freder and Maria are thus united by the mysticism of the dialectical images they generate, and thus also in their ultimate paradoxical support of Fredersen’s rule” and, unfortunately, carry the workers along in their misguided (but well-intentioned) zeal (Biro 1994, 91). Even after a watery debacle destroys their homes, the workers still march up the cathedral stairs to support the Fredersens in the same synchronized and triangular position they formed during the film’s beginning.

Power dynamics remain the same by the end of *Metropolis*. While one struggles to read the film as a socialist text, its valorisation of “the Mediator” seems to argue that the exploitation of labourers can be lessened simply by hiring better management. Moreover, “human society, in Maria’s endlessly cycling world view, is represented as a constant state of struggle between two unequal and incomplete ‘halves’ - a struggle which periodically results in a terrifying cataclysm, followed by the recreation of the same unwilling and authoritarian social formation” (Biro 1994, 91). Babel is erected, falls, and is resurrected throughout history in a series of farcical episodes, while hierarchies of power remain unchallenged. Ultimately, history teaches nothing, amnesia eradicates collective memory, and personal agency serves only to reinforce the existing historic patriarchal power base.

The Fall and Rise of Everytown

In *Things to Come*, science and technology determine every facet of human existence and the teleology of progress is perpetuated, no matter what the cost. Within the brave new world of 2036, “the human practically vanishes or assumes a supervisory role as the technological pushes to the foreground, as machines set about accomplishing their great task” of producing the bigger, the better, the faster (Telotte 1998, 82). History is invoked as an obstacle to their labour that must be surmounted, while the past is treated as a period of primitivism which must be buried. And yet the construction of “the future” leads to the same conditions which brought ruin to previous civilizations. Collective memory is vital in the fictional city of Everytown, as their ruling class seeks to avoid the mistakes of the past. However, they willfully “forget” what runs contrary to their ideology of progress, and quite simply, individuals who attempt to forward counter-ideologies rejecting the perpetual forward thrust of scientific achievement are suppressed.

The film traces out three family histories through three generations. Throughout the representation of these lineages, dominant personality traits are apparently genetic, as they recur from generation to generation: the Cabals embrace adventuresome scientism; the Passworthys are characterised by their naivete; the Gordons seem to be rather acquiescent as they are the perpetual flunkies of the Cabals; while “Grandfather” plays the skeptic (he wonders if “all these new toys won’t be too much for them” in 1940, and in 2036 worries if “they’ll go too far”). Little screen time is spent developing the first generation characters and our alignment with them is almost immediately disrupted by the war. By following the progress of their ancestors instead, it is almost as if we are continually at a slight remove

from them - historically distanced from the first generation archetypes who begin the film.

Things to Come opens with picture postcard establishing shots of Everytown during Christmas, 1940. The name "Everytown" establishes white, middle class suburbia as a universal ideal, and along with the establishing shot, the town is always-already nostalgized. Everytown is really a kind of nowhere, hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world. Later, in 1970, Roxana remarks that she's "begun to forget that there *is* anything outside." Following the war, and the ruination of their white-picketed world, Everytown's citizens remain untouched by the technological developments that allow the formation of the *deus ex machina* of Cabal's United Airmen. Everytown's self-proclaimed Boss rails against the encroachment of "outside" spaces into their isolated inside. His protestations, "Curse these World Communications," might even be taken as denouncements of a prophesied globalization. But despite its subsequent re-modernization, the city still does not seem to be part of the network of Cabal's "new world order" and, even by 2036, Catherine Cabal and Morris Passworthy yearn to escape Everytown's hermetic utopia by rocket.

So, despite the film's valorisation of progress, history never really touches the city, or rather, the city experiences its own exclusive relationship with time as distinct from the outside world. A fitting inscription for Everytown's coat of arms would be "*Plus c'est change, plus c'est la même chose.*" Everytown is a universal, an ideal, a prewar utopia that has disappeared and whose simulation must be resurrected on film. "In our designs of what has not yet come into being, we typically evoke that which we have already 'lost' - or *believe* we have lost; as we move into the future, we recall, even 'yearn' for the past as a kind of

anchor, a point of stability from which we might cope with the distancing effects of rapid and dizzying change" (Telotte 1999, 150). *Things to Come* is one of the first SF films in which a retreat back into the womb of history cushions the violence of future shock.

Nonetheless, Everytown's nostalgia for origins is (like *Metropolis*) merely superficial. The position towards "progress" established by the narrative is, in fact, dualistic. Underlying its optimistic narrative is a counter-ideology that interrogates and criticizes the film's advocacy of unbridled scientific progress and Everytown's all-white world. The juxtaposition of headlines announcing war with blissful holiday merriment in the opening montage is the first example of such dualism. Other more unconscious ironies abound in the film, beginning with Cabal's question to his wife about the war: "What can *we* do?" His forthright aplomb is made ominous by the sudden backlighting of the Christmas tree in the following shot. Perhaps the future may not be as bright as he hopes and, indeed, his ancestor John is framed by bars during his proclamation to Roxana in 1970 that his new world order is "taking over." The future may in fact be imagined as a prison house, with the "Wings Over the World" as warden. "While ['the rule of the airmen'] marks the film's turn in a utopian direction, it is one that, for late 1930's Europe, must have sounded a disturbingly dictatorial note . . ." (Telotte, 1995: 80). Their "Gas of Peace" ironically recalls the first gas attacks on Everytown by unnamed enemy forces in 1940 and, for a post-World War Two audience John Cabal's uniform conjures up associations with the fascist's black shirt. His "brotherhood of efficiency" also demonstrate fascistic tendencies in their stand for "law and sanity," and above all in their burning desire to get the trains running on time once again.

Additionally, the montage sequence in which Everytown is rebuilt is meant to evoke awe at the Fordist efficiency and the Taylorist scientific management which the film's author H. G. Wells admires. At least, the suited worker who looks around in wonder at the machinery surrounding him during the sequence is impressed. However, the shots of industrial machinery at work (reminiscent of *Metropolis*) have an unintended parallel with an earlier combat montage sequence. Shots of rolling pneumatic drills are associated with their previous visual "rhymes" of rolling tanks. The figuring of progress as militarism is especially reinforced by the zealotry of Cabal who yearns for endless conquest. "All the universe or nothing," he exclaims, eyes burning, "Which shall it be?" *Things to Come* repeatedly demonstrates that his question is extremely rhetorical, and the irony of Cabal's position is that his logics - supported by the technocracy which governs the "utopian" society of 2036 - echo the policies and ideologies of previous generations whose territorial imperative leads to world war. Historical tyranny and expansionism is perpetual. Following the death of the Chief (who literally sounds his own death knell) in 1970, the camera significantly pans over to a sign which reads "Long Live the Chief!"

Evil Empire or no, the future of Everytown is assured by 2036, its splendour achieved (naturally) in the centenary of the film's release. According to Wells, the vast, unvarying whiteness of the future "must not seem contemporary" but rather be "constructed differently" (Frayling 1995, 50). However, one wonders how much the future imagined by *Things to Come* is representative of "difference," or if it is rather a nod to the past. A wartime montage sequence depicts technological regression, with the reappearance of covered wagons in 1960,

housing the future's "pioneers." The "wandering sickness" which kills half of the world's population is aligned with "the Black Death of the Middle Ages." In fact, the Everytown of 1970 is transformed into a medieval hamlet, complete with peasantry, livestock, royal proclamations, and a Boss who rides into town on horseback accompanied by banners and fanfare. And while the "difference" represented by the mise-en-scene of Everytown in 2036 now looks uncannily like the interior of today's super mall, the grandeur of the costuming and architecture seems to have been meant to evoke ancient Roman opulence. Roxana's dream of Mediterranean splendour in 1970 has been achieved. Lastly, the idea of a "space gun" (note the incessant militarism of the future) that launches the spacecraft at the moon is antiquated by 1936, but is probably retained as the filmmakers' nod to Jules Verne.

Wells' desire for "difference" may be introspective: "that difference involves a movement forward that is also a retreat within, an embrace of a thoroughly technologized world which also seems a bit simpler and perhaps warier of humanity's misuse of the technological in the past" (Telotte 1999, 155). However, it seems unlikely that the future will be any different than the past. On the one hand, the technocracy of Cabal's great-grandson Oswald is privileged over Theotocopulos' anti-teleological demagoguery in 2036, and the "space gun" becomes an instrument of exploration rather than a weapon used to secure power.³ On the other, with the rejection of Theotocopulos' counter-ideology (he is represented in the film as little more than a rabble-rousing Luddite, another degenerate,

3 Theotocopulos seems an archetypal figure in SF, presaging the anti-productivity bureaucrats in Ayn Rand's 1957 novel, *Atlas Shrugged*.

tribalist Boss), the utopia of Everytown 2036 continues to be disturbingly totalitarian.⁴ The film seems to deny that utopia “forms the concrete expression of a moment of possibility, which is however annihilated in the very process of being enunciated” (Bann, 1993: 1). To borrow slightly from Orwell, all utopias are equal, but upon realization, some utopias are more equal than others. *Things to Come*’s monolithic technocracy seems proof positive that utopia is destined to remain textual or virtual. The silencing of Theotocopulos is merely a virtual preview of the actual atrocities committed in decades to come in the name of enforced utopianism.

Everytown’s elite seem determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past. They attempt to erect demarcations between “now” and “then” that are just as immaculate as the divisions between the natural and synthetic environments depicted in the establishing shots of the newly restored town. A clear delineation between natural and synthetic space seems to be an obsessive condition of SF. We have already seen these boundaries in *Metropolis*, but they will also occur later in *2001*, as evidenced by the abrupt cut from prehistorical Africa to “posthistorical” outer space, and in the appearance of the green (almost hyperreal) hills of an Elysian Canada at the end of *Blade Runner*’s original release.

However, a similar quarantining of the past is impossible. History repeats itself in

4 The totalitarian subtext is even more prominent in Wells’ novel, in which Theotocopulos and his “anti-progress” followers are annihilated by the blast of the space gun’s engines in their efforts to dismantle the rocket. Oswald and Passworthy’s indifference to their slaughter would indicate that in Everytown, human progress is paramount, even at the expense of human life.

Things to Come with the dictatorial actions of the technocracy and the associations with ancient civilizations the “futuristic” mise-en-scene evokes. Even in the film’s form, a repeated use of dissolves in the montage sequences seamlessly compress the distance between temporalities. And while principal characters seem unable to avoid perpetuating cyclical history, the rest of Everytown’s citizens seem victimized by recurring time. The “wandering sickness” of 1966 is a dementia which destroys their sense of space and time, turning them into zombies who are unable to make sense of a world in which “nothing will make anyone comfortable anymore” according to Harding. Despite the assurance of the intertitles, the condition is never really cured, and the zombies are easily led by demagogues, pine for the simplicity of the “good old days,” and find no comfort in the futurity of their presentness.

Beyond Space, Beyond Time . . . The Superman

2001: A Space Odyssey represents the near-complete inverse of *Things to Come*. The film announces that “progress” means the abandonment of a reliance on rationality, scientism, and technology and that the ultimate aim of human teleology is the achievement of the mystical. Historical development is one of the film’s primary thematics, not in the form of a preoccupation with sociology, but with biology instead. It is a film about human evolution in which absolute transcendence is the intended end result. The idea of memory seems entirely absent from *2001*, as the future society represented is beyond a culture of forgetting. Even the concept of “forgetting” seems outmoded since there seems to be little sign of anything to remember. Lastly, a desire for absolute agency is utterly central to the

film, as the characters play out a subconscious need to “make history,” to affect time *without* the assistance of the technological, which is conceived of as flawed, inherently murderous, and emasculating. Whether or not such agency is realized is debatable, since the change to human history is unavoidably orchestrated *by* technology, albeit alien. Regardless of such potential compromise, the film is an exemplary representative of a text which seeks to map out a modality of “being in the world” that may live up to the potential challenges of an unborn millennium - one which transcends our current ontological capacities and means of constructing experience.

The film announces its evolutionary zeal immediately during the opening credits with a pan up from three heavenly bodies - the moon, earth, and sun - in a position of total syzygy. As the sun emerges as the high point in the frame, Richard Strauss’ “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” reaches its climax on the soundtrack. Strauss takes the title of his music from Nietzsche, and the filmic associations with the philosopher’s description of the *Übermensch* are particularly telling. *2001*’s narrative depicts the birth of such a superman, one possibly beyond the dichotomy of good and evil.

Following the credits is episode one, “The Dawn of Man,” in which gorgeous images of the African landscape at sunrise are composed along the horizontal axis, with the horizon line dominant. No mastery of this space is possible for early man yet. Prehistoric man is the victim of nature (later he will square off against the artificial), as one of the simians is killed by a leopard. Primitive territorial behaviour is evidenced by the invasion of a rival tribe (ancestors of Everytown’s Chief?) and violence seems to be part of the natural order. With

the appearance of the Monolith, Other is introduced into the natural homogeny, its sleekness of design in stark contrast to the rocky, organic environment. It is a vertical incision into a horizontal world. Even the sun is no longer positioned along the horizon line, but instead peeks over the top of the Monolith, while the camera now shoots up from ground level, heightening its Difference.

Apparently, the Monolith triggers evolutionary development, the first sign of which is the discovery of technology by a simian. Unsurprisingly, the first tool is a weapon - a bone club - and a brief associative montage supports the discovery by linking the primate's smashing of a skeleton with a felled anteater. Murder accompanies the first physical sign of "evolution," as the tribe begins to walk slightly upright compared to their rivals during their attack. Another associative cut reinforces the film's galactic Darwinism, as the trajectory of a bone being hurled into the air in victory is completed by the rotating axis of a space station which moves in a downward motion in the following shot. Violence and progress are thus linked in one smooth stroke. The "space waltz" that follows is "choreographed" to Johann Strauss' "The Blue Danube," and the geometrical, minimalist "ballet" of the space craft links the Space Age to the Romantic Age. However, the preceding associative cut reminds the viewer that the Stone Age is not necessarily as historically distant as subjects of the future would like to believe. The mechanized and impersonal future of 2001 is the natural and teleologically determined outcome of human evolution.

2001's incredibly austere mise-en-scene represents the pinnacle of human alienation. Here, there is a dominance of space over time, again presaging the postmodern SF of

Sobchack. The future in *2001* is characterized by a rage for absolute symmetry, the geometric perfection of circular structures, and nullifying monochromatic interiors.⁵ Unlike the SF Sobchack outlines, however, the random play of disorganized space is utterly taboo. In contemporary SF, “the visual complexity of the urban space . . . remains a function of the superbly synchronized special effects technology, thus providing that balance of order and disorder. *2001*, by contrast, offers a very different experience of *order* at all levels - a partial function, perhaps, of its theme of a controlling alien intelligence” (Bukatman 1993b, 134). Like *Metropolis* and *Things to Come*, the future of *2001* emphasises the sterility of order, and control over these spaces is maintained by a political oligarchy. The government in the film seems to comprise a small collective of officials, whose meeting space to discuss the Monolith on the moon’s surface bears an eerie resemblance to the infamous War Room from Kubrick’s earlier film, *Dr. Strangelove* (1963).

Kubrick reinforces their order of sterility through the use of an extremely monochromatic palette and often flat lighting (especially in the spaceship interiors), while a severe minimalism characterizes the performances of the small handful of actors. Indeed, the dialogue is extremely sparse, as if the characters are subconsciously too numbed by their technological surroundings to speak. In a long, static shot of the lobby meeting between Floyd, Schwizlow, Alena, and an unnamed woman, the characters communicate with

⁵ Witness the round doorways, the circular camera movements, the predominance of circular radar screens, the spherical shuttle to the moon, the giant dome in which the shuttle lands, the spinning red “eye” of HAL, and the giant “hamster wheel” around which Dave jogs.

banalities and almost no one moves. Later, one of the astronauts on Floyd's crew tells him unironically that his dry, colourless speech "should beef up morale a hell of a lot." Technological determinism has penetrated nearly every sphere of human existence, as evidenced by the hermeticism of the spaceship which acts as the exclusive locale for a full two thirds of the film, and within these spaces, social relations are radically minimized.

The result is an ahistorical condition of homogeny and indifference. Floyd and his crew nonchalantly discuss over lunch the fact that the Monolith on the moon was buried there more than four million years ago.⁶ The deaths of Kaminsky, Kimble, and Hunter are summarily depicted by the flatlining of their lifeline monitors. Dave responds to their execution (as well as Poole's) with the same emotionless reserve he demonstrates in his sketches of them, isolated by technology in their sleeping pods. It is, perhaps, no small coincidence that all the astronauts look the same, that there is as little difference between them as there is between the simians at the beginning of the film, or for that matter, between the four rectangular trays of differently coloured mush from which the astronauts eat. "From a conservative perspective, technology represents artifice as opposed to nature, the mechanical as opposed to the free, an equalizer as opposed to liberty, democratic levelling as opposed to hierarchy derived from individual superiority . . . It represents modernity, the triumph of radical change over traditional social institutions" (Ryan and Kellner 1990, 58). Technology is the great homogenizer in *2001* and it is little wonder that Floyd tells his

⁶ Interestingly, in 1997, a similar popular indifference greeted NASA's announcement of the discovery of prehistoric life on Mars.

daughter who wants a telephone for her birthday that “we have enough of those.”

History is almost entirely absent in *2001*, except that which escapes the collective unconscious. For example, one of the lunar astronauts’ first instinct is like the primates, to touch the Monolith. Additionally, the bone-like structure of the Jupiter Mission ship recalls the shape of the first primitive tool. Even HAL, the ship’s computer is allowed a re-connection with history, singing “Daisy” - a regressive “childhood” memory - as his electronic memory is disconnected.

In fact, HAL is the “character” whose death elicits the most empathy. Its logistic breakdown is unacceptable to Dave, whose character represents an even colder mechanical rationality. HAL’s error drives it “insane” as it cannot accept the fact of its own fallibility (“It can only be *human* error,” HAL stresses). While the computer is figured as the apex of Western preoccupations with progress, rationality, and materialism, the film argues that these preoccupations are no longer adequate for our future conditions and they, like HAL, must be disconnected before a new stage in human evolution can begin. The irony is that HAL may be just as “human” (or perhaps “inhuman”) as the rest of its shipmates. Dave and Frank obviously do not recognize the bonds they share with the computer and form a conspiracy against it and plot its “murder” rather than try to communicate. HAL’s lethal actions may therefore even be thought of as a form of self-preservation.

Following the disconnection of HAL’s memory, history repeats itself in the “Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite” episode. “The passage of humanoid to human is . . . recapitulated at the finale of *2001* by a passage from human to more-than-human, a new state of being that

clearly exists on a level of cosmic awareness denied the human subjects who are barely functional within the oppressive isolation of Kubrick's banal future" (Bukatman 1993b, 283). Dave's voyage through the star gate is represented as an onslaught of light and colour which are finally reintroduced into the antiseptic environment of the future. Abstract patterns of iridescences not only prefigure the "virtual spaces" of contemporary SF but remind us of the dominant trope of vision in SF. Dave's experience is depicted as a new way of seeing, evidenced by the repeated extreme closeups of his dilating pupil.

All sense of space and time becomes disrupted during this sequence, especially at the end, when Dave undergoes a strange metamorphosis in a cosmic suite decorated in the style of Louis XVI. Examples include Dave's appearance in his own point-of-view shot, sound that may or may not be diegetic, and the synchronicity of time in which Dave is somehow various ages simultaneously. His condition apparently precedes Jameson's conception of postmodern experience as the "series of pure and unrelated presents in time" remarked upon earlier. Thus, the next stage in evolution occurs when time itself is transcended. When all times are one, the distance of space means nothing and a transformed David Bowman - now the embryonic Star Child (who is every age and no age) - requires no time to travel from Jupiter to Earth at the film's conclusion. This new life form represents the end of historical "progress," of a Hegelian teleology, of evolution's forward thrust towards an imagined perfection. The "new beginning" represented in *2001* seems much more suited to the temperament of a Theotocopulos, rather than a Cabal.

Remembering Tomorrow

We now arrive at *Blade Runner*, the emblematic postmodern SF film for Sobchack, or more precisely, the film that is “elegantly poised at the precise point where the high-modern and the postmodern meet to diverge . . . On the one hand, its mise-en-scène valorizes space for its capacity to accumulate and conserve past experience as a future present of tangible ‘things.’ On the other, the narrative elegizes temporal memory, its invisible flow, its ephemerality, its lack of tangibility” (Sobchack 1987, 272). Roy Batty, an android in search of a soul, laments the evanescence of departing personal history before he dies: “All these moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.” However, like the replicants, both history and memory in the film are figured only as simulacrum and pastiche. Characters are “apparently lost to their familial pasts just as their postmodern civilization has collapsed all of human history into the homogenized pastiche of the present moment. As the marketplace in animal replication indicates, nostalgia pervades the Los Angeles of 2019” (Boozer 1991, 222).

Nonetheless, memory is ultimately a measure of selfhood in *Blade Runner*. When the legitimacy of personal history is called into question, such doubt undermines entire notions of “I am,” as the absence of an authentic “I was,” of a past, is a condition of simulation. For the memories of the replicants are manufactured, as artificial as the historical signifiers that comprise Los Angeles’ futuristic culture. In their efforts to secure a greater longevity, Roy’s group of replicants also struggle to find a kernel of personal authenticity. Their attempts to determine selfhood are like the modernist project of “conjoining the ephemeral and the fleeting with the eternal and the immutable” (Harvey 1990, 10).

Living in this condition of ephemerality proves taxing. In keeping with his preoccupation with simulacra, Baudrillard discusses the cultural acceleration mentioned earlier (in my reference to Jameson) and its results on our perception of both the past and present. "One might suppose that the acceleration of modernity, of technology, events and media, of all exchanges - economic, political and sexual - has propelled us to 'escape velocity,' with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history" (Baudrillard 1997, 250). How is it possible for the characters in *Blade Runner* to exist in a state of escape velocity? More importantly, how do they enact change to their circumstances? Ultimately, the film suggests that it is hubris to suggest that they (or we, for that matter) have such agency in the first place. "It's too bad she won't live," Gaff warns Deckard about Rachael, "but then again, who does?"

The rage for order in the future as depicted by previous films has already been remarked upon. By contrast, *Blade Runner*'s futuristic Los Angeles is chaotic and decaying, representing the threat of industrialization running unchecked and the collapse of modern urban planning. Beyond standing for testimonies to progress, by the time Scott imagines the Dantean Los Angeles of *Blade Runner*, these futuristic cities come to stand only as testimonies to themselves. Abandoning modernist architecture's attempt to "speak to the eternal . . . by freezing time and all its fleeting qualities" (an aesthetic visible in the structures of *Metropolis* and *Things to Come*), *Blade Runner*'s "postmodern" city foregrounds ephemerality and the temporal flux modernism tried so hard to contain (Harvey 1990, 21). Its buildings become monuments to a condition in which depth (including historical depth)

vanishes and only empty signifiers remain.

Interestingly, Scott Bukatman reads its spaces as *modernist* instead: “Its citation of earlier urban forms does not seem to be the ahistorical pastiche that defined postmodern architecture and art, but represents, rather, a more deeply historicised restatement of fundamental modernist ideas of the city” (Bukatman 1997, 60). *Blade Runner* represents the second of two kinds of modernism. The first represents the pinnacles of rationality and efficiency. Bukatman cites the International Style of Le Corbusier, whose designs for a “vertically oriented Paris” called for a burial of the past and the birth of a new architecture “based on the logic of the machine” as an example. The buildings of Metropolis and Everytown, with their vertical thrust, devotion to rigid geometry, and mechanistic grandeur are distinctly modelled after this style. Conversely, these cities can be disordered and heterogeneous, evoking another modernist experience of the city by Benjamin and Georg Simmel.⁷ Architecture exceeds its boundaries and spills everywhere in a tumult, inducing sensory overload. *Blade Runner*, with its sprawling urban ruin, inescapable electronic advertisements for Coca-Cola and Kyortoku Wakamoto, and its disordered melange of cultural signifiers best signifies such dizzying heterogeneity. Los Angeles has erupted into a rhizomatic megalopolis, crowded with ghosts. The city is “a polyvalent, interchangeable structure, the product of geographical displacements and condensations” (Bruno 1990, 186).

⁷ The latter in particular speaks exuberantly about the (sometimes overwhelming) sensory experience that only street-level congestion can provide in “The Metropolis and Mental Life.”

However, its “displacements and condensations” are not just geographic, but temporal as well. As part of its chaotic array of signs (it *is* L. A. after all), the city’s urban space also annexes historical signifiers. “The aesthetics, the clothes and hairstyles of the forties recall the time of the first atomic bomb, the moment of the loss of innocence for physics, and they prophesy a similar moment for biology. The nostalgia of *Blade Runner* looks backward to the Eden of pure science” (Kerman 1991, 2). This concept of appropriation is known as *retrofitting* and has become the dominant aesthetic motif of much of SF cinema since Ridley Scott’s film. Bukatman attributes the neologism to Syd Mead, the futurist designer responsible for the visual design of *Blade Runner*. Retrofitting is the upgrading of old machinery by the addition of new technology. Such cannibalization is visible in dozens of films in which junk takes on a second life, augmented by the wizardry of contemporaneous robotics. *Blade Runner*’s flying police cars, cyborg technologies, and even *faux*-forties street fashions are obvious examples.

Bukatman uses retrofitting as a metaphor for science fiction in general. It is a genre in which “*familiar* characteristics and narratives ground its extrapolations” and it also “combines speculation with an uncanny resistance to change” (Bukatman 1997, 52). SF’s tomorrow is never far away from the familiarity of a recent yesterday. A retrofitted visual design in SF establishes connections with a recognizable past, especially in the contemporary SF films which acknowledge their debt to past visions of the future. I would like to suggest that the establishment of a connection with the past is similar to the project of the historian as theorized by Hayden White. In writing history, White asserts, one must “emplot” past

events in such a way that their strangeness (caused by temporal distance) is rendered comprehensible. Or, in other words, the historian must “familiarize the unfamiliar” (White 1978, 49). In this way, the futurist, rather than the historian, designs a tomorrow that is recognizable so as not to disconnect it from the past and present. For postmodernists, *form* provides this linkage - an aesthetic that suggests *synchronic*, rather than diachronic time.

But although contemporary SF attempts to reconnect an alienated present to its past by couching representations of the future in familiar terms, postmodern historical performativity has problematised these re-connections. *Blade Runner* merely offers connections to *representations* of history. In 2019, as in the present,

the past has become a collection of photographic, filmic, or televisual images. We, like the replicants, are put in the position of reclaiming a history by means of its reproduction . . . It is, however, the instantiation of a new form of historicity. It is an eclectic one, a historical pastiche. Pastiche is ultimately a redemption of history, which implies desire. It retraces history, deconstructing its order, uniqueness, specificity, and diachrony (Bruno 1990, 193) .

By aspiring to create these futures that have never been, filmmakers ensure the aesthetic realisation of an *artificial* temporality. Our new “referential spheres” are designed according to the *fictions of previous generations*. Furthermore, by referencing the aesthetic signifiers of past films, filmmakers not only reify these signifiers from their original socio-historic context, but may perhaps prevent us from thinking about our own position within history in a useful way. In quoting and appropriating, filmmakers potentially inhibit the moral impulse which White believes is behind the construction of history. Although the application of White’s theories here may be somewhat essentialist (moral for whom? and where? and at

what time?), one might be tempted to treat such films as works which do not identify with the social system that grounds our “moral common sense.” Instead, contemporary SF that continually recycles the well-worn cyberpunk aesthetic pioneered by *Blade Runner* (itself a mishmash of old styles) is incompatible with the *doxa* of the late 1990’s.⁸

SF’s “nostalgized futurity” is evident in all four films discussed in this chapter but is most systematically applied in *Blade Runner*. The perpetuation of this condition worries several cultural critics who are concerned that SF films are products that hasten the construction of a cultural simulacrum and use the trappings of history to eliminate the appearance of new authenticity. Thus, history, as Joseph Natoli describes it, is run over again causing the future to become “wearied, redundant, bearing more of what has already been packaged than what is new and inconceivable. The future is already a re-presentation, a re-play” (Natoli 1998, 13). For pessimists like Jameson, Baudrillard, Natoli, and Sobchack, they perpetuate a retrogressive future which is caught within a self-referential loop where the shock of the new is cushioned by the aesthetics of the old, which is completely disconnected from a contemporary sense of reality.

And yet, as mentioned earlier, such critics ignore the *lived* experience of subjects (real or fictional) within the condition of simulated history. In *Blade Runner*, the replicants ostensibly seem ideal candidates for acclimatisation. They are living models of Baudrillard’s simulacrum: “an operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive

⁸ *Doxa* is what Pierre Bordieu identifies as the social consensus that is beyond or before the various discourses – like history or fiction – by which it is represented.

machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (Baudrillard 1983, 4). Replicants are able to blend into and negotiate the film’s ahistorical space, while Deckard cannot. The latter does not understand the hybridized “streetspeak” (or pretends not to), cannot even simply order the noodles he wants from a Japanese street vendor. Navigating/penetrating the crowded street seems difficult for him in his pursuit of Zhora, while she slips through the congestion with much greater ease. When compared to Roy, a creature of impulse and whimsy whose movements during the climactic chase sequence are erratic and instinctive, Deckard’s own heavily calculated movements are clumsy, inefficient. One might even characterize Deckard as a figure of antiquated, modernist rationality who is not able to assume the Nexus 6 replicants’ sense of postmodern *jouissance*.

Even in the “posthistorical” space of the future, however, subjects still need access to memory, to a personal past. Roy’s first line establishes that all the replicants want is “time enough” of their own. Their desire for memory is desire for a quality that separates the human from the animal, especially since as slaves to the future’s “real” subjects, they are associated with animals. Rachael is aligned with an owl. Roy is the hunting wolf. With her eye makeup, Pris resembles a racoon. Leon’s obtuse density is affiliated with a tortoise, the animal he does not recognize in Holden’s questionnaire. Zhora’s exotic dance includes a snake. The film also hints that Deckard may be a replicant by giving him a dream of a unicorn, a private vision to which Gaff seems privy.

Unfortunately, the replicants are denied the privileged status of authentic subjecthood

not only because of their manufactured bodies, but because of their memories as well. Rachael discovers that she is a replicant after Deckard explains to her that her past is artificial, that she has the implanted memories of her creator's niece. Nonetheless, the film insists that a simulated past is no more authentic (or inauthentic) than the "real." The faked photo of Rachael and her mother comes to life for a handful of frames while Deckard holds it, and the extra-diegetic noise of children playing is heard on the soundtrack. While the "activation" of the photo is an almost subliminal annunciation of photography's central paradox - the past is brought into the now, and yet not - such a seeming incongruity becomes even more problematic considering that both Rachael's photograph and memory are faked. Deckard's own mantelpiece is crowded with photos too old in style to be his family - a clue to his own potential status as a replicant and also indicative of his future culture's impulsive need to collect history.

On the one hand, the search for an authenticated personal self through photos is a potentially misguided project since "the surface of the photograph is viewed as the projection of something which lies 'behind' or 'beyond' the surface," a something which does not exist (Burgin 1982, 11). On the other hand, perhaps such a quest *is* possible, for the futurist technology in *Blade Runner* allows such a glimpse "'behind' or 'beyond' the surface" of representations when Deckard scans the interior of a photo for clues. The machine's deconstruction of the photo transforms a two-dimensional surface into a three-dimensional virtual space. If postmodernity's flatness of space is reinflated by technology for phenomenological exploration, then perhaps the flatness of virtual representations may also

be similarly probed for historical depth. Moreover, critics like Sobchack seem inattentive to the film's alignment with Linda Hutcheon's rhetorical query: "have we ever known the 'real' except through representations?" (Hutcheon 1988, 5). While the recurring violence to eyes in the film may be regarded as the triumph of sign and surface, one must remember that SF's representations are also about the restoration of historical vision to the collapsed time of the future.

For Sobchack, retrofitted futures with their historical "piracies" do violence to our ability to imagine the future. Like her, Baudrillard laments the elegiac tendencies of the bimillennium, with which contemporary SF seems complicit: "If we could escape this end-of-century moratorium . . . we would at least allow the events that have preceded us to retain their glory, character, meaning, and singularity" (Baudrillard 1997, 257). In doing so, however, he disregards the *purpose* behind historical review, behind a "nostalgized" future: that of making tomorrow bearable. If such piracy prevents the production of futuristic representations that are relevant to the circumstances of late 1990's North America, then the future of SF itself seems hopelessly Jamesonian:

[SF's] deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future, to body forth, through apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constitutively impoverished, the atrophy in our time of what Marcuse has called the *utopian imagination*, the imagination of otherness and radical difference: to succeed by failure, and to serve as unwitting and even unwilling vehicles for mediation, which, setting forth for the unknown, finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits (Jameson 1982, 153).

For the postmodern Jeremiah, the future is not the only casualty of the nostalgia machine. Continual retrofitting further distances us from a past which is made strange again by reifying the signifiers of SF cinema from their original contexts. Wonderful machines of the future imagined by previous generations just become so many empty signs - now signifying only as evidence of "a simpler time." Futures past become "quaint," "primitive," and finally, inscrutable, since our connection to them is lost. Under the reign of postmodernity, these historical artifacts are deadened. "Given the evaporation of any sense of historical continuity and memory," viewers too take on "the only role left for the historian": becoming "archeologists of the past, digging up its remnants . . . and assembling them, side by side in the museum of modern knowledge" where they atrophy and wither (Harvey 1990, 56-57).

Why should SF cinema be such a cinema of "absolute limits?" I do not take to the composition of such a negative portrait, since I continue to enjoy the films mentioned, and many others like them. To adhere to the position that filmmakers have simply given us old forms while simultaneously distancing us from our past is to give up faith in science fiction, and (to misuse David Harvey) is to yield to "the condition/s/ of postmodernity." The greatest mistake such critics make is that their readings occur without giving credence to *how* a retrofitted form is put to use *within the narrative*. To dismiss a retrofitted SF cinema out of hand is to ignore the ways in which it narratively activates its form (or the ways in which the *viewer* activates its form during the viewing process). One must always consider the narrative *functionality* of its aesthetic. What is needed, then, is a reinvestment in SF

narrativity, as a concentration on form and aesthetics alone does the films great injustice.

By paying attention to the lived experience of subjects within a retrofitted SF, one *can* find ways of reading SF cinema that are useful. There *are* methods of situating the future that are not bound up within retrogressive discourse. And finally, it *is* possible to construct a forward-looking genre that acknowledges its past without becoming its slave. While critical of its past, Sobchack shares a similar optimism for the future of SF. In trying to conceive of a new mode of representation for the genre, she looks to

one that does not regress to the past, does not nostalgize, and does not complacently accept the present as the only place to live. It does indeed imagine a future - but one contiguous with the present, in temporal and spatial relation to it. It is political and empowering and has a momentum not 'transfixed' by excess scenography or caught up in an overwhelming and paralysing material heterogeneity (Sobchack 1987, 305).

Sobchack is writing about SF films produced from 1977 to 1985. I believe that several films produced in the last fifteen years may better live up to her ideal of "postfuturism" and may even exceed her expectations. This chapter has reviewed the condition of historicity in SF films of the past. The following chapters will examine the genre's condition now, and where it is heading. Perhaps by critically reviewing its narrative operations within the next few chapters, we may even construct our own theoretical time machine (let's call it "revisionism") that will allow us to reclaim retrofitting's casualties from a new viewing perspective. *Time machine, go!*

NOTE TO USERS

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UMI'

Chapter 2

Big Brother is Watching You (Since Nothing Else is On): Utopias and Dystopias

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing.

- Oscar Wilde

The previous chapter addressed the opinion that the many futures represented by contemporary SF often do not seem especially relevant to our contemporary socio-political context. That is, their cultural instrumentalities seem to speak of an outmoded past, made present by referencing the aesthetics of an antique futurism. For critics of contemporary SF such as Joseph Natoli, representations of the future continue to falter: "It's as if the whole dystopic future waiting for us round this decade's bend, the whole new (chances are riot-filled, terrorist-laden, class riven, politically retrogressing) millennium that faces us can't come to the screen, can't even make it into popular film" (Natoli 1998, 301).

Despite Natoli's admonitions, there are several contemporary SF films which herald the arrival of such a future. Prominent among them are *1984*, *Brazil*, *12 Monkeys*, and *The X-Files*. Primarily, they are texts which attack the consensus, or crushing homogeneity of utopian ideologies and invite the viewer to read them as such. Each of these films deploys a dystopian imagination to critique political control over contemporary and historical reality. Moreover, they are significant filmic texts whose narratives address the position of the individual in relation to the State in the twilight of the twentieth century.

In *1984*, the eradication of the individual by the State is carried out by the terrorism

of perpetual historical revision. *Brazil*, on the other hand, is in many ways a reply to Orwell - an indictment of an individualism that results in escapism and a retreat from social realities. Gilliam shifts his focus slightly eleven years later with *12 Monkeys*, in which technocrats attempt to ensure control over history at the expense of individual subjects. The narrative of *The X-Files* voices a similar dystopian theme by proclaiming that world-changing historical truth is being withheld from the public by a conspiratorial oligarchy.

Interestingly, *The X-Files* announces the recent revival of a filmic trend evident throughout the history of SF which suggests that dystopian machinations are operating *now*, and furthermore, are almost utterly clandestine. Conspiracy narratives enjoyed a newfound popularity in the late 1990's, particularly films which postulated that power resides in the hands of invisible governments, or sinister corporate agencies who are answerable to no one.¹ The members of the Syndicate in *The X-Files* are "shadowy, nameless, and obscure . . . represent[ing] the invisible workings of ideology itself" (Hersey 1999, 113). At the same time, they also represent the evolution of the Orwellian officials who rewrite history - an oligarchy of white, middle-aged men - who continue to "remake the world" in order to secure their position of power. Through their coverups, lies, and doublespeak, they transform historical truth into convenient fictions. With erasure as their greatest tool, these men hold fast to the dictum announced in the epigram of 1984: "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." At its most advanced state of paranoia,

¹ Obvious examples include *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991) *Conspiracy Theory* (Richard Donner, 1997), and Chris Carter's second television project timely dubbed, *Millennium*.

conspiracy warns that history is subject to any number of alterations. “Trust no one,” is in fact one of *The X-Files*’ catch phrases.

Therefore, the questions this utopian/dystopian branch of contemporary SF asks are: how is history manipulated by those who make it and to what end? Specifically, how will history be constructed, edited, and revised to support the ideologies of those in power to perpetuate their maintenance of control in the future? Seeking answers to these questions is perhaps one of the means of constructing a radical skepticism with regards to the systems of power organizing and controlling a society’s “authoritative” history and/or historicity.

Brave New Worlds

To begin, we should briefly establish the connections between utopian and dystopian discourses and SF cinema. Utopian and dystopian “what ifs” are favourite recurring themes in science fiction whose narratives feature social systems which are identified as either 1) technological paradises managed by a beneficent elite or 2) a nightmarish regime presided over by fascistic powers who use technology systematically to quash the agency of its subjects. Particular manifestations of these fictional political systems are contingent on the period in which they are produced. Sometimes the ideologies they reflect are straightforward. I mentioned, as an example, H. G. Wells’ unambiguous self-adaptation of *Things to Come*, in which he demonstrates a rather obvious admiration of Fordist efficiency and Taylorist scientific management. Conversely, the ideologies reflected in texts may be multiple and conflicting. *Metropolis*’ problematic espousement of socialism, also mentioned in Chapter One, can be referenced here as another example. “Humanistic” or not, Adolph

Hitler's admiration for *Metropolis* certainly does not help in building a positive case for the film's utopianism, and even the "triumph of the scientific imagination" trumpeted by *Things to Come* did not prove popular among audiences upon its release.

The prevalence of dystopian filmic representations since the 1930's is not surprising. Attacks on utopianism "ha[ve] taken on a heightened urgency in the twentieth century, largely because of a presumed connection between utopian thought and the totalitarian regimes of this century" (Kumar 1993, 65). SF's particular predilection for dystopia may issue from any number of sources. One could credit a general suspicion of grand metanarratives following the atrocities of the Second World War. Additionally, Hollywood dystopias since the late sixties may also emulate a disillusionment with American nationalism following the Kennedy assassination and the Watergate scandal. More recently, many regard the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc as proof that communism was no more than a failed experiment, an improbable and idealistic utopian dream.

Theorizing *the* cause (or causes) of dystopia's filmic popularity remains a speculative enterprise. Suffice to say that no matter what their source, or what form they take, "all these dystopian themes suggest that we have lost confidence in the future, and can only imagine coming worlds in which we either lose control and things descend into chaos, or malevolent powers gain control over us without our consent or restraint" (Combs 1995, 76). Because these powers often mystify their operations, before we dissect them in detail with each specific text, we should take pause to gain a general understanding of their workings.

Utopian culture has an extremely long history. Its political and philosophical

underpinnings are quite varied, beginning most obviously with Plato's *Republic*. Plato postulates that the aspiration for the greatest of all possible worlds is born from a contrast between the individual and social needs. St. Augustine modifies Plato's idea substantially in his *City of God* (427), the next major utopian text, in which the interconnection of human ambition and divine love produces the utopian drive. Augustine's Christian pragmatism underlies the most well-known work of utopian political theory, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), which advocates a utilitarian state that privileges the common good. With *The New Atlantis* (1660) by Francis Bacon, however, a more secular focus appears in which humankind's technological mastery of nature is believed to be imminent. By the nineteenth century, utopianism finds its last two great proponents in Hegelian historicism and Marxist dialectical materialism.

The twentieth century is less kind to the utopian impulse implicitly championed by Hegel and Marx. Karl Popper in particular criticizes their belief in teleological principles of historical development. He argues that the predictions offered by utopians such as Hegel and Marx are not possible in systems such as history that are not "well-isolated, stationary, and recurrent" (Popper 1965, 339). Since the force of individualism is paramount to historical development, socio-historic progression can never be programmatic due to the sheer numeracy of potentialities enacted by human agents at any given moment.

A singular utopia, then, cannot be represented as a foregone conclusion. It cannot occur as the result of a logical, or determined system, driven either by a Hegelian *weltgeist* or by dialectical law. Utopia may not even be a space or a position at all, but instead a mode

of thinking. In drawing on More's initial idea of utopia as a "no-place," or a neutral space, Louis Marin identifies utopia as "a locus whose characteristics are semiotically negative, whose specificity consists in being neither the one nor the other, *neither* this edge *nor* the other . . ." (Marin 1993, 10). Utopia cannot be rigid; instead, it must be fluid and impermanent. In many ways, it shares a kinship with the Zen Buddhist idea of spirituality which intuits that once its workings are determined or institutionalised as religion, they disappear. Above all, the utopian text "serves to stimulate in its readers a desire for a better life and to motivate that desire toward action by conveying a sense that *the world is not fixed once and for all*" (Moylan 1986, 35 italics mine). Again, we have seen evidence in Chapter One of early SF films which often cling to the fixity of prior utopianisms. However, we have also seen how quickly a fixed conception of utopia degenerates into tyranny with *Metropolis*' cyclical representation of history and the repression of counter-ideology by a dominant scientism in *Things to Come*.

Regardless of means or methodology, the dominant utopian system achieves power through the thorough totalizing of the social makeup and the suppression of all alternative systems. The system's efforts take the form of either repression (fascism) or cooption (capitalism). However, the primary means by which the state apparatus maintains control of its totalistic environment is by acquiring sanction over the production of history, and occasionally, of material reality itself. I will turn now to an examination of SF films which are preoccupied with the manufacturing of a socio-historic reality by "utopian" state machinery.

Welcome to Room 101

Since Orwell's *1984* is perhaps the most prominent of dystopian urtexts, beginning with Michael Radford's adaptation seems logical. The film, like the novel, articulates a "humane belief in the individual, and records his destruction by the machine of the state with . . . compassion and horror" (Ellis 1992, 73). At the end of the narrative, Winston Smith, the central protagonist, is summarily destroyed by the fictional authoritarian state of Oceania as punishment for his futile assertion of individuality.

Big Brother, the Party's figurehead, carries out the eradication of individual agency by the terrorism of perpetual revision. Material reality is in a constant state of flux in Oceania. Newspeak implementation, for example, revises language and is continually being updated. A naive Winston asks Syme if "the revolution will be complete when the language is perfect," not realizing that the logical paradoxes of Newspeak will ensure that the language will *never* be perfect, and thus, the perpetual state of "revolution" will never cease. Linguistic revisions are enforced by the Party, especially in regards to individualism: for example, the rhetoric of the Anti-Sex League; the oxymoronic contradictions of "Freedom is slavery;" and the inaptly named Ministry of Love. In order for Oceania's subjects to process these contradictions, the Party continually rewrites history. Enemies of the state are arbitrarily identified during the daily propaganda of the "Two Minute Hates," and can even change at the Party's whim ("Oceania has *always* been at war with East Asia"). Winston himself has the job of revising the newspaper to conform with Party-dictated history. Political ideology ultimately dictates reality itself and the effects of constant revisions are

nullification, apathy, and indifference. Two plus two will equal whatever the Party dictates.

Oceania's highly mediated social reality makes these epistemological (and ontological) revisions possible. The penetration of state surveillance at every level eradicates concepts of privacy and "free" time. Oceania's hyper-mediation stands as an allegory for our own late twentieth century conditions, in which Fredric Jameson wonders "how there could be private things, let alone privacy, [when] almost everything around us is functionally inserted into larger institutional schemes and frameworks of all kinds, which nonetheless belong to *somebody* . . ." (Jameson 1992, 11). Big Brother's piercing gaze is reflected in the omnipresence of Oceanic television screens. Helicopters hover outside the window of Winston's flat. Ever-changing statistics from the Ministry of Plenty are perpetually delivered through loudspeakers in every workplace. The film announces the dominance of mediation from the very outset as the first images we see are of a screen in a theatre and the enraptured expressions of the audience. No "safe" places exist from state observation and even Winston's first tryst with Julia is followed by a dream of O'Brien leading him to Room 101.

At first, memory is established in opposition to state-controlled, mediated history. Charrington's antique shop initially acts as a haven for Winston, a reservoir where history is petrified, not unlike the globe of coral he purchases ("What is it?" asks Julia, to which Winston responds, "A little chunk of history they've forgotten to alter"). The warm, sepia tones of the room above the shop seem even more prominent during Winston and Julia's post-coital bliss and are a welcome change from the dominant blue-greys of the identical rows of cubicles where Winston works. Charrington's room generates the permanency and

familiarity of an old photograph, signifying history that is actual rather than alterable. Images are, in fact, never motionless in Oceania. Photographs are rarely seen, and those that do appear are altered by Winston's effacing adhesives.

Permanent history - that which could be described as "what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual and collective praxis" - is thus taboo in the world of *1984*, emphasised by Winston's decision to keep a diary - the first act triggering his larger rebellion (Jameson 1981, 35). His diary is a record of memory used to counter the arbitrariness of "official" Party history. But eventually, even memory is invaded by the state. O'Brien becomes present even at the death of Winston's mother, as he remembers her being chewed by rats. According to O'Brien, Winston suffers from a "defective memory," and during his torture of the hapless Smith, he seeks to rectify such a dangerous malady. Holding up the photos of Winston and Julia for Smith to see in the Ministry of Love, O'Brien denies the pictures' very existence, denies even that they exist in Winston's memory. As in *Blade Runner*, material evidence of "pastness" does not necessarily correspond to the veracity of an actual, experienced event.

Party victory over history is all-encompassing in *1984*, as past, present and future are controlled by Big Brother. Even myths of opposition or alternative ideologies are coopted. Charrington's shop turns out to be an elaborate trap to snare Winston and Julia. Goldstein's book, "The Principles of Collective Oligarchy" is revealed to have been written by O'Brien and, most tragically, Winston's recurring dream of the Golden Country for which he yearns is conflated with Room 101. The idyllic, pastoral dreamscape even becomes the setting

where he is finally persuaded to love Big Brother. No resistance is possible and *1984* is the year that can truly be regarded as the beginning of “the end of history.”

“Tomorrow Was Another Day . . .”

Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* is obviously heavily indebted to *1984*, but is extremely critical of Orwell’s valorization of the individual. Sam Lowry, the principal character, becomes caught up in a romantic and escapist dream world which inevitably leads to his destruction. The film is actually a post-romantic tragicomedy in which individual heroism at the expense of social responsibility is harshly condemned and is thus a progenitor of the social focus of SF films to come. In *Brazil*, unlike *1984*, history exists as pastiche, or simulacrum, and signifiers of the past act as repressive mechanisms. “History” destroys Sam in a sense, but he also participates in his own destruction by choosing his own dream world rather than the State’s. However, he is denied the status of a tragic hero since he shirks his responsibilities in the one dream world that is still able to grind human lives into nothingness.

The Brazilian state apparatus is an allegory for modern bureaucracy. Not even the simplest work can be performed without official sanction, as evidenced by the maligned “27B-6” form necessary for duct repair. “You can’t even make a move these days without a form,” complains Harry Tuttle, the air-conditioning anarchist. In Sam’s world, “the oppressive (but all too cozily familiar) system privileges signifiers that are consistent with themselves but don’t necessarily point clearly to a signified. The system, with all of its elaborate paper shuffling, narrates the lives of its citizens without regard to how those lives are actually lived” (Fister 1996, 291). Mr. Warren, for example, makes rapid-fire decisions

without even glancing at his underlings' papers. Kurtzmann, Sam's previous boss, is more concerned with the government refund cheque for Buttle's accidental death than he is with Buttle's meaningless death itself. "We'll never get rid of the damn thing now," he whines. The malignant ineffectualness of bureaucracy reaches its metaphorical peak with the paper assault on Tuttle near the film's end.

While several critics read the film as an allegorical critique of Thatcherism (with Ida Lowry standing in for domineering matriarchal authority), *Brazil*'s glaring absence of a centralized power figure makes such a correlation seem inappropriate. Dangerously close to our own political reality, it is "a world in which nobody is in charge" (Combs 1993, 18). *Brazil*'s political system is run by a system of buck-passing middlemen such as Kurtzmann ("If it's not our mistake, whose is it?") and Jack Lint ("We didn't get the wrong man. Information *Transit* got the wrong man"). There is certainly nothing centralized about "Central Services." In fact, what makes the workings of the system so insidious is not the invisibility of a centralized power, but the very visibility of its headless workings. The inside-outness of the omnipresent ducts acts as a metaphor for the exposed guts of governmental operations. It is significant that Sam insists on covering up the ducts in his apartment. Comfortable in his complacency, he does not care to understand how the system works. Jill vainly attempts to act as his social conscience by asking, "Doesn't it bother you the things you do at Information Retrieval?" Naturally, Sam only stammers by way of reply.

To make matters worse, *Brazil*'s political system seems to thrive on inefficiency: Spoor and Spiro destroy Sam's flat instead of fixing it; Lime boasts that "computers are

[his] *forté* but cannot even turn the machine on; Kurtzmann relies on Sam to run his office; Jill experiences the brunt of bureaucratic circularity at the Ministry of Information, where “The Truth Shall Make You Free”; The Department of Works claims that they “don’t make mistakes,” as their floor plug proves too big for the hole in the Buttle’s ceiling (“They’ve gone back to the metric system without telling us”). Worst of all, a literal bug in the machine results in the mistaken arrest and death of Archibald Buttle. Only those with wealth, influence, and no conscience (Jack and Ida) can move freely through the system.

In order to escape from the system’s convolutions, Sam constructs a dream world in which he is the hero, a reality in which he is an *agent* rather than an *actor*. Tuttle, with his ability to circumnavigate the paper traps of the system, acts as the idealized, real-life counterpart to Sam’s dream double. Because the “real” world is equally as surreal and absurd as that of Sam’s dreams, a renegade air-conditioning installer may achieve heroic status. And because the State produces a Debordian society in which the image is the fundamental unit of reality, the transitions between Sam’s dream world and the real world become more and more seamless.

Brazil’s society of the spectacle is a collage of twentieth century cultural and technological artifacts. Gilliam’s use of historical collage is critical in the Benjaminian sense, insofar as it opens cracks in a seamless understanding of the past, or causes an ontological shock in the way one experiences time by juxtaposing disparate historical

images.² But within the narrative, the retrofitted technology and aesthetics are just part of the strategy employed by the State (perhaps unconsciously) to confuse its subjects' sense of material reality. For,

despite its unspecific location 'somewhere in the 20th century,' the *mise-en-scène* presents a world which has not developed beyond the austere world of the early 1950's except in urban squalor, outmoded technological bureaucracy, authoritarian Fascism such as the SAS, and government torture chambers . . . Gilliam's film illustrates the dominant hold of old institutional ideas in terms of a visual society of the spectacle that seeks to fantasize and deny the real conditions of existence (Williams 1993, 214-215).

Examples proliferate in the text. The posters of Dietrich and Garbo in Sam's flat align his obsession with Jill with cinematic fantasy. In the restaurant scene, photographs of entrées inserted onto globs of unidentifiable paste stand in as simulacra of the food itself and an ornate screen is erected by Mrs. Lowry's table to hide the destruction of the terrorist bomb. Her pint-sized plastic surgeon convinces Mrs. Terrain that exposure to acid will make her face beautiful. Billboards alongside the highway advertise scenic getaways and also block out the blighted roadside landscape. Gilliam's liberal sprinkling of illusionism and the occasional *trompe l'oeil* extends the confusion beyond the screen to the audience itself. The giant face that suddenly looms over the sky-blue nuclear cooling towers to expose them as a model, or the "flying" house that turns out to be a false front being carried away on a crane are examples. Seldom, however, are the characters within the text privileged with our ability to process these manipulations after a perceptual double-take.

3 I am indebted to Laura Marks for this observation.

But occasionally, moments of imagistic rupture do occur in the lives of the characters. A subtle instance occurs when Sam visits the Buttle's dilapidated apartment building which is cheerily dubbed the "Shangrila Towers." The word "REALITY" is spray-painted on the wall outside - a testimony of the refusal of its inhabitants to whitewash the conditions of urban squalor. Remaining indifferent to the grossly unequal distribution of wealth, the government's attitude to the underprivileged can be best summed up by Helpmann's admonition to the terrorists: "If these people would just play the game, they'd get a lot more out of life."

Sam's refusal to "play the game" does not take the form of radical activism, but escapism instead. Dreams are used by Sam as a means to avoid responsibility. Mrs. Terrain is told, for example, that he cannot "do something" about the terrorists since "it's [his] lunch hour," and that "besides, it's not [his] department." His romantic pursuit of Jill, then, is self-aggrandizing and is conducted at the expense of making amends for the ruination of the Buttle family. He ignores Mrs. Buttle and the other innocent victims of the State as avidly in his dreams as in the real world.

Time and again, Sam shirks his social responsibility. Following the bombing in the shopping centre, he initially ignores the injured to find Jill and even takes on a security officer who menaces her. The officer becomes the Samurai warrior in his dream and Sam's victory over him is cut short by the administration of a brisk clubbing in reality. Even later, Sam ignores the truth of his dreams - that *he* in fact is the enemy. In discovering his own face hidden behind the Samurai mask, Sam refuses to accept his own culpability in the

system against which he believes he is revolting. It is no surprise when Jill tells him that he's "got no sense of reality."

The confusion caused by the intermixing of images is manifested in Sam's increased inability to distinguish between his dream world and that of the State's dream world. An eruption of skyscrapers into Sam's field of dreams, for example, precedes the fateful air-conditioning breakdown in his flat. As the blurring of real and dream worlds becomes even more pronounced, the effect is an increased logical lunacy and Pythonesque absurdity asserted in even the most horrific conditions. Witness the secretary's literal transcriptions of torture and the assault on the Ministry of Information; the hooded and straitjacketed man who repeatedly bumps off the wall in his blind effort to escape into the elevator; the carol singing security thugs; and the sleigh bells which do not herald the arrival of Santa, but the forced entry of the secret service. Absurdities mount in the final sequence, until they are exposed as Sam's own fabrications. As the faces of Lint and Helpmann intrude into the "closing" Elysian horizons (like the wino over the cooling towers), the union between dream worlds is finally, irrevocably shattered.

The State does not authorize the intermingling of dream worlds, but before Jack can begin his torturous administrations, Sam psychically "escapes" into his dream world permanently. While it is tempting to read the film's end as a triumph of the individual imagination ("He's gotten away from us, Jack"), the reduction of the central protagonist to the state of a lobotomized vegetable is a Pyrrhic victory at best. Furthermore, it is Sam's escapism that leads to Jill's execution as a "suspected terrorist" in the first place. He uses

her to live out his own heroic fantasies vicariously and it is his continued attentions to her that largely attract the suspicions of the Ministry of Information. Even then, in the end, Sam chooses to deny the reality of his own circumstances. He switches channels in his mind just as easily as he changes the radio station to listen to Ary Barroso's "Brazil," rather than pay attention to news about the latest terrorist bombing.

In 1984, individual agency is impossible as the mediation of the State controls both the means by which a subject perceives his/her reality and the means by which he/she positions him/herself in relation to history. History, in fact, is continually *erased*. By contrast, the State's processes of image-making *employs* historical signifiers to short-circuit an individual's sense of material reality in *Brazil*. For Sam, the only means by which to assert personal autonomy in this world is to retreat into personal fantasy. He evokes Barroso's "Brazil" as an atemporal Shangrila which material history cannot penetrate, a sheltering womb in which nothing develops but abnegation.

Simians, Scientists, and Simulacra

Gilliam constructs a dystopia of a different sort in 1996 with *12 Monkeys*, a time-travel film about the trauma of colliding temporalities. The dystopian manipulation of history becomes literalised in the narrative by a scientific elite's attempt to alter the course of time. Naturally, their motives for asserting control over history are most likely not altruistic. As in 1984 and *Brazil*, the focus is on the destruction of the individual by authoritarian powers. Here, once again, the attempt by those in power to manipulate history is carried out at the expense of the powerless. The already unstable psyche of their guinea

pig, James Cole, is ravaged by being subjected to multiple times.

Like a dystopian echo of *Things to Come*, a scientific oligarchy governs the post-apocalyptic future society of *12 Monkeys*. No evidence of higher government agencies is present; those with control over technology exert authority. *Brazil*'s labyrinthine bureaucracies have no place in this subterranean future world which is struggling to put itself back together. Power has become strictly centralized again, with the scientists acting out our worst millennial fears of the "hive-mind." With any trace of individual subjectivity absent, they speak communally - each picking up a sentence where their last colleague leaves off. Frighteningly, they alternate indiscriminately between moments of pseudo-benevolence and the utterance of bald threats. Cole's successful return from the past is a perfect example of their communal schizophrenia. When he does not comply with their agenda, their congratulatory "Blueberry Hill" serenade and the comfort of the teddy-bear blankie with which they cover James are both ruptured by the emergence of black-wearing thugs onto the scene.

Like Big Brother in *1984*, their reach extends everywhere. Adopting the efficiencies of capitalist processing in a post-capitalist environment, they catalogue their subjects by branding them with an ISBN bar code that may be scanned to retrieve personal history instantaneously. Instances of their authoritarianism are even mirrored in the past where/when James is sent. His detoxification following his topside expedition is paralleled by his hose-down before he enters the asylum. The multi-screen probe which interrogates/intimidates Cole finds its twentieth century parallel with the wall of TV screens that projects his and

Kathryn's image, in spite of their efforts to hide from the police. There is no respite "anywhen" for Cole. His oil painting reverie, for example, is exposed as a typical "Gilliamesque" *trompe l'oeil* by the intrusion of the scientists (like Lint and Helpmann piercing Sam's final dream). And even when Cole escapes to the past, Jose is sent to retrieve him and ensure that Cole fulfills his mission. Jeffery's own paranoid rants thus do not seem altogether unfounded. A mad prophet of sorts, he tells his fellow "Army of the 12 Monkeys" activists that psychiatrists have created a map of his mind with a "probability matrix" to determine what he will think "for the next ten years."

But whereas Jeffery is unhinged by the conditions of his own present, Cole becomes traumatized by history. Experiencing total paranoia after his time travel jaunts, he cannot make distinctions between what is real and what is not. His moments of paranoia are punctuated by the relentlessly circling camera and the extensive use of canted framing, especially when taunted by the disembodied voice of a (potentially) fellow time-traveller, Louie. The psychic ruination caused by the stress of time travel is also transferred onto the *mise-en-scene*. Debris is strewn everywhere in both the present and the future. Relics of the past litter the decrepit buildings Cole and Kathryn stumble into and are also scattered throughout the underground world of 2016. Inside/outside dichotomies become blurred in a world that is an extended asylum, cacophonous with white noise. Cole "escapes" the mental institution, only to find that the cartoon noises of the television that continually plays there are not exclusive to that environment. He eventually doubts his own sanity and even takes on a role-reversal with Kathryn later in the film when he tries to convince *her* that he

is crazy. Like Winston in *1984*, memory is one of his only anchors. His paradoxical remembrance of what will be the experience of his own unalterable death barely keeps him grounded, and the film itself is a trajectory leading up to that one fateful moment.

Although initially acting as Cole's foil, Kathryn too gradually becomes his anchor to sanity. It is on her image that the eyes of a young James focus at the beginning and the end of the film, emphasizing her centrality to the narrative's workings. Significantly, she is a sceptical millennialist, lecturing on eschatology following her career as a psychiatrist, and by being drawn into Cole's story, she ironically becomes a key figure in a very real global cataclysm.

One might also argue that Kathryn is to Cole what Julia signifies for Winston: the temporary freedom of personal happiness, but also the onset of the inevitable. Her role in Cole's personal narrative trajectory is particularly foregrounded during the film's "*Vertigo*" scenes. *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) carries a considerable amount of intertextual weight in *12 Monkeys* and is explicitly referenced when Cole and Kathryn hide out at an all-night Hitchcock film festival. Correlations become apparent soon afterward. Just as Scottie remakes Judy in Madeline's image in the former film, so is Kathryn transformed into the blonde woman from Cole's dream in the latter.³ Following Kathryn's "transformation," the melancholy theme from Bernard Herrmann's score escapes the diegesis of *Vertigo* and becomes part of *12 Monkeys*' extra-diegetic music, thus aurally concretizing the link between

³ It is also a strange coincidence that the actor playing the role of Kathryn is *Madeline* Stowe.

the films. Their linkage is not coincidental; thematically, both films are about inevitability, repetition, and the haunting of the present by the past (Scotty is haunted by Madeline and Cole by his childhood memory). In many ways, Cole is as much a living ghost from another time as Carlotta/Madeline/Judy. Significantly, the eerie redwood sequence is the scene from *Vertigo* that Cole watches.⁴ Speaking of his memories of the film, he tells Kathryn, “every time you see it, it’s different because you’re different.” His comment to Kathryn about his changing memories of *Vertigo* is simultaneously a comment on the phenomenological role of history on viewing practices. More importantly, it is a comment on the role of memory on history as well. But while one’s perception of a filmic narrative may change, the story’s outcome is always predetermined, just as Cole cannot alter his own fate despite his efforts to change history. As Madeline and Scotty walk amongst the majestic trees, one recalls that their scene revolves around the inescapable nature of history as well.

Furthermore, history may not be altered in *12 Monkeys* at all. At the film’s conclusion, the scientist “Jones” makes her appearance *after* the plague has been released in the Philadelphia airport, thus allowing for an extremely open-ended reading. “Jones” claims that she is “in insurance,” but for whom? The future of all humankind, or merely the ruling class? Having determined the source of the virus, why would she not appear earlier to prevent its release? Has she instead been sent to the past in order to apprehend the virus to secure power for the scientists in the future? The determinism of history is thus still

4 Oddly enough, this particular sequence in *Vertigo* also has a parallel in *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962), the film from which *12 Monkeys* is adapted.

maintained by those who can construct it according to their whims. In a condition in which time is mutable, Cole's death is completely arbitrary, the act of a martyr without agency. ¹² *Monkeys* speaks of a dystopia in which those without authority over history fall victim to its tyrants.

I Want to Believe

However much of an allegory they may be for contemporary events, most SF films construct dystopias occurring in a far-removed future. What makes *The X-Files* a particularly audacious film compared to others is its explicit proclamation that we are unknowingly living in a state of dystopia now - specifically, that clandestine agencies are preventing "the truth" from getting "out there." These same agencies are constructing and enforcing false narratives that take on a truth-value, to the detriment of the public. Charles Taylor attempts to explain the popularity of the television series that made possible a feature-length film release: "What links up the show to the Zeitgeist is that Mulder and Scully are working to get out from under the most enduring legacy of the Reagan/Bush era: the way the government, in the words of the Situationist philosopher Guy Debord, '[proclaims] that whatever is said was all there was'" (Taylor 1994, 1-2). Tapping into a broad, late twentieth-century cultural anxiety, the protagonists of *The X-Files* have formulated a constructive paranoia as a means of resistance to "official" histories. In striving to expose an international conspiracy whose ambitions may end in genocide, the two agents attempt to "fight the future."

In Patricia Pisters' words, "FBI agents Mulder and Scully always operate in a field

of forces that they are unable to control. They also operate between an enormous suspicion about everything and everybody . . . and a belief in the world” (Pisters 1998, 83). Or in other words, the dystopian paranoia that *The X-Files* invokes is an attempt to bridge the gap between modern and postmodern discourse (just as *Blade Runner* is positioned on the boundary between the two discourses for Sobchack). On the one hand, Mulder and Scully are postmodern agents who question *everything* in the course of their investigations and are instructed to “trust no one,” while on the other, they are driven to uncover “the truth” - the grandest of all metanarratives. And while the film’s paranoia is produced by a cultural bricolage of 1950’s Cold War SF, 1960’s police procedurals, 1970’s post-Watergate conspiracy films (à la Alan Pakula), and 1990’s Hot Zone narratives, it is also one birthed by a desperate modernist need to find a centre that will hold. Mulder’s search for his sister Samantha, who disappeared in 1973, represents a search for that centre. “Just what was lost in 1973 is a question that looms over [*The X-Files*], a question Mulder seems ‘chosen’ to answer by his particular attachment to history . . . If there is a ghost animating the machinery of *The X-Files*, it is most likely Richard Nixon, the icon of paranoia whose career virtually defined the golden age of American conspiracy theory” (Graham 1996, 58). While the spirit of Tricky Dick seems to haunt the film’s reliance on the traditional semantics of conspiracy narratives - government moles, coverups, back-alley meetings, bad suits - his spectre is also present in the more contemporary signifiers.⁵ *The X-Files* is also a world of unmarked

6 Even Martin Landau, a familiar face from the granddaddy of all conspiracy films, *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959) is well used here as the informant Kurtzweil.

helicopters, tanker trucks which haul viruses, and “secret governments” such as the Federal Emergency Medical Agency (a sinister, Cronenbergian medical institution).

The agents’ constructive paranoia serves an important narrative purpose as well. What makes Mulder and Scully dangerous to the Syndicate is that their status as FBI agents lends a potential legitimacy to their paranoia. Unlike the Lone Gunmen, the self-dubbed government watchdog group whose paranoia has no credence due to their marginalised status outside official discourse, the agents’ conspiracy theories are supported by the weight of their “authenticated” positions within the Bureau. Thus protected, they “develop complex and useful structural conspiracies that together work toward dialogical productiveness - unlike the larger conspiracy of the secret government which . . . does not promote thought or free inquiry but seeks to control the mind and denies the possibility that choice and dialogism can exist” (Wildermuth 1999, 152). Mulder in particular is a potent weapon, as he applies unorthodox means of investigation as a tool against the systematic and invisible workings of the conspiracy. But despite their privileged position within the FBI, both agents experience the continual frustration of what is regarded as the implausibility of their work’s truth-value. Or, as Mulder remarks, “They won’t believe you unless your story can be programmed, categorized, or easily referenced.”

Furthermore, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to combat an unseen enemy. Since the agents never come into contact with their nemeses (unlike most SF), they are essentially opposing the non-corporeal machinery of their ideology itself, and a particularly ruthless manifestation at that, which the Well-Manicured Man dubs, “Survival.” In keeping with the

tradition of its dystopian predecessors, *The X-Files* features the employment of constant governmental surveillance, only this time observation is as invisible as the authorities who do the watching. Syndicate countermeasures materialize and vanish in the form of mute agents, plateless limos, and bugged phones. Their means of execution are administered by remote control: after two bombings, even a mere phone call from Cancer Man can signal disaster (as when the Well-Manicured Man's grandson coincidentally breaks his leg at the same time Cancer Man informs his colleague of the Syndicate's next meeting).

In accordance with their talents for obfuscation, the Syndicate maintains corresponding strategies of hiding in plain sight, followed by disappearance. Examples of the former are the Texas dig site, the corn fields and huge domes in the middle of the desert, and the spacecraft buried in Wilke's Land, Antarctica. Just as easily as they erect these structures, do they make things disappear, such as causing Kurtzweil to "vanish," the erasure of the Texas dig site by the erection of a playground, and the destruction of evidence that occurs at the same time as the suppression of Scully's report. Only inscrutable traces of their workings remain, like the pieces of paper wafting from the exploded building in Dallas. Credible deniability and coverups become policy and narratives are constructed by authority figures (always some unnamed "They") whose official status obscures truth. The workings of the Syndicate are even replicated in miniature by the FBI, whose directors attempt to author a narrative of blame after the failed attempt to avert the Dallas bombing. Mulder remarks bitterly on such fabrications near the end of the film after reading the government press release about the Texas debacle: "There's an interesting work of fiction on page

twelve.”

It would seem futile to “fight the future” of *The X-Files*’ dystopia. “Since an invisible shadow government controls everything from baseball to the media to our national destiny, real paranoia (much less political action) would be beside the point” (McLean 1998, 9). However, the film is realistic about its anti-hegemonic aspirations. While the agents’ efforts to expose the conspiracy progresses only incrementally, the narrative thrust of *The X-Files* is one of optimism. Unlike *1984*, *Brazil*, *12 Monkeys*, and other dystopian texts, it does not rely on the failed agency of the individual. Strughold, the Syndicate’s Chairman, is correct in asserting that “one man alone cannot fight the future.” But with the official reopening of the X-files by the FBI at the film’s end, it becomes clear that Mulder and Scully are working within a *network* of counter-cultural forces which, however marginal, is beginning to expand exponentially.

Furthermore, their pursuit of an idealized and elusive “truth” is utopian, in that achieving their grail would mean the end of the authority of the government’s illegitimate narratives, of “official” history. Films such as *The X-Files* suggest that “there is indeed an opportunity, as well as a need, for the ‘rebirth of history’ . . . But we must understand this not as the resumption of the sway of the past, but as the invention of something new, a rebirth that is also a renewal of history” (Kumar 1993, 80). In other words, there is a need for a radical historical skepticism, in which subjects are empowered to question the narratives which, we are told authoritatively, are “all that is.” Or, in the case of *The X-Files*, “all that was.” The questioning of “authenticated,” official historical narratives does not licence the

the indiscriminate re-visioning of history; instead, pursuing utopia perhaps means a radical skepticism of authoritative metanarratives and the refusal to accept any state (or State) as a point of ultimate stasis.

Chapter 3

Apocalypse When? : SF and the End(s) of the World

"The world is always ending for someone."

- Neil Gaiman

In the previous chapter, I added my own voice to the growing number of cultural theorists who call for a reevaluation of utopia. To avoid the burdens of totalitarianism, the utopian ideal must be one which recognizes multiplicity, diversity, even liminality. This conception of utopia has affinities with Michel Foucault's idea of *heterotopia*, a state in which a single authoritative source no longer dictates the Real and the True. The cultural instrumentality of the utopian/dystopian thematic of SF is in its challenge to audiences to question those narratives of control, the authorities who construct them, and their purposes for establishing them in the first place. However fantastical its subject matter, the political purpose of the critical dystopian film is to challenge both homogeny and hegemony. At the same time, its efforts must be *communal* rather than individualistic to correspond to the heterogeneity of the ideal future.

The spirit of the communal is carried over to the more progressive of SF films concerning the end of the world. As indicated earlier in the introduction, the central question contemporary SF asks is "how are *we* going to survive the coming era?" Contemporary SF's implicit communal anxieties often echo (and occasionally inform) the anxieties that are explicitly articulated by millenarian groups, which Michael Barkun defines as "those which expect change that is *collective*, this worldly, imminent, total, and supernatural" (Barkun

1996, 4 italics mine). Unfortunately (for most), this “change” is perceived by millenarian groups to be concomitant with the termination of the world’s existence. Another prominent cultural instrumentality of SF, then, is in the way it situates its audience in relation to a perceived imminent epochal change, and the end of time itself. Its treatment of the metaphorical end of history has already been discussed. This chapter is about its representations of history’s *literal* end and the various meanings it may have for viewers.

The cultural instrumentalities of apocalyptic representations are intended to provide viewers with a means of *seeing*. Representations of global cataclysm act as a means of visualizing the end in order to make the abstraction of total annihilation concrete.¹ Seeing also extends to the visionary, as these films attempt to synthesize the privilege of knowledge that only becomes available at a narrative’s end. With the apocalypse, the end is obviously not textual, but the *denouement* of the grand narrative of civilization itself. Apocalypse not only signifies destruction; its literal translation from the Greek is “unveiling.” Thus, the “two senses of the apocalypse - as cataclysm and as revelation - share a common movement toward a perception of the primal, toward immediacy, the unitary unmodified event, the absolute resolution. This is the urge to purify and unveil the world to its final transparent nakedness . . .” (Berger 1999, 38). Evidence of a contemporary cultural narcissism was prominent with the excitement around the recent bimillennium: that we should be present

¹ In the same way as the specular function of the Holocaust’s realist representations serve to make tangible the almost unimaginable horror of the event itself which the objective accounts and statistics of historians cannot always articulate.

as/at the end of progress, of evolution, of teleology. Even greater narcissism is present in some accompanying SF texts that suggest the final “purification” and “unveiling” may be prevented.

Each of the four films discussed in this chapter is about the literal end of the world and the accompanying linkage of destruction with vision. *End of Days* and *Dogma* rely on Biblical rhetoric for their evocations of the Apocalypse, while the global disasters of *Armageddon* and *Last Night* are more secular in nature.² Further distinctions can be made between the films’ structures in the following chart.

Structural Differences in Apocalyptic Films

<i>End of Days / Armageddon</i>	<i>Dogma / Last Night</i>
action	comedy
preventive narrative	introspective narrative
spectacle / immersion	narrative / distance
individualism	communal activity
Christology / Puritanism	agnosticism / Unitarianism

As indicated on the chart, the films discussed in this chapter can be broken down into two categories: the Hollywood apocalyptic and the “alternative” apocalyptic. *End of Days* and *Armageddon* both belong to the former category. Both are big-budget action films with an

² However, an explicit religiosity is occasionally evident in *Armageddon*’s narrative structure, which will be discussed later.

emphasis on spectacle, or to be more precise, their approach to representing the end of the world is *experiential*, immersing the viewer within the diegesis completely. Their narratives are obviously action-driven, in which the oncoming apocalypse is avoidable, and is indeed prevented by the actions of an individual hero who must sacrifice himself for the greater good, thereby invoking the Christian myths of martyrdom and redemption.

Conversely, *Dogma* and *Last Night* belong to the category of alternative apocalypses. Because the catastrophes they represent are either inevitable, or the prevention of the apocalypse is of secondary interest, these narratives are appropriately dialogue-driven, rather than action-driven, and demonstrate a comic irreverence towards a normally sombre subject matter. Their emphasis is on the interaction of characters during an experience of crisis and, therefore, viewers observe their narratives from a certain critical distance, rather than from the firsthand immersion of their Hollywood contemporaries. The absence of a *single* protagonist and a focus on the relationships between characters allows for the communal emphasis of SF cinema. Finally, although their focus is on social or on collective activity, they stress an *individual* approach to spirituality.³ This is not to argue that they promote a radical subjectivism in regards to religiosity; rather, they champion a personal philosophy which reestablishes and revitalizes - rather than excludes - contact with the social.

While these films are different in both structure and focus, what unites all four is the characters' commitment to history, especially *personal* history. Although faced with the

3 Although, *Last Night* is much more agnostic than *Dogma* in its representation of contemporary spirituality.

imminent end of history itself, protagonists must either come to terms with the trauma of memory, and thus be reconnected to the social world from which they have withdrawn, or realign their present in relation to a past from which they have been disconnected. For some, memory leads to agency, providing the impetus for them to attempt the prevention of time's end, while for others, it is only by means of exorcising the past that they peacefully resign themselves to a private apocalypse. It is only by "letting go" of history that these characters can conceptualize their (absence of a) future and, strangely enough, this release of history's ghosts allows a glimpse of the eternal.

The dichotomous category of the apocalyptic SF film therefore speaks to the binary compound that is apocalypticism. Too often, popular references to the event focus on its destructive, or negative side without considering the revelatory capacities of its opposite. But what exactly is the apocalypticism of the late twentieth century and how is it taken up by popular culture? Before examining how each film articulates the dichotomy of the apocalyptic, it is first necessary to elaborate on the cultural and textual phenomenon that informs my object of study.

Waiting for the End of the World

What is most compelling about the potentiality of time's end is its ability to provide both closure and context for the narrative of human progress. At the end of time, we might presumably wish to avoid nihilistic philosophies conceiving of a grand world narrative (or narratives) as "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." After all, any reader theorist or narratologist would attest to a fundamental principle of narrative: that

by the end, a reader will presumably be privileged with some new knowledge, or at least be able to forward a position on the text's meaning. Can the world not similarly be conceived as a "text" that may be "read," with the apocalypse as its inevitable, yet illuminating "conclusion?"

Consider the following definition of apocalyptic rhetoric: "Apocalyptic is that discourse that restores order through structures of time or history by revealing the present to be a pivotal moment in time, a moment in which history is reaching a state that will both reveal and fulfill the underlying order and purpose in history" (Brummett 1991, 9-10). An apocalyptic present is akin to that privileged moment in the text - the climax - in which all the elements which have gone before are infused with the new energy of comprehension. Conclusion is what makes all of the confusions and uncertainties of a narrative's earlier workings bearable and understandable.⁴ In fact, the major apocalyptic text of the Bible is also its last book, and is appropriately entitled "Revelations." Its title does not just speak of the visions which were apparently revealed to John of Patmos in 96 AD by "one unto like the son of God" (Rev. 1:13), but for the *insight* that God allows the faithful - "those only written in the book of life of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:27) - at the end of time.

Revelations is the starting point for most Western apocalypticism and is certainly the text most often borrowed from in films about the Apocalypse. Recent examples include *The*

4 Many narratologists have commented on the structural connections between works of *history* and works of *mystery*. The historian and the detective are also both "authorial" figures who perform similar functions: to make sense of events; to answer how; to speculate why.

Seventh Sign (Carl Schultz, 1988), *The Prophecy* trilogy (Gregory Widen, 1996, Greg Spence, 1998, and Patrick Lussier, 1999), *The Book of Life* (Hal Hartley, 1998), and *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainwright, 1999). According to Christian scripture, the end of the world occurs after a series of supernatural events, including: heavenly-induced plagues; a period of Satanic triumph; the Parousia (Christ's "second coming" which ushers in his subsequent thousand year reign); the battle of Har-Megiddo (or Armageddon) between the Messiah and the Antichrist; and a final judgement by God. Following these events, "the first heaven and the first earth passe[s] away" (Rev. 21:1) and a new heavenly city appears where "death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, no pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

The Bible's last epistle has long occupied a precarious position within mainstream Christian tradition, undergoing periods of popularity and decline since its inclusion in the standard King James text. One of its major problems is the canonical status of its foreordination. "Determinism, the view that all events are somehow inevitable, let alone predestined, is incompatible with the Christian doctrines of autonomy and free will" and yet the faithful are expected to be prepared for the inevitable end times though they know not the hour or the day (Weber 1999, 35). While the promise of knowledge at the end of a narrative is attractive, the inevitability of teleology is at odds with the malleability of destiny that freedom of choice allows.

But why should this end coincide with "the Year 2000" in particular? Daniel Wojcik forwards a hypothesis: "The prospect of triple zeros may . . . suggest complete nullification.

The endings of centuries have been viewed by many as critical junctures, weird liminal times that are betwixt and between, periods of danger and transition” (Wojcik 1997, 212). In this syncretic liminality of millennialism, discursive boundaries overlap one another, resulting in what has been described as *eclectic millenarianism* (Barkun 1996, 8). Such eclecticism comes across in SF films which may borrow from the Bible, but whose structures do not establish its centrality. *Dogma* features several irreverent reinterpretations of Scripture, and although the Bible is the primary text referenced in the film, it is also one text referenced among many. *Armageddon* borrows its title from Revelations, but its implicit Christology is linked to the generic traditions of SF and action films. At the most extreme, Christian apocalypticism is almost entirely absent in *Last Night*.

The hybridized apocalypticism which accompanies the bimillennium is not just about endings, but *transformation*. Oblivion is not meant to follow the end of the world, but a transition from an old order (singularity) to something new (multiplicity). This condition of “newness” (or “heterotopia,” if you will) is also a renewal of history and of a subject’s experience of time. If the Second World War’s postmodern apocalypticism has ended the master narratives structuring Western civilization since the eighteenth century, the future must be thought of “not in terms of a discredited universal telos” but as “the beginning and *infinity of heterogeneous finalities*” (Lyotard 1987, 179). *Last Night* is the best example of a work which evidences such “heterogeneous finalities.” The ways in which the citizens of Toronto take part in the world’s end are many and varied in the film, and none are judged as more or less valid than any other.

So while Revelations has long held centrality as *the* major apocalyptic text in the West, the cultural complexity of the late twentieth century warrants against its continued privileged status as the sole organizing narrative structure. Twentieth century apocalypticism is characterised by a radical pluralism that a handful of the more progressive contemporary SF films embrace. However, as we shall see, a few conservative representations of the apocalypse refuse to relinquish the primacy of Judeo-Christian myth in the organization of their narratives.

No Sympathy for the Devil

End of Days is a big-budget, generic crossbreed between SF, horror and action cinema featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger out to prevent the end of the world. The film immediately announces its ties to Christianity in the credit sequence, with images of the Bible, a crucifix, rosary beads, and a stained glass Christ. Flames surrounding the iconic objects not only herald the oncoming Satanic threat, but also seem to indicate that contemporary Christian faith is in a perilous state. To reinforce the perceived precariousness of Catholicism, Jericho, the film's central male protagonist has lost his faith following the murder of his wife and daughter. Obsessed with their loss, he no longer experiences a present that has any "meaning." His name has immediate scriptural and historical resonance: the Israelites laid siege to the city of Jericho during their conquest of Canaan in approximately 1400 BC (as narrativized in Joshua 6). A metaphorical connection may thus be established between the filmic and biblical narratives. Just as the wall around the city eventually crumbles, so does Jericho's cynical shell, a breach which restores and renews his

faith and reconnects him with the present.

Jericho initially rejects his preventive role as saviour-figure and uses the action film's traditional tough-guy front as armour, disguising his hollowed-out interiority. When the Bishops informs him of the necessity of reclaiming his lost belief, Jericho replies with familiar Schwarzeneggerian aplomb, "Between faith and my Glock 9 mm, I'll take my Glock." However the heroic stature that viewers associate with Schwarzenegger's action roles is systematically undermined in *End of Days*. He abandons his former glory days as a Reagan era superhero for the role of a self-abusive, alcoholic, suicidal cop instead.

End of Days strives to emulate Yeats' lament that as a condition of modernity, "things fall apart." Jericho's deteriorating will to engage with the world and decaying personal life is concretized by the chipped music box which stands in as a symbol for a ruined domestic bliss. Such ruination is projected onto the mise-en-scene, as evidenced by the many crumbling urban spaces which are visited in the film. In fact, New York City is figured as a modern day Dis, whose sewers spawn demons and produces fiery infernos (the exploding restaurant, the immolation of Bobby). Even its inhabitants are disintegrating, like Christine's vision of the homeless "porcelain man" who menaces her on the subway and then shatters, the corruptible police force (Marge and later, Bobby), and the Man's other mindless minions. Even the Church is prey to such corrupting influences and Satanic iconoclasm. Thomas Aquinas, a homicidal priest, is killed in a parody of the crucifixion and later enacts a perverse "resurrection." The Papacy itself is initially represented in a sinister fashion (to say nothing of the fundamentalist group that tries to murder Christine) with the meeting of a 1979 Papal

“inner circle” at the Vatican - a conspiratorial organization aware of “the Day and the Hour.”

As in the earlier periods of the SF genre, Jericho acts as the individual hero who must rid the social order of corrupting (Satanic, in this case) forces and, in doing so, finds redemption. His return to the Church is a reaffirmation of Christian orthodoxy in the face of contemporary disavowals. The answer to his rhetorical question, “Now I have to believe in God to solve a crime?” turns out to be an affirmative. In fact, the individual hero figure occupies a central position in Scripture as well. For example, “in both Jewish and Christian theology, the apocalypse was a means by which to spiritually and psychologically overcome the immediate calamity of social persecution, imbued with the scriptural revelation that an end to the eon of oppression was at hand via the millennial rule of the hero-saviour, and with it oblivion and eternal damnation of his foes” (Broderick 1993, 253).

Thus, *End of Days* attempts to reinvigorate the antiquated, individualist hero with Jericho acting as a Saviour-figure. The film tries to invest Schwarzenegger’s on-screen persona as action hero with newfound authority by (unintentionally bathetic) attempts to conflate Jericho with Christ, or at least some sort of warrior saint. For example, the Man’s visit to Jericho’s apartment is a thinly veiled reenactment of the temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) and Jericho becomes a sacrificial Christ after being hung up on a cross by the Man - the closeup of the stitches on his forehead a grisly revisiting of the crown of thorns. Later, he undergoes a spiritual shift from the warrior Christ of Revelations (19:11-21) to a sacrificial saint after his epiphany in the church and is glorified by an extra-diegetic Gregorian choir. He casts aside his weapons and after being possessed, asserts his victory

by martyring himself on the sword of a statue of Michael - a nod to Revelations 12:9 in which the archangel Michael defeats the dragon.

Unfortunately, *End of Days*' aggrandizing tendencies are not always successful and the film's reflation of the hero figure is hardly credible. Just as a radio announcer in the film forgets to credit history *before* the common era ("This is the very last day of the first two thousand years"), producers assumed that audiences would have forgotten Schwarzenegger's earlier, pro-militaristic incarnations. In fact, the film is little more than a revisitation of *Terminator 2*. Schwarzenegger is again featured as a protector against a relentless killer, whose wounds seal over (care of digitally mapped morphing effects) not unlike a certain T-1000. Christine is both a passive John Connor when protected, and an active Sarah Connor when taking up arms. The credits even feature music by a long defunct Guns 'N Roses, whose music is foregrounded in James Cameron's film. As (film) history repeats itself with *End of Days*, we might find it useful here to recall Rick Altman's observation quoted in the Introduction, that "whereas genres once served as a monument to real world configurations and concerns, today's genres have increasingly taken on . . . a pseudo-memorial function."

While generic memory may contribute to the film's failings, personal memory proves to be absolutely essential to Jericho's success within the film. Interestingly, it is precisely Jericho's refusal to disengage with the past that leaves him unable to engage with the present. He is continually haunted by the memories of his murdered wife and child and is turned into an automaton by historical trauma - perhaps even a subject who experiences temporality as "a series of pure and unrelated presents in time." The film's editing seems to reinforce his

fragmented subjectivity. While a frenetic editing style is typical of the action film, the sheer volume of cuts during distinctly *non*-action sequences is astounding. Jericho's introductory sequence (in which he makes a revolting "milkshake" after contemplating suicide), for example, is only slightly over a minute in duration, but contains *sixty-two* cuts. Time is certainly fractured here, especially compared with the elegiac (relatively) long take following Jericho's triumphant death. Naturally, after exorcising his devils (not to mention the *actual* devil), a coherent sense of time is restored.

Ironically, however, it is the devil himself who provides Jericho with the means to defeat him. For Jericho's obsession with absence is twofold: he is tormented by both his absent family, and the fact that he himself was absent at the time of their murder. What he has been unable to "remember" or, more precisely, to imagine is the actual moment of their deaths. It is precisely this moment which the Man reveals to him during the "temptation" sequence, providing Jericho with a virtual "memory" of the unimaginable. Vision leads to agency, as it is finally the reenactment of the most important moment in Jericho's history over which he had no control that leads him to reassert his efforts to control his present circumstances. *End of Days'* turning point is a literal Revelation in which an atrophied and decaying present is galvanized by historical atrocity. And while the film is certainly not among Schwarzenegger's more popular films, it is one whose implicit moralism should be well-apparent to late twentieth century viewers, for whom historical atrocity is no stranger.

Saving the World, American Style

Conversely, *Armageddon* was a more commercially successful prevention of the

apocalypse. Its computer-generated spectacle was extremely popular in its representation of the apocalypse. In this film, the threat is extraterrestrial (a giant asteroid), rather than Satanic, although NASA chief Dan Truman predicts that “all the worst parts of the Bible” will come to pass if the crisis is not averted. Happily, global destruction *is* prevented by a motley crew of oil driller-cum-astronauts lead by Harry Stamper, a true-blue (collar) American Hero and the film’s central protagonist. Harry’s ultimate self-sacrifice perpetuates the Christian myth of heroism and aggrandizes the American myth of individualism.

Armageddon is another SF/action narrative in which time is ultimately the worst threat, and in this case, is as much a menace as the colossal asteroid. The objective of Harry’s team is to destroy the meteor by digging into its core to insert a nuclear device before it strikes the earth. Accordingly, an incessant forward thrust propels the narrative, dictating even the movements of the camera, which at one point swoops downwards into the hole the astronauts dig. No time is allotted for breathing room in the film, nor stasis, as the classical dictum of continual plot development continually pushes the narrative. A breathless aesthetic matches the forward-moving plot, as evidenced by relentlessly moving cameras, whip pans, fast zooms, and rapid-fire editing.

Recalling *Metropolis*, clocks upon clocks are evident in the film. For example, frequent cuts are made to the Doomsday clock, and the military’s premature activation of the nuclear bomb introduces a second countdown that must be averted. But whereas clocks stood as symbols for the mechanization of human labour in *Metropolis*, time itself is the enemy in *Armageddon*. In his voice-over address to the global village, the President claims

that “for the first time in human history, mankind has the technology to avert extinction.” If the disaster that threatens the earth is indeed “Armageddon,” then his claim is a refutation of even heavenly-ordained teleology. During the global montage that accompanies his broadcast, the President also asserts that “all of human development has lead up to this moment,” and he includes the progress of imagination, technology, and even warfare in his list. So, while the President denies teleology’s inevitable conclusion by confidently asserting his country’s capability of averting extinction, his patriotism has parallels with the millenarian’s narcissism in imagining the present moment as the apotheosis of history. And yet, one cannot ignore the computer generated geology lesson that begins the film, in which the voice-over narration of Charlton Heston emphasises the circularity of history. His warning (“It happened before, it will happen again. It’s just a question of when”) starkly contradicts the linearity the President’s conception of history suggests.

However, the termination of time represented by *Armageddon*’s oncoming apocalypse is literally virtual as the asteroids are CGIs, and yet they are totally integrated into the story world. With the onset of the first meteor shower, the viewer is immediately immersed within *Armageddon*’s perpetual state of crisis. But interestingly, occasional moments in the narrative seem self-reflexively to acknowledge the *virtuality* of the meteoric threat. During the final briefing sequence of Harry’s team, the graphics of the computer simulators minimize the crisis into a video game, complete with Truman’s warnings about the consequences of failure: “It’s game over.” At other moments, the spectacle of the computer-generated asteroid assumes a near-anthropomorphic status. Several cutaways to

the incoming meteor interrupt the narrative and serve to personify the meteor as “enemy.” Such anthropomorphizing is reinforced by the exchange between Chick and Harry on its surface: “I don’t think this thing likes us,” to which Harry replies, “That’s because it knows we’re here to kill it.”

On the one hand, the computer generated effects almost reflexively announce themselves, and are even endowed with a minimal, but hostile subjectivity within the narrative. On the other, the purpose of *Armageddon*’s special effects is total audio-visual immersion - the recreation of a “you-are-there” experience as cosmic debris is hurled toward the viewer from every angle. The film’s representations are meant to evoke an embodied *experience* of the world’s end for the viewer (recalling the “phenomenology” of SF), one that he/she shares *with* the characters, rather than observes from a once removed position.

A first person alignment with the perspectives of Harry’s team is also a privileged position, as their point of view is narratively favoured over the state-controlled perspective of NASA and their astronauts. In fact, the film establishes a class conflict between the two perspectives, with blue collar heroism set up against bureaucratic ineptitude. Harry’s strict paternalism and conservatism are aligned with an equally trenchant working class patriotism. He is introduced as a good ol’ American boy, doing his duty to protect capitalist interests against pesky environmentalists by shooting golf balls from his oil rig at a boat full of Greenpeace protestors.⁵ General Rimsey, however, is less than taken with the “cowboy”

⁵ Interestingly, the golf ball shower promptly follows New York’s meteor shower. Such an alignment implicitly undermines the populism of Harry’s politics from the outset.

antics of Harry's team, complaining that "the fate of the world is in the hands of a bunch of retards I wouldn't trust with a potato gun." The class conflict is mirrored by a narrative strategy that often uses dialogue such as Rimsey's to deflate formal attempts at grandeur. As the driller's stride toward the camera in slow motion for example, Colonel Sharp's comment punctures the monumentalism of the scene: "Talk about the Wrong Stuff." Another instance of bathos occurs when a similar, slow motion suit-up is followed by A. J., Bear, and Rockhound's "Leaving on a Jet Plane" goof-off.

However, it is Harry who undercuts the government agents' classist assumptions by metaphorically kicking holes through bureaucratic incompetence and simultaneously revitalizing a history of American individualism. The rightness of his actions and authority are never in doubt, as evidenced in the closeup in which he growls at Truman, "I'm not asking you; I'm telling you": a huge American flag hangs in the background behind his head.⁶ He even has the audacity to invert the infamous Apollo 13 declaration by declaring, "Houston, *you* have a problem." It is up to Harry to prevent the detonation of the nuke which a hasty military prematurely activates, since the crisis reveals Colonel Sharp - his government sanctioned double - to be too caught up in the authority of the State's symbolic order to be of any use.

The successful completion of the mission establishes the surviving drillers as True

⁶ Although one could argue again that the "naturalness" of Harry's authority is subverted by considering his incessant paternalism as compensation for a self-perceived lack of "control" over his daughter, Grace. In this regard, his attempts to keep his future son-in-law A. J. in line are an obvious displacement of frustrated paternal authority.

American Heroes. No deflation of their second slow-motion stride towards the camera occurs upon their return, and we are to presume they have now earned their status as the *Right Stuff*. Their success even prompts the miraculous symbolic cohesion of the disrupted nuclear family, as Chick is reunited with his estranged wife and son (“That’s not a salesman; that’s your father”). As the culmination of the film’s preoccupation with national symbols (there are at least two dozen closeups of logos, flags, and emblems), Truman receives Harry’s NASA decal. To reinforce the drillers’ victory in *Armageddon*’s class conflict further, concern for the dead NASA astronauts is conspicuous in its absence. In the “home movie” footage of Grace and A.J.’s wedding during the credits, one shot focuses on photos of the members of Harry’s team who were killed, but the framing completely cuts out the photos of the deceased NASA astronauts.

Since the film takes its name from the New Testament, it is unsurprising that Harry’s death (like Jericho’s in *End of Days*) establishes him as a Christ figure. An explicit religiosity occasionally manifests itself, as continual references to God are made by characters throughout the film. A Christian millennial militarism certainly fuels *Armageddon*’s narrative, as Truman reminds the team that they are “all God’s warriors up there.” At the climax of the film, the heroism which is the ideological buttress for Christian martyrdom inspires Harry to relinquish his role as the Father, and in a dramatic inversion, he refuses to sacrifice “his only Son,” A. J. He remains behind to detonate the bomb, and the Kingdom, the power, and the glory become his, now and forever.

Before detonation, Harry’s reward is (like Lester’s in *American Beauty*) a

transfiguration by history, except in this case, he experiences the passage of past, present, *and* future before his eyes. In a series of flashes, he witnesses images of Grace as a little girl, on her wedding day to come, and then, a series of six rapid closeups alternate between her face and Harry's. This sequence is a transcendental repetition of Chick's reunion with his family. By averting the end of history, Harry is allowed a brief glimpse of the future from which he will be excluded and, furthermore, experiences a mystical connection to his daughter from whom he was once emotionally estranged.

Der Himmel über New Jersey

Having extensively discussed the Hollywood approach to the apocalypse, we turn now to *Dogma*, an alternative representation whose strategies are almost the complete inverse of *End of Days* and *Armageddon*. While the film also employs a preventive narrative, the characters' attempts to avert the end of the world are of secondary narrative interest to the heroine's spiritual journey. But while Bethany Sloan is situated as the central protagonist, the comic interaction of *Dogma*'s ensemble cast is emphasised over her individual heroism. In fact, dialogue drives the film rather than plot or action, and special effects are certainly not its *raison d'être*; the interests of humour typically dictate their use. The irreverence with which Kevin Smith approaches traditionally inviolable subject matter (for example, "This is not a drill; this is the Apocalypse. Please exit the hospital in an orderly fashion") is in the tradition of Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979). Consequently, the most important aspect of *Dogma*'s representation of the world's potential end is its tonal approach, which is *comedic* rather than deadly earnest.

The systematic tipping of Christianity's sacred cows in the film is not as blasphemous as irate fundamentalists (to whom the sardonic cautionary note preceding the credits is directed) might believe. Structurally speaking, doomsday rhetoric is, in fact, comic. Consider the following definition:

Let comedy be defined as that form of drama which begins with an orderly universe, proceeds with complications that make it appear as though things will go badly (anastasis), turns the unhappy course of events around (climax) so that a happy resolution is in sight, worries the characters and the audience with a reversal (catastasis) or reversals that threaten the happy outcome, but concludes with general harmony . . . The rhetoric of Doomsday places the present just before the "catastasis" of the cosmic comedy, that last ordeal or reversal of good fortune before the happy resolution (Borchardt 1990, 29).

Dogma's narrative structure, like that of *Revelations*, is comic. In Smith's film, both apocalyptic and spiritual crises are averted, with a renewal of the community occurring at the end.

Like *End of Days*, *Dogma* depicts a society in a period of a religious exigency before the catastasis of the millennium, only this time the crisis is caused by apathy, rather than moral decrepitude. Christianity's waning attraction and authority in the dying days of the twentieth century are captured in the scene depicting an indifferent, yawning congregation at the Church Bethany attends. Bethany herself has lost her faith. She confesses to an archangel, the Metatron, that she became disenchanted with Christianity at the moment when the authority of God's master narrative overrode her own. The arbitrariness of God's metanarrative is put into a painful, personal context when her mother responds to Bethany's infertility and the subsequent divorce of Bethany's husband with the platitude, "God has a

plan.” Instantly losing her religion, Bethany wonders, “Weren’t my plans good enough for God?” Here, as in other apocalyptic SF films, history plays a dominant role in determining personal agency. She longs to return to a point in her spiritual past when personal faith was second nature. “When you’re a child,” she recollects, “you just don’t question. God’s in His heaven and all’s right with the world.”

Different characters put forward various solutions to the apathy and apostasy plaguing Christianity. Bartleby and Loki, the renegade angels, respond by reinvesting in their own unique version of fundamentalism. Before they attempt their return to Heaven, the latter rains (self)righteous, bloody vengeance on several idolaters (the “Moobie” CEO’s) and adulterers (the kissing couple on the bus), while the former’s indignant zeal eventually leads him to murder indiscriminately. Alternatively, Cardinal Glick’s answer is to erect a new populist Christianity, with his “Catholicism Wow!” campaign and a smiling, winking “Buddy Christ” statue. “The Church needs a little panache,” he admits, “We’ve got to hook ‘em while they’re young.”

Rufus’ solution, however, is not to reinscribe a new user-friendly faith (“People *die* over beliefs”), but to synthesize a more *personal* approach to spirituality, one rooted in a communal ground of being. The heart of the film is in its instructions to differentiate between a *belief* and an *idea* in one’s conception of faith. At the end of the film, Rufus asks Bethany, “Are you saying you believe,” to which she replies, “No, but I have a pretty good *idea*.” This conception of religiosity represents an embracing of the non-dogmatism of Eastern philosophies such as Zen, in which God’s playful “beep” on the nose could well be

a legitimate “Meaning of Life.” Belief is figured in the film as rigid, inflexible, and dogmatic as opposed to the mutability and subjectivity (one might say, *Dogmatism*) of a conception of faith as an *idea*. Smith is not splitting hairs, but is instead contrasting two different approaches to Western belief systems. Moreover, the film suggests that perhaps the fluidity of the latter approach is better suited to our present situation which (if postmodernists are to be believed) is as equally fluid and heterogeneous.

What *Dogma* demonstrates might even be conceived as “postmodern” faith, evident not only in its reevaluations of old ethical systems, but also in its revisionist takes on the Christian canon and its playful intertextual borrowing from other cultural sources. Loki, for example, is the Norse god of mischief, and is first seen in the film “fucking with the clergy.” Bartleby’s name can be taken as a reference to Herman Melville’s Scrivener who, like the angel, “prefer[s] not to” engage in active contact with the world - that is until the former’s distaste for it drives him to murder (Melville 1994, 6). Serendipity the muse (though not one of the traditional nine), is a figure from Greek mythology. Azrael, the demon, is taken from the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia. Other revisions include casting God as a woman (“And why not?” Serendipity asks, pointing out the Bible’s many gender biases), introducing a thirteenth apostle who claims that “Jesus was a black man, too,” and featuring other unlikely “divine” figures such as the drug-dealing, mallrat “prophets,” Jay and Silent Bob.

Postmodernism’s irreverence toward sacrosanct narratives is also employed as a strategy of resistance against some of the more domineering and totalizing Christian avenues.

Unlike *Armageddon*, *Dogma* is consistent in its defusion of grandeur.⁷ Examples include the extinguishing of the Metatron's fiery entrance with flame retardant ("Did you have to use the whole can?"), a tutu-sporting God who attempts headstands, and an Angel of Death who sings "Run's House" after smiting the wicked. Such irreverence is not so much an attempt to undermine the Kierkegaardian "fear and trembling" one assumes when approaching the divine, but to bring the infinite closer to a level of human comprehension - to reaffirm a lost connection between the secular and spiritual.

To that end, distanced mythological figures are brought into a contemporary environment in which they are perfectly at home. Witness, then, a muse who performs a striptease, an apostle eating a hamburger, and "Moobie," a children's character that becomes a literal Golden Calf for the late 1990's. Rufus and the Metatron in particular delight in puncturing inflated Judeo-Christian narratives, often pointing out the Bible's many omissions (Jesus' early adulthood is excluded due to "ecumenical politics"), biases ("You think all those nice, white folk would accept a *black* Jesus?"), and contradictions ("Noah was a drunk; look what *he* accomplished").

Most systematic is the way the film embraces a proliferation of intertextual references, a quality characteristic of postmodernist strategy. The abundant quotation of other texts, especially film, is the structural backbone of the film's celebration of religious heterogeneity. Examples are numerous: one of Silent Bob's only lines is to quote Indiana

⁷ And I cannot resist commenting on *End of Days*' own *delusion* of grandeur.

Jones to a terrified passenger after throwing Bartleby off the train (“No ticket”); Bartleby quotes Bill Bixby’s *Incredible Hulk* (“You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry”); the angels’ armour is a possible reference to *Wings of Desire* (Wim Wenders, 1987); upon confronting a mute God, Jay asks, “What the fuck is this, *The Piano*?”; God heals/impregnates Bethany using a technique borrowed from Mr. Miyagi (“Wax on, wax off”). One of the Metatron’s complaints - “Mention something out of a Charlton Heston movie and all of a sudden, everyone’s a theology scholar” - sums up the purpose behind these continual quotations. *Dogma* stresses the importance of grounding a subjective faith within a community, and postmodernism’s preoccupation with quotation also establishes a community of the culturally cognizant - those who are “in the know” get the in-jokes. In fact, much of the film’s humour is derived from casting celebrities in unlikely roles: George Carlin as a cardinal; Chris Rock as a Disciple; Alanis Morissette as God; and the Jay and Silent Bob characters both appeared in Smith’s three previous films.

Pastiche and parody are also postmodernist staples, and towards its conclusion, *Dogma* satirizes apocalyptic films such as *End of Days* and *Armageddon* with its tongue-in-cheek action sequences. Bartleby’s bloody transubstantiation, for example, is filmed using the balletic, slow-motion aesthetics of John Woo. The film’s violence reaches almost comic book proportions, and the carnage at the church is reminiscent of a particularly infamous issue of one of Smith’s favourite comics, *Miracleman*. But the histrionic violence and militarism championed in the aforementioned films is deflated, along with their corresponding myths of self-sacrificial Christian heroism. Bethany refuses to fulfill her role

as “the Last Scion” by killing Bartleby and Loki. In fact, the end of the world is averted by an action as simple as her unplugging of God in the hospital. The glorious martyrdom of the hero is not necessary here, as a grateful God heals Bethany’s mortal wound.

Each of these postmodern strategies is used to “open” a formerly “closed” belief system. *Dogma* advocates a *unitarian* approach to Christianity, rather than the implicit puritanism of *End of Days* and *Armageddon*. The film celebrates spiritual plurality and heterogeneous religious percipience - not the syncretistic schizophrenia of an Aum Shinrikyo, whose Manichean distinctions between righteous and unrighteous leads to violence, but an expression of religion whose subjectivity is personally contingent while retaining a harmony with the social. Its implicit message might be paraphrased thus: if Western religiosity is to survive into the twenty-first century, it must be prepared to relinquish the singular historical authority of its master narratives.

It's Not Like it's the End of the World

Last Night’s apocalypse shares many of the same qualities as *Dogma*. The film’s structure is comic, its focus is communal, its represented disaster is inevitable, and its tone is introspective. Although its narrative concerns universal endings, it oddly strives to emulate a sense of the eternal.

Humour is an integral part of the film’s representation of the end. Little absurdities make up Toronto’s last night. Witness, for example, Mrs. Wheeler’s grafting of Christmas onto the event, complete with a health-conscientious dinner (“Mom, here’s a little ham for your condition”). Her breakdown during dinner is represented as comical, rather than tragic,

as is the indifference with which her high-pitched sobs are met (“Well, food’s getting cold,” Jennifer notes). Such absurdities mount throughout the evening, culminating in the use of Pete Seeger’s “Guantanamera” in preventing a murder/suicide pact. Like *Dogma*, *Last Night*’s structure is comic, insofar as the shattered personal life of its principal character Patrick is rejuvenated and renewed before the end, as will be discussed shortly.

And while Patrick (like Bethany in *Dogma*) is positioned as the viewer’s principal source of alignment, *Last Night* also features an ensemble cast who approach the apocalypse in their own personalized ways. Don McKellar’s authorial attitude towards the characters is extremely ambivalent and no position is advanced which demonstrates the “proper” way of experiencing the end of the world. Moreover, the film is highly agnostic in its attitudes toward millennial spirituality. Dealing with the apocalypse is left to the characters’ respective subjectivities, but belief, faith, spirituality, and other examples of transcendentalism are largely absent. Craig, for example, rejects his mother’s invitation to join her prayer circle, preferring instead the more fleshy contact of coitus before the end. But religion certainly does not appear to be entirely useless in dealing with the apocalypse; it just is not the privileged means by which the end is contextualized. Indeed, Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler, Patrick’s grandmother, and Rose spend their last moments together in thankful prayer. Madame Carlton seems to view the end as a spiritual journey as she changes her farewell to Patrick and Craig from “au revoir” to “bon voyage” at the last second.

Each of the characters recognizes the inevitability of the end. There is no Bruce Willis to intervene here. As a further contrast to *Armageddon*, the disaster itself is

unimportant compared to the final experiences of its victims. No details are given about the oncoming catastrophe; the only clue for the viewer is the presence of daylight at midnight. Preventive heroics are absent, as is cowboy heroism in general. Patrick discovers, for example, that hot-wiring a car is not as easy in real life as it is in the movies. The passivity with which the characters await the apocalypse seems fundamentally Canadian in contrast to the heroic, myth-building activity of the film's American contemporaries. Only Sandra seems to reject her fate, claiming she "won't let this world kill [her]," but her resistance is merely in *choosing* her own end (through suicide), not preventing it.

One might argue that such passivity is much more realistic in light of assured destruction, and indeed McKellar eschews the spectacle of the aforementioned action fantasies for the employment of a more-or-less (and typically Canadian) realist aesthetic. The insertion of intertitles, for example, is a device used to situate the narrative in a supposed "real" time, but its secondary function is to mark a "millennial" countdown to the end. And while one presumes that the narrative takes place in the present, or at least the near future, the film lacks *Armageddon's* presumption of asserting the centrality of the present, or arguing that it is the apex of human history.

However, *Last Night* is a much more introspective film than its contemporaries. It is a humanist film arguing for a "coming together" of individuals in a period of modern alienation. Much of the film features individuals who try frantically to connect through failing communication systems. Duncan's personalized calls to all of the gas company's clients usually go unheard ("Just leave it to the machine"). Sandra is continually unable to

reach him while he expresses mild frustration with his nonfunctional cellular phone. Communication technology is ultimately a hedonistic device for Craig, and he advises an uninterested Patrick to go online to seek out a last-minute amorous rendezvous: "Get on the Internet. That's what they invented it for." But as a result of the death of his wife which precedes the narrative, Patrick seems unable to communicate, unable to make contact with people even as the film emphasises the need to establish connections out of life's random, accidental collisions.

The viewer is largely aligned with Patrick during his forced reconnection with the world before its end. He is initially wary of these rushed collisions until he literally stumbles into Sandra, who asserts that "there's something to be said for human companionship." Before meeting her, he exists in a state resembling a living death, in which he detaches himself from meaningful contact with individuals. In the opening shot of the film, he lays prone on his back listening to his own disembodied voice on the answering machine, while the camera hovers above him like his ghost. Like Jericho in *End of Days*, Patrick himself is haunted by the presence of his wife's absence. Later, a pan over the "Get Well Soon" pictures painted for his deceased wife is accompanied by the sombre piano of Menzies' performance which carries over from the previous scene. It is a weighty moment which almost speaks this absence. Unable to cope with the end of his world(s), Patrick sits alone on his roof near the end of the film, and is isolated in the left corner of the screen against the blankness of an immense brick wall.

Other means of coming to terms with extinction are unavailable for Patrick. He

makes no attempts at escapism, as exemplified by the paralysed woman on the streetcar who refuses to acknowledge the reality of her environment. Scornful of his mother's attempt to evoke nostalgia by giving out old presents, he avoids accessing personal history as a means of contextualizing his life before it is over (unlike his Grandmother and Rose, who review home videos before the end). The revelries of his sister Jennifer and her boyfriend Alex are trivialized by his sardonic comments at dinner. Alex tries to explain that he "understands the need for people to blow off steam," but is interrupted by Patrick's sarcastic interjection, "Blow off what? Heads?" Even the sexual trysts (and advances) of his best friend are rejected.⁸ Awaiting oblivion in isolation seems the only response, and downtown Toronto's ruined, empty streets through which he trudges seem to be an extension of his blasted interiority - a landscape taken from a post-apocalyptic SF film. With the death of his wife, Patrick has already experienced one apocalypse ("She died, and soon after, they said the world would end"), and plans to wait for another alone and unloved, a condition shared by the two principal characters in *End of Days* and *Dogma*.

Sandra, however, forces him to redefine his concept of love and companionship. She herself married after only knowing her husband a month, and minutes before the end, orders

8 Strangely enough, while McKellar usually refrains from moralizing about the actions of the characters in the film, he seems critical of Craig's sensualism. The turquoise minimalism of his apartment and the repetition of the Parliament song seem to be the outer veneer of a sexually schizoid heart. Craig's kitchen suggests an underlying depravity as it is "wallpapered" by a debauched collage of Polaroids, images torn from magazines, and text scrawled on the wall by various utensils. Sinister non-diegetic music accompanies his revelation of the room to Patrick.

Patrick, "Quick, say something to make me love you. It won't be hard." Her predicament interrupts the solitary rationality of his last evening, and in helping her try to reach her husband, he is forced to come out of his shell. His neurosis is overcome against his wishes and, consequently, he chooses contact instead of isolation, a small action instead of a grand passivity. Meanwhile, Duncan's own death wish is granted. As if in a scene from one of his own films, David Cronenberg's character backs up into a final silhouette, while being menaced by Marty and his shotgun.

But whereas Duncan and Sandra have chosen death, Patrick finally has the courage (as Irvine Welsh wrote, albeit sardonically, in *Trainspotting*) to "choose life." He refuses to kill and be killed and spends his last moments embracing Sandra instead. As fatuous as *Last Night's* message - an elaboration on the Christian dictum to "love thy neighbour" - may seem, it is nonetheless important to consider in the midst of millennial violence. Moreover, it is an important change from the messages of doom broadcast by other representations of the apocalypse. *Last Night's* apocalypse merges the life impulse (*Eros*) with the death impulse (*Thanatos*) to synthesize something new: a postmillennial *Thanateros* to carry us into the next millennium.

As the camera circles Patrick and Sandra while they embrace, its movement is evocative of a sense of time that is cyclical, rather than a relentless line that must someday be terminated. Here, eternity, rather than teleology is invoked as the screen flares to white instead of black, and the film ends along with the world. Above all, McKellar's film reminds us of the omnipresence of apocalypticism.

As an undercurrent of Western imagination, apocalypticism is always with us. Consider its part in such sudden surges of intellectual and artistic life in our century as modernism, and, in particular, expressionism; communism and fascism, the most powerful apocalyptic political currents of our time; the unwelcome beginnings of the nuclear era and the cold war; then, the countercultural explosion of the 1960's with its fear of technology, its yearnings to recover the natural, and its millenarian dreams of a new Heaven and a new Earth (Friedlander 1985, 3-4).

The more reform-minded SF films recognize the cyclical nature of time. We have always been living in the end times, but as Euripides asserts, "Never that which is shall die." Teleological energies may be what fuel the development of civilization, as *End of Days* and *Armageddon* demonstrate, but the ideal abstraction and multiplicity of eternity celebrated in *Dogma* and *Last Night* are what allow for White's "moral impulse" behind history, or more broadly speaking, its conscience.

SF's history has also been a history of progress - the fictional charting of a teleology of human development toward a yet-to-be realized ideal. History has demonstrated that such a narrative rolls inexorably onward without compunction by assuming that there *is* an end in sight. Only those SF films with an eye for the eternal (evident in *2001*, *Last Night*, and perhaps later in *The Matrix*) allow room for a modicum of historical moralism that will be respected by future subjects. Perhaps the greatest possible utopia is represented in a world without end, one in which "the former things have passed away," including the idea of progress, of development, and of other such master narratives of control.

Chapter 4

Becoming a Time Machine: Cyborgs, Cyberspace, and Science Fiction

Futures made of virtual insanity always seem to be governed by this love we have for useless twisting of new technology.

- Jason Kay

With the conclusion of the previous chapter, I drew a few distinctions between two different varieties of apocalyptic SF: one which embraced a linear, or teleological notion of time, and another which forwarded a cyclical position. A common trait of both types of films, however, is that their characters' respective endeavours to either prevent or resign themselves to the ends of their worlds are largely motivated by memory, or more precisely, that their assertions of personal agency are the result of attempts to reconcile with personal history. The past ultimately compels these often alienated characters to reconnect with their surrounding world before it terminates. At the end of history, a personal reestablishment with the social order is just as imperative as the coincidental reestablishment of that same larger community.

What is also noteworthy about three of the four films discussed is that technology plays an extremely minimal role in their respective oncoming holocausts, or else a reliance on technology in the prevention/acceptance of the world's end is unavailing. For example, Jericho casts aside his weapons in his final confrontation with the Man in *End of Days*. Bethany ironically prevents the apocalypse by unplugging God's life support system in *Dogma*. Communication technologies are more or less nonfunctional or ineffectual in *Last Night*. In other words, the authority of science is undermined in these SF films. Conversely,

in *Armageddon*, the use of technology is paramount in preventing the meteor's fatal collision with the earth. In this film, characters live in a fundamentally technologized world of video screens, neo-industrial machinery, and futuristic weaponry. Thus, we have come to the final section of this thesis, which explores contemporary SF's depiction of subjects who live within such thoroughly technologized (perhaps over-technologized) worlds.

In itself, technology is an objective product of science, but "technology never comes to its particular specificity in a neutral context for a neutral purpose. Rather, it is always 'lived' - always historically informed by political, economic, and social content, and always an expression of aesthetic value" (Sobchack 1987, 223). The appearance of new technologies and their incorporation into our lived experience often proves estranging, "but however remote, impersonal, or alienating these processes are, technologies are also fully lived and experienced in our daily actions and practices, and that is why it is important to understand technology not as a mechanical imposition on our lives but as a fully cultural process, soaked through with social meaning that can only make sense in the context of familiar kinds of behaviour" (Ross 1991, 3). In considering SF's representations of these technologies, then, we are to consider concurrently how technology is inducted into a "fully cultural process."

New technologies cannot always be integrated into "the context of *familiar* kinds of behaviour," since their introduction often alters the ontology of our immediate experience. The shock of the technologically new typically requires an *a posteriori* reconfiguration of the modalities of being, of one's sense of "being in the world." I would like to discuss the filmic

representations of two relatively recent technologies that have altered our contemporary phenomenal modalities: cybernetics and virtual reality. As mentioned in the introduction, SF represents a narrative measure for replotting our experience of the world affected by technologies such as these. Four films which attempt such a fictional replotting are *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Strange Days*, and *The Matrix*. In particular, I would like to concentrate on the effects of these new technologies on a subject's experience of time. More specifically, what impact do cybernetics and virtual technologies have on one's sense of time and history? Can the digital memory of cybernetics be employed in the service of retrieving, preserving, and/or constructing actual memory? Does new technology allow for new conceptions of agency? For future cultural theorists, then, determining the receptive cultural instrumentality of contemporary SF should include a consideration of the genre's phenomenological task: to provide for its audience a cognitive map of new temporal relations as altered by the appearance of new technology.

Liminality, Virtuality, and the New Technologies

Before outlining my theses for this chapter, it is necessary first to review the technologies in question: both what they are and their relation to one's experience of time. While neither technology is primarily designed to assist the individual in managing the abstractions of time, both play an important role in the way he/she experiences both time and history, as we shall soon discern. For the unfamiliar, cybernetics are the conjoining of living tissue with mechanical or electronic parts - a technology that is still in its primitive stages - while cyberspace is the representation of our contemporary electronic information system's

virtual “geography.” Both forms of technology have become nearly essential to the contemporary social order. In the oft-cited *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Donna Haraway claims that “communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations for women world-wide” (Haraway 1989, 164). It should be argued that although Haraway constructs her influential thesis along gendered lines, the contemporary restructuring of the social world she describes is experienced by all subjects.

I would like to turn my attention first toward the figure of the cyborg, which has long occupied a place within the history of the SF film. Predated by the personage of the homunculus in literature (the golem of European folktale, the creature in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*), the artificial being gains popular filmic prominence with *Metropolis*’ “machine man of the future” in 1926. Fritz Lang’s film is generally credited as having introduced the hybridized image of man and machine to a widespread audience. More importantly, however, it is possible to conceive of the Weimar cyborg aesthetically, as “a creature of the new montage media,” and since this being was “a montage of human and technological elements [it] was also a figure through which the activity of montage itself came to self-consciousness” (Biro 1994, 73). While incorporating the idea of the modernist cyborg as the corporeal embodiment of the montage aesthetic, I would like to establish the cyborg’s relation to one’s lived experience of time.

The montage, or collagist aesthetic for the modernist is an attempt to assert simultaneity in the midst of transition, a creative response to the modern world’s widely-

acknowledged divorce from the past. “Resort to the techniques of montage/collage provided one means of addressing this problem, since different effects out of different times (old newspapers) and spaces (the use of common objects) could be superimposed to create a *simultaneous* effect” (Harvey 1990, 21). Through collage, a lost history could once again be reintroduced into the present. I believe it is possible, then, to consider the cyborg - that “creature of the new montage media” - as *embodied* temporal simultaneity. It is a physicality which viscerally marries the old (organic/flesh) with the new (synthetic/electronic). The corporeal liminality of the cyborg embeds the estranging properties of technology (standing in for the uncertainties of futurity) within the familiarity of the physical body (standing in for the nostalgia of the past).

One is also able to conceive of the cinema spectator as a cyborg, “as if the subject himself . . . unable . . . to account for his own situation [needs] to substitute secondary organs, grafted on to replace his own defective ones, instruments or ideological formations capable of filling his function as a subject” (Baudry 1992, 694). Here, Jean-Louis Baudry conceives of the modern subject’s vision as deficient. Film, for Baudry, responds to the alienating properties of the twentieth century, which distances individuals from their lived experience and their connection with history. Modern subjects require the crutch of technologized vision in order to experience the world and to establish a historical nexus through representation.

Perhaps because of an implicit distrust of such technologically-aided vision, past representations of the cyborg have typically not been positive. What is explicit in such

representations, however, is an enunciated fear of the grafting of man and machine, a technologically-induced splicing that is represented as “unnatural.” For early audiences of SF, the cyborg represents the erasure of *corporeal* boundaries, and for a postmodern audience, such a dissolution has parallels with the late twentieth century’s dissipation of *temporal* boundaries. Earlier examples include *Metropolis*’ android, and the artificial intelligence of HAL in *2001*, but such negative representations are carried into the SF discussed by Sobchack, who also references the corrupted machine-man, Darth Vader in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) and the relentless killing machine of *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984).

However, Sobchack also indicates the introduction of ambiguity to the filmic representations of the cyborg in the SF she discusses, of which *Blade Runner* is the paradigmatic example. In Ridley Scott’s film, the replicants may even be considered (in Tyrell’s words) “more human than human,” but they nonetheless represent beings who are far beyond the dichotomies of the moral order. These are beings who “burn so very brightly” according to Tyrell, but whose acts of violence are often quite capricious. While the “questionable” impulses of the artificial being are still retained in *Blade Runner*, such ambiguity gives way to thoroughly positive representations of the cyborg in contemporary SF. With Western culture’s passage from the industrial to the digital age, one might even argue that technology has achieved such cultural saturation that the premise of the technologically new no longer threatens. Techno-optimists may even go so far as to argue that our cultural adaptability towards technology is accelerating. For example, Haraway

suggests that “the machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are *they*” (Harraway 1989, 180). In popular SF, Cameron’s sequel to *The Terminator* is the most oft-referenced example of a film which incorporates such optimism. Other recent SF representing a more positive cyborg include *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997), with its sexy “Supreme Being,” Disney’s bumbling *Inspector Gadget* (David Kellogg and Adam Greenberg, 1999), and the soul-searching (yet fairly fatuous) *Bicentennial Man* (Chris Columbus, 1999).

However, there still remains a small (even dwindling) number of contemporary SF films that regard our potentially accelerating adaptability to technology as evidence of an increasing level of technological determinism in our culture. Though *Terminator 2* depicts a humanized cyborg, it is a dystopian film nonetheless. Both Cameron’s blockbuster and *Johnny Mnemonic* take particular positions on their represented societies in which either control over technology is tenuous, or the relationship between man and machine is problematic or antagonistic. In these films, the cyborg is a figure who potentially allows characters to reclaim control over a technology which threatens to either exterminate or assimilate humanity.

The liminality the cyborg represents not only reconnects humanity with technology, but also a technologized future with history. *T2* is a humanist film, at once technophobic and technophilic. Its premillennial paradox is such that its social order can only be protected from technology by an adoption of the technological. Meanwhile, *Mnemonic* represents a

thoroughly technologized world in which control over history can be claimed by the use of technology and personal memory can be accessed through digital memory.

Cybernetics are a manifestation of the social transition from what Harraway describes as “old hierarchical dominations” to the “informatics of domination” - a transition that is hyperbolized in *Mnemonic* (Harraway 1989, 161). She claims that as a result of the new bio and communication technologies, “we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous information system - from all work to all play, a deadly game” (Harraway 1989, 161). The virtual spaces of this information system are visually represented as cyberspace - a graphic mapping out of the unmappable abstract geographies of contemporary communication networks and thus, a second manifestation of the transition in our socio-historic order. Part of our polymorphous information system (perhaps even a symptom of its conditions) is the 1990's proclivity for the virtual. Virtuality is the phenomenological experience of environments which substitute for the Real, including MUD's, video games, and VR simulators. Figured as escapist entertainment, rather than as instruments with which to re-engage with one's experience of the world, these technologies are evidence of contemporary Western culture's penchant for the “deadly game” of “play.”

In popular art, however, the cinematic representations/recreations of these virtual spaces is the latest development in the phenomenology of SF: “in otherwise diverse works it is the experience of space and perception that enable a tentative definition of being for both protagonist and reader/spectator” (Bukatman 1993a, 83). In the introduction, I described SF narratives as ultimately ontological in nature. Now, I would like to reprise my thematic

characterization of the genre as the cinematic exploration of one's phenomenological "givenness" as redefined by new technologies. Scott Bukatman offers the most concise description of SF's phenomenology in relation to the new digital technologies of cyberspace:

A phenomenology of science fiction locates a significant attempt to redefine the imperceptible (and therefore absent to consciousness) realms of the electronic era in terms of the physically and perceptually familiar. The motive is to render the electronic fields present to consciousness - to turn them into phenomena - and therefore susceptible to human intentionality . . . Cyberspace is an abstraction which, diegetically and extradiegetically, provides a narrative compensation for the loss of visibility in the world, the movement of power into the cybernetic matrices of the global computer banks, and the corresponding divestiture of power from the subject (Bukatman 1993a, 86).

Representations of cyberspace and virtuality also compensate for the weakening of historicity under postmodernity. The phenomenology of these representations reintroduces depth to the "deflated," two-dimensional space of the screen (which can now be explored) and also equals the restoration of collapsed temporal relationships in which time is once again experienced as a "continuous unifying flow." Virtual geographies provide an empowering illusion of stasis amidst temporal flux as cyberspace is paradoxically a place "where nothing is forgotten and yet everything changes" (Benedikt 1992, 1). These cyberspaces solve the problem of agency, as introduced by Heraclitus - namely, how can a subject affect time in the midst of constant flux, when nothing is abiding? All is motion in cyberspace, yet nothing that *was* disappears, or is lost. Everything is retained, stored, "remembered" by boundless digital memory. Within these spaces, then, the cybersubject phenomenally experiences constant change, yet the computer stores the minutiae of the past

in its entirety.

We may draw similarities between the computer's electronic "memory" and the cinematic recording of history for later phenomenal re-experience. The difference with cyberspace, or virtual realities, is that their phenomenologies strive to be totalistic. Such digital technologies strive for the complete sensory immersion of their users. They move beyond Baudry's cybernetic metaphor and aim for the realization of André Bazin's "total cinema" - the virtual recreation of actual lived experience, which he argues is the drive behind all technological development in the cinema.

The frequent representation of virtual spaces is also evidence of the increasing "digitization" of the cinema. SF film "is now undergoing a radical reformulation in which the depiction of science fiction narratives is being displaced by science fictional modes of depiction" (Landon 1992, 134). Perhaps this reformulation is part of the reason why contemporary SF seems paralysed, unable to imagine the future, stuck in perpetual re-play, according to the genre's critics. Brooks Landon argues that "production technology has become more interesting than the stories ostensibly justifying the use of that technology - the new narrative of technology has outstripped the science fiction narratives it once supported" (Landon 1992, 153). For these critics (for whom Sobchack paves the way with her complaints in 1987), contemporary SF narratives are simply the rehashed narratives of yore, dressed up (retrofitted) in new digital suits. Considering the number of retrogressive films about virtuality - *The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992), *Hackers* (Iain Softley, 1995), *Virtuosity* (Brett Leonard, 1995) - their complaints seem almost justified.

Lest one begin to despair that the genre is condemned to perpetual thematic reruns, it should be noted that the new modes of digital representation nevertheless give way to new narrative thematics as well. These new narratives address a growing indistinguishability between actual and virtual realities - an uncertain condition in which subjects use technology to test the very grounds of "being in the world." In recent progressive films about virtuality, including *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999), *Open Your Eyes* (Alejandro Amenábar, 1999), and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), digital technologies (and their effects) are certainly not instruments (or representations) of "play"; instead, after dramatically reevaluating their own selfhood, characters in these film occasionally realize that "reality" is just as constructed/artificial as the digital landscapes of a VR simulator. What is more, these discoveries are figured as oddly empowering, rather than disillusioning.

Two other films which feature such dramatic reexaminations of self include *Strange Days* and *The Matrix*. In the first film, virtual history is represented as stunting the progress of the future. The central protagonist's reevaluation of his experience of "being in the world" requires the potential renunciation of his reliance on mediation. Conversely, with *The Matrix*, the central protagonist's new self-awakening is entirely contingent on mediation. His assertion of personal agency also requires an abandonment of historical simulacra, but such a rejection also entails the establishment of a connection with the Real in the midst of the virtual.

A Kinder, Gentler Killing Machine

We begin our review of the technological branch of contemporary SF with *Terminator 2*. In this film, as in many other dystopian filmic texts, autonomous technology has seized control of history. These self-aware machines attempt to secure the mechanized tyranny of their future by invading the past. On one level, the subtextual cultural instrumentality of the film articulates our contemporary society's fear of technologically induced revisions of history.¹ On another, the temporal disruptions caused by technology also assault memory. Sarah Connors, the survivor of the first *Terminator* film, is paradoxically traumatised by her "memories" of the future and must exorcise them at all costs in the sequel. History is "invented" by the characters in the film as a means of resistance against a constrictive fate established by machines from the future.

T2 is another apocalyptic narrative. Its fiery credit sequence - in which the camera tracks across a burning playground (a visceral image of our contemporary "deadly" environment of "play") and a metal, skeletal chassis emerges from the flames - immediately announces "no future." Los Angeles 2029 is represented as Golgotha, where machines controlled by the master computer system, SkyNet, wage all-out warfare on humans.² However, the machines are not originally the aggressors. SkyNet's initial act of hostility

1 The Rodney King trial provides one of the most notorious examples of this contemporary phenomenon: the LAPD's defense team actually used the videotape of King's beating to convince the jury that the police officers charged in King's assault were following proper arrest procedure. For an excellent reading of the incident, refer to Frank P. Tomasulo's 1996 article "'I'll See It When I Believe It': Rodney King and the Prison-House of Video."

2 Interestingly, (and perhaps ominously) SkyNet is now the name of an Internet server.

against humanity is (like HAL in *2001*) a matter of self-defence after its panicked creators try to pull the plug upon its acquisition of self-awareness.

Steel blues and greys dominate the blasted, technologized mise-en-scene of the future, and as the future literally invades the past, these colours intrude upon the present of L. A., circa 1991. The conjoining of the two temporalities is achieved through the film's lighting and colour scheme, in which (following Sobchack) the future is depicted as "now." The first instance occurs in the parking lot where the T-800 appears, a naked, newborn Man of the Future. Blues and greys are the dominant colours of the asylum where Sarah is imprisoned. It is an institution of repression and of control where technologized eyes constantly monitor her, projecting and recording her image, recalling the technological point of view of the futuristic cyborg. Both Dr. Silberman and Miles Dyson wear blue and grey and the computer lab where the latter works is lit in the same manner as the institution, thus linking the two characters in their discourses of mechanized control. The same colour and lighting scheme even occurs in Dyson's house where Sarah steels herself (becomes a "terminator") in order to kill him. Thus, the presence of the future's "aesthetic" in the past perpetuates the postmodern conflation of time Sobchack finds evident in contemporary SF. Sarah is not able to process this "schizophrenic" temporality and, as mentioned earlier, is unhinged as a result of her brush with "the future." Refusing to be victimized again, both she and her son John are out to prevent further temporal penetrations.

As a foil to his mother's technophobia, John demonstrates a relative ease with the technological. His position is one of mastery over the machine and opposes Sarah's

antiquated, destructive impulse (a dichotomy of the contemporary ludic view of technology versus the Luddite's archaic view). He first demonstrates his mastery by using an electronic instrument to steal from a bank machine, and later, he will use the same device to defeat a security system (technology defeats technology). At the arcade, he plays "Mission Control," a militaristic Atari game designed in the mid-80's and a digital allegory for his future role as defender against an imminent nuclear strike. In 2029, he will send his own Terminator back in time to defend his past self, and thus, the T-800's catch phrase, "I'll be back," takes on new conno(r)tations: the cyborg represents the return of the technologized repressed in the first film, while mechanical technology has a protective/helpful function in the sequel. Such a shift is demonstrative of the comfort with which the contemporary generation recognizes technology - a recognition that no longer implies Otherness.

Although John demonstrates mastery over the T-800, he has no such control over the T-1000, who represents "the dreaded triumph of electronic technology" (Bukatman 1993b, 310). This new Terminator is a simulated, exteriorized embodiment of cyberspace's fluidity, while the T-800 model is now "positively *benign* in contrast to the noncorporeal, interiorized digitalism of the electronically generated T-1000. The techno-organic fusion of these cinematic cyborgs thus represents only an exaggerated defensive formation, another panic subject frantically hiding its obsolescence behind a suit of armour" (Bukatman 1993b. 309-310). Within the workings of the film, the T-1000 is an even greater threat to the Real than the organic/machine hybrid ever was to the modernist subject. Its fluid body escapes solid definition and is represented as much more unsettling than the T-800's hard, chiselled

(idealised?) frame. Indeed, the horror of the T-1000's body is that its morphology projects an absence of difference between Self and Other: the T-800 goes through things while the T-1000 becomes one with them. Moreover, it is a corporeality that incorporates other bodies, as the T-1000 absorbs its victims' self-image (recalling the android who takes on Maria's likeness in *Metropolis*). *T2* seems to argue that "when our technological simulations advance this far . . . humans are not equal partners with the machine in the formation of the hybrid. Rather . . . we lose our centre - and even our life - to what is 'out there'" (Rushing and Frentz 1995, 187).³

The body of the T-1000 is also a corporeal allegory for the postmodern triumph of the signifier over the signified. "For the T-1000's ability to reshape itself points up our difficulty in correctly seeing and judging the world around us - a difficulty linked to a technologized environment's tendency to expose everything, including the body, thereby reducing it to little more than observable surfaces" (Telotte 1995, 177). Thus, the T-1000 is the embodied condition of simulation. While the T-800 is an artificial being below a "real" surface, *T2* introduces a second Terminator "whose covering will not come off, whose surface we can never see beneath, in fact, a figure that finally seems to be *all* surface - a kind of mobile Möbius strip - with no real 'inside'" (Telotte 1995, 176).

3 As a noteworthy digression, the T-1000 also assumes the personas of authority figures: cop, security guard, foster mother. In opposition to the T-1000's mechanized law and order, is the T-800's persona as biker outlaw. The cyborg rebel-hero is aligned with George Thorgood's "Bad to the Bone" and comes bearing "Guns 'N Roses" to rescue John (who sports a Public Enemy t-shirt throughout the film - a sign of his own rebelliousness).

While the first showdown between the two models takes place in the simulated environment of a galleria mall, the film's climactic sequences return (as in the first *Terminator*) "to a factory as the site of a struggle that is now focussed on the struggle between the different generations of technology" (Pask 1995, 195). Conflict between the T-800 and the T-1000 can be allegorized as the conflict between industrial versus post-industrial digital technology. Furthermore, their final skirmish is also figured as a battle between the elements of fire and ice, a visualization which conjures up associations with McLuhan's differentiation between "hot" and "cool" technologies.

If the T-1000 is a physical metaphor for the two-dimensionality of contemporary space, it also stands in for the schizophrenic conflation of time. Along with *T2*'s representation of time travel and the futurist aesthetics of the mise-en-scene, the T-1000 is another example of the present's indivisible conjoining with the future. The seamless fluidity of its body is in stark contrast to the T-800, whose corporeal liminality still contains visible boundaries between the natural and the synthetic, especially when damaged. When the metal chassis of its exoskeleton is exposed, demarcations between the past (flesh) and the present (metal) are still divisible, written into its flesh, whereas the T-1000 has no such boundaries, since it is all "surface." But since the film's emphasis is on the T-800's "humanization" (it even stands in as a paternal figure for John), it is perhaps the past that wins out over the future, both literally and figuratively. In the SF film, cyborg wetware is typically "a sign of the non-human; only cyborgs, androids, robots, and other semihuman or artificial beings have it. Despite this, since the purpose of most of these artificial beings is

to demonstrate their humanity . . . the sign tends to be transcended” (Bonner 196). As the T-800 is taught “the value of human life,” it “transcends” the “sign” of its own artificiality and thus, the past wins out over the tyranny of the future.

At one point in the film, Sarah declares that “we were making up history as we went along.” *T2* is ultimately about the liberation of the past from a predetermined teleology. Its protagonists attempt to establish absolute individual agency for their social order against an otherwise mechanized fate. In asserting that there is “no fate but what we make,” these characters reclaim the present from the restrictions of the future’s technologized foreordination and reestablish free will in opposition to destiny’s totalitarianism.

Reminiscences of a Cyberpunk

Another “informatics of domination” is resisted by characters in *Johnny Mnemonic*, one which maintains control at every level, even that of the perception of time. The acceleration of the lived experience of time has increased to such an extent in the film that individuals in 2021 live in a condition of “timelessness” - not in the sense of the eternal, but rather, in a perceived absence of time. Johnny, the central protagonist, is one of these subjects who exists without time. More precisely, he is unable to remember his own personal history and will eventually use the digital memory of cybernetics in the service of retrieving his actual memory. Additionally, Johnny’s cybernetics are used to reclaim his sense of agency - the ability to effect change in time - from corporate control.

The film is set in 2021, depicting a future social order “where corporations rule” and is essentially a critique of the corporatisation of medicine. “Pharmacom” (an insidious

Cronenbergian infrastructure) controls pharmaceutical distribution and as a result of the ruthless self-protection of their profit margins, hospitals are full of disenfranchised medical casualties who lack access to the remedies the company regulates. Their international HQ in central Beijing is a site of perpetual demonstrations by protestors, raucous assemblies presaging the actual large-scale anti-corporate demonstrations of the late 90's (such as Seattle's massive anti-WTO campaign in December 1999).

Mnemonic's corporate NWO results in a future society overwrought by a technological glut. Gadgets and gizmos straight out of a Bond film proliferate, thereby necessitating the copious amounts of technical verbiage in the script (as opposed to the more user-friendly dialogue of *The Matrix*), and most of them are utterly unnecessary (such as the robotic voice issuing from a bathroom sink, informing Johnny that the "water temperature is seventeen degrees"). Cybernetics are *de rigueur* by 2021: even a bartender has mechanical hands which boost his proficiency and productivity in the tendering of his trade. Big Brother's ultimate fantasy is realised as screens and video monitors are everywhere in the film; however, no one seems to be watching them.

Despite the gloss of a high-tech future, signs of decay nevertheless begin to appear. For example, although it is apparently a "Free City" (whatever such simulated "freedom" entails), Newark (the film's principal locale) is rundown compared with the sleekness of Beijing. Newark's malls - the ultimate realisations of capitalism's simulated space - have collapsed in on themselves, and mannequins and commerce are strewn everywhere throughout the wreckage of the shopping centres visited in the film. Many of the "posh"

urban spaces of the city re-serve warmed-over remnants of a sickly 1980's aesthetic: glam reigns in Ralfi's (Culture) club; music is of the German industrial variety; and the *mise-en-scene* of the film is essentially a barely concealed imitation of *Blade Runner*'s more resplendent urban decay (note the extreme closeup of Takahashi's eyes superimposed over Beijing's megalopolis - a flagrant pilfering of one of *Blade Runner*'s opening shots). Perhaps the film's mixture of glam and garbage is employed due to its status as an adaptation of a William Gibson novella, a writer who is firmly entrenched in (and a pioneer of) the 80's unique brand of techno-glitz.

Similar signs of decay begin to appear in the future's subjects. "Nerve Attenuation Syndrome" - a disease which sporadically attacks its victim's fine motor control - becomes the "wandering sickness" of *Mnemonic*'s 2021. "Information overload causes it," yells Spider, the distraught ex-surgeon, "but we can't live without it!" Such "information overload" is the incessant sensory assault of the future's multiple/multiplying technologies, and with its surfeit of signage, all demanding a subject's attention, *Mnemonic*'s futurity is intended to hyperbolize our own contemporary condition. Eventually, the film argues, a hyper-technologized world will cause subjects to lose control over their bodies in time. "The Black Shakes" - spasms caused by NAS - are physical symptoms of a continued postmodern existence: an experience of the past, present, and future as "pure and unrelated 'presents' in time." The erratics of a NAS seizure can be thought of as the physical experience of the same instant recurring over and over. Moreover, a condition of *Mnemonic*'s cybernetic postmodernity is that "the human body seems to be disappearing as well, becoming

disposable as human memory is downloaded into computer programs, while a sense of disembodiment grows as actual body organs are replaced by electronic prosthetic devices and bodily sensorium augmented by biological and computer technologies that remain external to the body” (Boyer 1996, 117). Human corporeality is disappearing at the same rate in the film as time.

Johnny is one such “disappearing” subject. While not a victim of NAS, like Jaye, nor crazed by his own cybernetics, like the Street Preacher, he sacrifices the authentic for the artificial instead. In 2021, human memory is now literally quantifiable and Johnny trades his actual memory for digital memory - hundreds of gigabytes worth. Although glimpses of personal memory flash through his head throughout the film, Johnny becomes decentred without the experience of them as a “continuous flow.” Claiming at the beginning of the film that he “doesn’t even know where home is,” he is nevertheless haunted by these fragments of home, of history. Without a past, he is (like *Blade Runner*’s replicants) without identity (a lack Spider comments on by calling him “Just-Johnny”), and he lives out Sobchack’s lament referenced in the introduction that “privately experienced ‘interiority’ appears less and less a necessary condition of human being” (Sobchack 1987, 235). Due to his lack of history, his lack of interiority, Johnny is initially a servant to the reified sign. He is a corporate courier who rages against becoming a hero for the masses and his newfound social responsibility is diametrically opposed to his former status as a corporate tool who enjoys all of the fringe benefits of his trade (“I want room service!” a petulant Johnny wails).

The high-tech, corporate “informatics of domination” Johnny initially serves are

opposed by the retrofitted anarchism of aptly-named Loteks - media pirates who coopt Johnny's services. Represented as back-alley primitives, complete with war paint and primitive weaponry, the Loteks are led by the charismatic J-Bone (well cast as hip-hop-artist-cum-media-"terrorist," Ice-T). His Lotek "wideband" is a form of techno-anarchism using combinations of old and new machinery to sabotage corporate control over the process of image-making. Junkpiles of TV's outside their stronghold are cannibalized to form the tower of screens acting as their central nervous system, one that is (inexplicably) powered by a cybernetic dolphin. Spider, another resistance figure, also makes use of retrofitted technology, driving a hybridized van/command centre and incorporating piecemeal technology to perform his "flesh mechanics." In *Mnemonic*, retrofitted technology is both a cyberpunk tactic employed against the high-tech spheres of corporate strategy and an allegory for the deployment of the past against the future (a theme also prominent in *T2*).

Moreover, personal memory is finally accessed via such retrofitted technology and uncovered in the electronic hinterlands of cyberspace. The Lotek's retrofitted technology of virtuality is used to exteriorize interiority as screens project the digitized interior of Johnny's head. Cyberspace is a phenomenal territory inside Johnny's wetwired brain and like the digital space of the Internet which begins the film, it is controlled by corporate powers. With the help of a cybernetic glove and/or glasses, the phenomenological interface between Johnny and cyberspace is minimized (*no* such interface exists at all in *The Matrix*) and his final immersion into cyberspace is represented in the digitized militarism of a video game. It is a space that is represented as completely Other (unlike the reality simulations of *The*

Matrix) but its threatening environments must be penetrated if Johnny is to liberate his “memory” from corporate ownership and control.

After accessing the coded information lodged in his cerebral mainframe, Johnny is “rewarded” with his lost personal memories. Coincidentally, a cure for the technologized disease afflicting the future is recovered and corporate control disintegrates as Pharmacom explodes for no logical reason. What the film strives to represent is the idealized use of the new cyber-technologies, one which ironically restores an alienated self to the presence of the real by way of the virtual. *Johnny Mnemonic* belongs to a new corpus of SF films, and what these new “popular cyborgs analyses . . . reveal, while few state it, is the recuperation of the organic. Whether through the development or rehabilitation of memory, the discovery of compassion, the development of self/selflessness, the return is from the technological to the human” (Hamilton 1995, 96). Mnemonics are, after all, a technology used to aid the human memory. With the contemporary cyborg, we have a restoration of personal historicity, of memory to an alienated futurity.

Millennial Memorybank Movies

While authentic agency cannot be realized without personal history in *Johnny Mnemonic*, in *Strange Days*, history - or, rather, *virtual* history - is conversely represented as that which paralyses the central character and concurrently immobilizes the future. Rather than acting as a means to preserve the past, recorded “virtual” history becomes an obsession which stunts progress. Lenny Nero is paralysed by the virtuality of memory, or more specifically, by his inability to accept memory’s mortality. The narrative charts his

revocation of this “past-addiction” which leads to an ability finally to move forward and the corresponding restoration of a crumbling social order.

Strange Days’ opening moments recapitulates SF’s preoccupation with the technologizing of vision. The first shot is an extreme closeup of Lenny’s eye, accompanied by a disembodied voice which asks Lenny (and the viewer, by extension), “are you ready?” A second voice replies, “yeah, boot it,” but the film suggests that neither Lenny, nor the viewer, is “ready” for the future’s virtual technologies. Announcing this position from the very outset, the following shot is a brief, digital scrambling of the screen and, concurrently, of the viewer’s vision.

A three minute, long take that is shot with a handheld camera follows, depicting a botched robbery - the aesthetic of an uncensored “Real TV” program (“Only better,” as Lenny reminds us). While Lenny’s experience of the scenario through a “wiretrip” is one of total immersion, the audience must settle for an “inferior” voyeuristic alignment, and yet the death of the individual whose point of view we share along with Lenny is still experienced as the epitome of ontological shock. The viewer virtually experiences the real death of the hapless criminal. Lenny is only briefly disturbed by the wiretrip’s violent end: “You know I hate the zap,” he complains, “It ruins your whole day.” Because the virtual history experienced during these wiretrips is shot from a “first person” point of view, the audience’s voyeurism is aligned with the voyeurism of the characters who experience this “playback.” Thus, Lenny’s callous remarks about the snuff film are an implicit cue as to how we are to respond to the representations of these virtual experiences and, moreover, it will be this

indifference that the film will eventually castigate.

While the workings of the narrative will eventually indict such technology and those who use it frivolously, the film also perhaps indicts by extension the explicit voyeuristic pleasures of the cinema as well. In one particularly harrowing scene, the virtual violence of a rape and murder that we experience from the assaulter's visual perspective is inverted as the victim is wired into her attacker's point of view. The scene's assault on the viewer's vision is literalised (the victim's name is Iris) as we are also forced to share the perspective of both killer and victim. While one character comments that "movies are still better than playback because at least you know when they're over," the film does not seem to share her preference for the cinema and critiques its own process of image-making.

Unable to develop the cinema's sense of closure, Lenny is a "wirehead," addicted to playing back his own virtual memories which never have to be "over" thanks to the futuristic technologies of 1999. He lives in a virtual world, accessing his memories only through the SQUID technology and is represented as a subject whose "private 'memory' has been increasingly constituted from previously mediated 'spectacle' rather than from 'direct' experience" (Sobchack 1987, 235). The irony in Faith's videoed remarks to Lenny, "I love your eyes; I love the way they see" is that Lenny can only see through virtual eyes. His experience with the world is always through mediation, and thus is transferred into the realm of simulacra.

Lenny's "future" environment is also preoccupied by simulacra. The Los Angeles of 1999 is a Debordian society of the spectacle "in which everything that was lived directly

has moved away into a representation" (Debord 1983, sect. 1). It is characterised by a proliferation of images, an excess of signs without meaning and by virtuality for its own sake ("One man's mundane existence is another's Technicolor," Tick asserts). *Strange Days*' principal locale is another L. A. full of devils and ruined angels, a city which has been virtual since Hollywood came to town. L. A. 1999 contains the same urban decay and chaos as *Blade Runner*, only the future is "now." The social order is crumbling in the film and is represented as a police state in which crime is rampant ("911 is busy!" Lenny exclaims). Early moments of the film depict the slow-motion insanity of rioting in streets where female punks even beat up Santa and cops take out pedestrians who get in their way. Lenny watches it all from his car while switching radio stations, as if channel surfing (he appropriately settles on the song "Karmacoma"). Both he and Mace always drive through the Disneyland of chaos without ever being exposed to it from the outside. However, interior environments are often worse than exterior environments as they represent places where the virtual's invasion of the real reaches a fever pitch. At Club Retinal Fetish, Lenny moves through a similar conglomeration of conflicting signs as those he has seen on the streets: S/M as passionless exhibition, Nazi book burnings, and the virtual shootings of "hostages."

Part of Lenny's job as a "playback" dealer is to read these signs and surfaces. In looking over a potential client he determines who he is and what he wants by processing personal signifiers. To shield himself from the onslaught of his culture's violent superficiality, he "uses the enemy," making sure he is always armoured within the signifiers of high fashion. Naturally, he protects "the eyes" and his Armani suit when being roughed

up by Beamer. However, even these tools of the trade are imitation (just as his eyes are), as evidenced by the briefcase full of fake Rolexes he keeps “just in case.” Experiencing a period of personal crisis, Lenny has degenerated into figure of almost total simulacrum.

Aside from its condition of simulacra, premillennial L. A. seems unable to produce the authentic. The film literally takes place on the eve of the new millennium and the forecast is grim. Max claims that “you can tell it’s the end of the world” because “everything’s already been done,” sharing the opinion of postmodern critics that the recycling of culture equals the end of progress. Los Angeles is undergoing a condition of *déjà-disparu*:

the feeling that what is new and unique about the situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been. It is as if the speed of current events is producing a radical desynchronization: the generation of more and more images to the point of visual saturation going together with a general regression of viewing, an inability to read what is given to view - in other words, the state of reverse hallucination (Abbas 1997, 25-26).

Lenny offers virtuality as escapism, claiming it to be “better and safer than the real world” where, as a result of this “reverse hallucination,” nothing is shocking and all is memory. However, the technology he offers delivers only one half of VR’s potentially liberating qualities, in which “the cybersubject’s immersion in myriad virtual realities . . . represents both a *fantasy* of cyborg empowerment and a *real* tactics of adaptations to the exigencies of terminal reality” (Bukatman 1993a, 98). Wiretripping offers the fantasy only, without its accompanying empowerment.

Settling for such half-baked escapism, Lenny is represented as an emasculated subject - a male hysteric whose masculinity is under siege after he literally loses his “Faith.” He is

a fast-talking rhetorician, displaying very little action to accompany his words, as well as a failed paternalist authority figure. Lenny apparently could not perform effectively as a police officer in the past, and even in the present he forgets to load his gun while attempting to catch an “intruder.” Addicted to his own product (he is a failed “dealer” too), Lenny is trapped within a cycle of virtual memory which prevents him from moving forward.

Conversely, Mace, his foil and only true friend, is as tough as her name suggests, but also acts as a maternal figure for Lenny. Refusing to use “playback,” she firmly establishes the real and virtual as oppositions whereas Lenny asserts (perhaps correctly in this future) that there is no difference between the two. Continually privileging the latter over the former, she gives Lenny his much-needed wake-up call, telling him that it is “time to get real!” She correctly diagnoses his problem: that he is unable to accept the fact that “memories are *meant* to fade,” just as a simulated future culture which propagates the superficial recycling of signifiers will not recognize the sign’s state of decay.

One can also recognize a tension between the old SF championing of individualism and contemporary SF’s emphasis on the communal as personified by Lenny and Mace. While the former is out to redeem his failed masculinity - acting as the individual hero saving a damsel in distress - Mace embarks on a mission to redeem the social order, even if it means destroying it first. Lenny even contemplates using the chip that could change the face of Los Angeles as currency in his own individualist endeavours, but balks when Mace threatens to cut off all contact with him should he choose to sacrifice the social for the personal. The film itself flirts with social commentary as it hints at the racism underlying the power

structures of the LAPD - powerful allegations to make especially in the wake of the Rodney King trials. Yet by its conclusion, *Strange Days* pulls away from an explicit indictment by falling into a good cop/bad cop dualism. The white “death squads” of police officers Max speaks of are a fabrication and the murder of hip-hop artist Jeriko One is simply revealed to be the action of two renegade cops and not indicative of an inherent racism among the LAPD’s all-white force.

Still, the film does its best to be a utopian text, as L. A.’s social order *is* represented as being redeemed at the same time as Lenny’s masculinity is reaffirmed. Lenny abandons the paralysis of a virtual past, while in the streets, minutes before the millennial countdown, the crowd realizes that the emperor has no clothes and helps protect Mace from the batons of police officers. They are no longer Baudrillardian sheep, hypnotized by the surface of spectacle into senseless violence (rather than the stupor Baudrillard attributes to the over-s(t)imulated subject) and, in fact, the mob abandons its history of unmotivated aggression at the film’s end. The arrival of their own collective social conscience coincides with the arrival of the Year 2000, and in the aftermath Lenny and Mace embrace in the street amidst a shower of petals as the rioting is transformed into peaceful revelries. While it is problematic (and naive) to position the film as unreservedly utopian, *Strange Days* at least ends with a brief moment of redemption to ring in the next thousand years.⁴ Both Lenny and

4 While Lenny is forgiven for his “bad Faith,” the girl in question certainly is not. Driven away by a squad car at the film’s end, Faith is punished not only for her promiscuity but for the crime of being nothing more than a “bad” memory. Strangely, director Katherine Bigelow does not seem to be using the narrative’s masculinist punitive measures

the citizens of Los Angeles have (if only momentarily) escaped from the “end-of-century moratorium” that so troubled Baudrillard in Chapter One. Moreover, if “history is what hurts” in the film (to misuse Jameson slightly), its end ostensibly represents the arrival of a period of healing and a glimpse of a progressive future’s horizon (Jameson 1981, 102).

Waking Up Without Your Alarm Clock

History is more than “what hurts” in *The Matrix*: it is a lie, an utter fabrication as reality is discovered to be a literal simulation generated by a computer system. The film is an even more explicit comment on the pervasive simulations of a late twentieth-century society of the spectacle. “Memory” is literally force-fed to subjects in the film to induce impassivity, and characters attempt the mass liberation of humanity from artificial memory, from personal histories which are comprised of nothing but representation. Like *2001*, personal agency is paramount as the characters struggle to assert authenticity, to discover the Real, to effect change in the midst of the virtual.

From its outset, *The Matrix* thrusts the viewer into the digital interiority of cyberspace. The Matrix originates from William Gibson’s novel, *Neuromancer*: “a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system” (Gibson 1984, 7).⁵ Correspondingly, *The Matrix* utilizes a Gibsonian cyberpunk aesthetic, as characters demonstrate a penchant for black leather and mirror shades, and a by-now-

ironically here.

5 The term “human system” has grisly connotations in *The Matrix*, as we shall see.

familiar (if not somewhat tired) crumbling urban decay, and perpetual rain comprises a large part of the mise-en-scene. Sobchack would probably identify the aesthetic and space of the film as further evidence of SF's petrified future. However, the film (if not the entire genre) is reinvigorated by a completely new way of representing these spaces, as well as by its characters' completely new way of relating to these spaces, as we shall discern later.

Thomas Anderson, aka "Neo" (the future's "new man"), initially lives a dissatisfied existence within the contemporary (unchanging) space of the present. He works for a faceless computer corporation, one which likely seeks to colonize the chaotic play of cyberspace for capitalist interests. But Neo is not a drone of the capitalist machine, he leads a "double life" in which his anarchistic tendencies have a chance to surface through his hacking.⁶ Discontented by a vague feeling of perpetual unreality, he asks a drug-addled client (who is in the perfect condition to relate), "Do you ever have the feeling where you're not sure if you're awake or still dreaming?" The individual who wakes him from the dream of his life is ironically named Morpheus, and a further irony is apparent in Neo's growing awareness that his computer "handle" is a far more authentic name than his "official" name. As the persona of "Neo" gains primacy, "Thomas Anderson" becomes nothing more than a title enforced by the machinery that suppresses human contact with the Real.

Morpheus reveals to Neo that the reality with which Neo has been familiar is merely

⁶ He is also apparently a disciple of Baudrillard, and in the first of the film's many direct references to the theorist, he hides his pirated software in a copy of *Simulacra and Simulations*.

a simulation manufactured by self-aware machines, designed to sedate the human subjects which they use as organic batteries. To correspond with the film's themes of simulation, many landscapes in the film are complete CGI's, and the digital technology produces a filmic simulacrum similar to that experienced by the characters within *The Matrix* itself. As Sobchack asserts in her writing on digital cinema, "the electronic semiotically constitutes a system of *simulation* - a system which constitutes 'copies' that no longer refer to an 'original'" (Sobchack 1990, 56). In a sense, within the fantasy life which each of the film's technologically subjugated subjects lives, they are all "copies." A treacherous Cypher is not aware of the irony in telling Agent Smith that he "wants to be someone important - like an actor," when put back into the coma of the simulated system. In the Construct, Cypher - like everyone - already is an actor and, appropriately, only Agents have agency.

The Construct is the simulated system in which subjects experience their dream life and is what Morpheus describes as a "neural interactive simulation." It is a prison designed by an invisible, authoritarian system that Morpheus claims one can feel "when you go to work. When you go to Church. When you pay your taxes." The Construct is a simulated system of absolute *control*. Meanwhile, the Matrix itself is actually the nervous system of the technologized future of 2199. Its represented landscapes resemble something out of a Giger painting with towering, skyscraper "memory banks" fusing man and machine, and with fields where humans are grown in pods and plucked by insect machines for energy.⁷

⁷ In seeing these pods, one thinks of the Green Plaza Capsule Hotel's rows of identical "sleeping cubicles" used in between shifts by Japanese workers and effectively

Explicitly using one of Baudrillard's metaphors, Morpheus introduces Neo to "the desert of the Real." Just as he broadcasts its wasted landscapes over an antiquated television set, the "real" future is a retrofitted world of duct tape, hoses, and old machinery used once again in opposition to high technology's dehumanizing effects.

Morpheus remarks that it is not only technology but *time* that "is always against us." Thus, resistance against the simulation induced by the Matrix means a mastery of time itself. Time within the Construct is the eternal present: it is, and always has been, "now." It is significant that the Matrix projects the late twentieth century as the period of ideal simulation, as many critics would probably agree that late capitalism figures as the perfect condition for apathy and inaction. As in *T2*, a mechanized fate controls time in the world of *The Matrix*. The Oracle is a character gifted with foresight and is able to see into a digitally foreordained future. Neo naturally rebels against the idea of fate that the Oracle supports, as he "doesn't like the idea of not being in control of (his) own life." Part of Neo's gift when he comes into his own as "the One" is the ability to cheat, or literally remake fate (an ability characters in *T2* fight to achieve). He is eventually able to mould time according to his will, and yet he does not completely transcend history itself (as Dave does in *2001*). While he changes the future predicted by the Oracle, some of her prophecies are unavoidably accurate, evidenced by the vital information she gives to Trinity: that Trinity will fall in love with "the One" - a revelation that subsequently "resurrects" a fatally wounded Neo later in the film.

represented in *Baraka*'s Tokyo sequence (Ron Fricke, 1994).

Cybernetic wetware allows characters access in and out of the Construct at will and also grants them the experience of a new relationship with time. Communication technologies of the present have become essential in the future, providing the means of entry and escape for the characters and allowing them free movement within the virtual space of simulation. With their phenomenal immersion into the Construct's digital spaces, now experienced as real, *The Matrix* reintroduces depth to the flattened spaces of a two-dimensional world. Such a restoration goes well beyond reinvigorating the experience of an environment deflated under postmodernity, as characters are now able to defy laws of physics with their feats of athleticism within these spaces.

As mentioned above, the biotechnologies and communication technologies also allow for a new physical relation to time. Characters can take phenomenological advantage of the postmodern condition in which time is experienced as a continual "present." Knowledge, for example, no longer takes "time" to acquire and can be obtained nearly instantaneously through rapid downloads. Morpheus, Trinity, and Neo can virtually "transcend" time with their movements - they can actually move "faster" than the physical world as evidenced by their dodging of bullets and physics-defying kung-fu. Moreover, this radical new relationship to time also requires an equally radical new mode of representation. *The Matrix's* visual-effects director, John Gaeta has conceived of such a mode, with his trend-setting "bullet time" photography. "Bullet time," according to Gaeta, is designed along anime's "physics of decimation," which "breaks down action into its components and allows those elements to be meticulously controlled to build the most dramatic effect from dynamic

movement” (Gaeta 1999, 1). The method involves “dynamic camera movement around slow-motion events that can approach twelve thousand frames per second” (Gaeta 1999, 1). In these heavily stylized action sequences, characters in combat actually appear to float, compared to other seemingly-paralysed surrounding objects or “ordinary” subjects. Time is at a standstill, and yet these characters are still able to move. Moreover the shockwaves left by the kinesis of their action are now actually *visible*, etched in a static canvas of time.

No matter how superhuman their actions seem, however, they are essentially fruitless because characters in *The Matrix* cannot change their surroundings. Just as we are perhaps denied full agency due to time’s inexorable flux, the cybernetic human subjects who can enter and leave the Construct at will are not able to *alter* the Construct. The ability to make a material change in time is only enjoyed by humanity’s oppressors, the machines and their servants, the shape-stealing Agents. When Neo finally recognizes his own innate abilities and becomes a master of technology, he is able to subordinate the technology, and thus reality, to his will. By representing Neo’s achievement of a technological satori, *The Matrix* offers the viewer the ultimate fantasy of ontological mastery. Once he is able to make sense of the Matrix’s code - a Zen-like super-awareness in which he can literally see the digital information comprising his phenomenal world - he is able to transcend his digital prison. In doing so, Neo subordinates time as well. He becomes a mutable subject who is nonetheless able to create change in his equally mutable world and is represented in quasi-religious terms as a redeeming Messiah whose “second coming” will remake the world as he sees fit. Or, in other words,

now the human proudly takes up a position within the machine, but almost always from a position of mastery: by entering the machine, the machine becomes a part of the human. The subject is, and is not, afraid to leave the body behind. The computer can become a new body, with its electronic sensorium extending far beyond human capacities, and yet some residual form of the body is retained in almost every instance (Bukatman 1993a, 96).

As a super-Neo rockets into the sky at the end of the film (another transfigured Dave Bowman), his ascension is accompanied on the soundtrack (appropriately) by Rage Against the Machine's "Wake Up." Thus, the film calls for nothing less than a radical reevaluation of self, not only of one's personal ontology in time, but of one's relation in and with the world. *The Matrix* is probably the most utopian of all the contemporary SF texts we have discussed so far. Here, subjects use technology as a means to assert mastery over their own fundamental modality of being and are finally able to "live in a world without rules or boundaries," even the boundaries of time itself.

Conclusion

Crystals Balls and Other Rearview Mirrors: SF from Postmodernity to Postfuturism

The rearview mirror is our only crystal ball: there is no guide to the future except by analogy with the past.

- Northrop Frye

Now that we have reached the end of our review of contemporary SF cinema, the inevitable question remains: where does the genre go from here? It is a question that Sobchack certainly does not hesitate to ask at the end of her own review of SF, as she expresses a fundamental dissatisfaction with the corpus of films she discusses in the concluding section of *Screening Space*. Throughout her analysis, she castigates SF filmmakers for their “inability to imagine the future,” and the films themselves for their tendency to “nostalgize” and to “complacently accept the present as the only place to live” (Sobchack 1987, 305). An apparent utopian herself, she imagines an ideal future for the genre, one which is able to represent the temporality of the future as a state that is “contiguous with the present, in temporal and spatial relation to it” (Sobchack 1987, 305). Unfortunately, with the exception of the low-fi aggro-feminism of Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, 1984), Sobchack finds none of the films she references to be exemplars of her “postfuturist” ideal - none that are “political” or “empowering” (Sobchack 1987, 305).

At the conclusion of my analysis of contemporary SF, the “postfuturist” cinema highly anticipated by Sobchack, I am forced to admit that it is once again unlikely that the

genre would satisfy her criteria. In reviewing the SF films of the past fifteen years, I have seen little evidence of the appearance of a genre that engages more actively with issues of class, race, and gender than its earlier manifestations. Nor have I witnessed the birth of a new generic mode of representation that is not “‘transfixed’ by excess scenography” or “caught up in an overwhelming and paralysing material heterogeneity” (Sobchack 1987, 305). Perhaps I have been looking in the wrong places. It is more likely, however, that it is Sobchack who is looking for qualities that do not exist. While I respect her desire to see a mode of SF which is more committed to engagement with the socio-political order, it is unfair of her to criticize the genre for something that it is not. Moreover, one perhaps should not approach SF, a genre about possibilities, with a firmly entrenched *idea* of what its films *should* be like, nor an *ideal* to which the films must measure up. Finally, is it really accurate to claim that the genre does not empower the viewer? Again, perhaps it is Sobchack who is looking in the wrong places.

Her appropriation of Jameson’s ideas about postmodern historicity are not always advantageous to her analysis of SF. Contemporary SF is not a genre which expresses a “disbelief in progress,” nor do its preoccupations with the past indicate the narration of the future as a temporality of “weakened historicity” (Sobchack 1987, 248, 253). By considering how the SF of 1985 to 1999 engages with history, or evokes historicity, I have also been trying to determine ways in which the genre *is* empowering. The genre’s politics of empowerment are not located within its “new familiar relationship to otherness,” or within its commitment (or lack thereof) to the specificity of identity politics, but in its

phenomenological engagement with history (Sobchack 1987, 253). I have concentrated on only one facet of contemporary SF's phenomenology, that of its positioning of fictional and viewing subjects in relation to time. This concentration is a direct response to Sobchack who often overlooks the *lived* experience of time in her examination of the genre.

Therefore, before considering the genre's hypothetical future, I would first like to review the ground we have covered and offer some conclusions (disregarding any potential Baudrillardian mumblings about obsessions with moratoriums and recapitulations). Breaking down the thematics of SF into three interconnected discursive fields - the utopian/dystopian film, the apocalyptic film, the technological film - I have speculated as to how issues of historicity are addressed within each thematic. Specifically, I considered each film's position in relation to history and historicity, individual and collective memory, and personal agency. Several questions were asked about these films in the chapter breakdown in my introduction, and it is to these questions I would now like to suggest answers based on the ground we have covered.

In Chapter One, which provided a historical context for contemporary SF, I asked the following questions: what role does history play in SF? Why is earlier SF often preoccupied with memory? And how have the SF protagonists of previous generations been able to bring about change in their fictive worlds? As mentioned above, history tempers the violence of progress in these films, a progress that "assumes that the dynamic is greater than the stable and unchanging" without realizing that by definition, "it moves toward greater stability" (Frye 1967, 83). Futuristic narratives are "emplotted" (Hayden White's term) according to

the same logics as the moralism of historical narratives. Memory (either collective or individual) is the means by which the protagonists of these films access a necessary historical conscience. A single, generalizing strategy cannot be applied to summarize the various ways in which characters are able to assert agency in the temporal flux of their future worlds, since the dates of production of the films reviewed in this chapter span 1926 to 1985. However, when successful, they often create change by repositioning themselves experientially in their relation to time and the past.

In Chapter Two, I reviewed the contemporary dystopian film, asking: who has control over history in these films and how is it exerted? When is personal memory employed in opposition to public history? And how are individuals able to secure agency in dystopian environments? Typically, characters living in a repressive social order are denied a “functional” relationship with history - that is, due to the manipulations of the State, they are unable to experience the past authentically, and thus become disenfranchised in the present. In these future dystopias of conspiracy, paranoia, and rigorous oligarchical tyranny, memory is often the only defence against an ever-changing, State-controlled history. Often, characters are not able to assert personal autonomy, nor establish an authentic relationship to the past under these conditions, but what the films agitate for is both a liberation of history as political prisoner, and a radical skepticism which encourages subjects to question totalising, State-induced metanarratives of control.

In reviewing the apocalyptic films of Chapter Three, I considered the following: how is the end of history represented in these films? Where does the act of remembering lead

characters at the end of the world? What are some of the different ways in which characters assert themselves in the midst of apocalypticism? Generally speaking, not only is the literal threat of the end of time imminent in these eschatological narratives, but the principal characters have, in a sense, already experienced the end of their own personal worlds. Often, due to a traumatic event from their past, they have been cut off from the present, or else personal history gets in the way of an affirmative experience with the present. Memory must often be overcome to reestablish a healthy connection with the present, to allow the future to progress, or else they must reexamine their own past in order to reassert control over the future. Coming to terms with individual history also means reconnecting with the larger social order and being able to establish a sense of the eternal in the midst of the future's ever-changing transience.

Finally, in an evaluation of the technological narratives of Chapter Four, I asked the following questions: what impact do the new technologies of cyberspace and cybernetics have on one's sense of time and history? Can the digital memory of cybernetics be employed in the service of retrieving, preserving, and/or reconstructing actual memory? Does new technology allow for new conceptions of agency? Filmic representations of the new biotechnologies and communication technologies that are currently changing our contemporary social order can be said to offer a new reconnection to the past. With the cyborg, both past and future are metaphorically etched upon its physicality in the present, while with the virtuality of cyberspace, one phenomenally experiences a sense of time that is in constant flux, and yet, paradoxically retains everything that ever was. While characters

must occasionally relinquish their obsession with paralysis-inducing virtual history, they may also employ technology in the service of retrieving a past from which they are alienated. Although SF continues to be a cautionary genre, one concerned with the appearances of technologies that are occasionally employed before a system of relative ethics emerges to govern their use, the recent SF film is more or less a propitious text. Films about the technologically-induced changes to personal ontology suggest that a new, empowering relation to a (postmodern) condition of conflated time is possible through the use of the very instruments that bring about such change.

To conclude my summation, I would like to suggest that history plays a much more constructive role in contemporary SF than previous critics have allowed. The literal “presence” of signifiers of the “past” services narratives which are often fundamentally moralistic in nature. Science fiction’s historicity is employed to prevent the alienation of “future shock” - the estranging tendencies of new technologies - which necessitate new modes of epistemological and ontological adaptation. In such films, history plays the vital function of conscience. Representations of familiar futures are not necessarily conservative, but are indicative of a development in SF that refuses to celebrate progress at the expense of history.

Since I am writing about a corpus of films that ask at their most fundamental level, “what’s next,” one would expect that an appropriate conclusion would be to follow suit. As I mentioned earlier, Sobchack concludes her own analysis in *Screening Space* by asking the same question about the future of films about the future. However, unlike Sobchack and the

makers of the films that we have discussed, I do not have the hubris to imagine what the future might be like. Divination has not been the motivation behind this thesis; I hope, instead, that I have been able to offer a lucid position on the relatively unexplored “pastness” of the future in contemporary SF. It is my hope that such an abnegation of attempted prophecy will not be construed as a critical copout. Because my interest in the genre is a matter of its employment of historicity, I have no desire to concern myself with “things to come.”

Nor will I follow Sobchack’s lead by asserting a preconceived ideal of SF to which I hope subsequent films will measure up. Such efforts can only end in disappointment. Rather, to borrow an analogy from Geoff Pevere, I am content with reviewing “the cinema we got” rather than pining for “the cinema we need.” Again, I appreciate Sobchack’s idealism, but in considering the films of the last fifteen years, I am not sure these ideals will be realized any time soon. Moreover, I am equally hesitant to lend my support to a position which essentially argues that the developments of a genre should be expected to adhere to the particulars of a single critic’s yearnings, no matter how noble these yearnings might be. I hope my position will be taken as realistic rather than complacent.

One thing is for certain: the current popular reception of the genre shows little signs of abating. If I may momentarily retract my aforementioned reluctance to soothsay, I will hazard to predict that as a result of the cinema’s increasing “digitization” (a transition which Sobchack has recently remarked on at length herself), and the continued profitability of the “cinema of affect,” the future popular success of SF is well-assured. Since January 2000, we

have already seen the release of numerous SF films (four of them in August alone) including *Mission to Mars* (Brian DePalma, 2000), *Pitch Black* (David Twohy and David Eggby, 2000), *Titan A. E.* (Don Bluth, 2000), *Battlefield Earth* (Roger Christian, 2000), *Frequency* (Toby Emmerich, 2000), *X-Men* (Brian Singer, 2000), *Space Cowboys* (Clint Eastwood, 2000), *Hollow Man* (Paul Verhoeven, 2000), *The Cell* (Tarsem Singh, 2000), and (of course) *Godzilla 2000* (Hiroshi Kashiwabara, 2000). The “future” continues to be produced at an extraordinary rate, and the velocity of SF seems only to be increasing exponentially. Science fictional acceleration prompts more questions to consider for the future: will historicity continue to play the role it has in premillennial SF? How will future subjects continue to explore their newly developed relation with time? What sorts of modalities will constitute tomorrow’s “rememberings?” In essence, what will a movement from postmodernity to “postfuturity” be like?

I turn to the film released on the final day of the twentieth century (perhaps of the last millennium) for a potential model of the genre’s future evocations of historicity. P. T. Anderson’s *Magnolia* was timely introduced to North American theatres on December 31, 1999. While the film is not, by strict definition, science fiction (though the rain of frogs in its climactic sequences certainly has science fictional resonances), it does articulate the themes I have introduced in ways both poignant and strange. To recall Jameson for one last time, “history is” again “what hurts” in *Magnolia*. Characters stumble through their collapsing personal worlds, scarred by history’s many knives, without hearing each other, without seeing each other, in desperate attempts to find a moment of tangibility. “Things fall

down. People look up,” the film’s trailer asserts, and indeed, it seems that the present world, burdened by the weight of the past, is about to crumble in on itself.

By means both extraordinary and mundane, however, the ensemble of loosely interconnected individuals making up *Magnolia*’s strange universe is able to find personal salvation, is able to forgive the past its violence. “It’s not going to stop ‘till you wise up,” each of them sings along with Aimee Mann on the soundtrack in a moment of powerful magical realism, and somehow all of them achieve the means to do so. Gaps between alienated generations are restored, history’s paraplegics are able to move forward, while past, present, and future are once again experienced as a contiguous flow with none of the temporalities gaining dominance. Just as the contemporary science fictional subjects we have been discussing forge new relationships to their future by means of the past, so does the cast of *Magnolia* pass through the past’s dis-ease in order to establish a holistic future. In doing so, both temporalities are restored. Moments of review, in which one considers where one has been, are absolutely essential in order to establish where one is going. While moving forward through the rearview mirror, little apocalypses occur, at the end of which, as promised, are miraculous revelations.

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