Science Fiction and Postmodernism

Editorial Introduction: Postmodernism's SF/SF's Postmodernism

Are we late? Are we early? Can it be we're on time?

Linking postmodernism and SF is hardly a new thing; many of SF's most sophisticated commentators have been doing it for the past 15 years. Roger Luckhurst, in "Policing the Borders: Postmodernism and Science Fiction," shows that theorists of postmodern genres have often taken up SF as a *cause célèbre* to prove that the traditional boundaries of genre have collapsed in the fluid new culture of Postmodernity. N. Katherine Hayles, in the recent book on the chaos paradigm reviewed in this issue, turns to SF texts as touchstones for understanding the transformation of Western culture into a culture of chaos. Larry McCaffery, in his collection of interviews with SF writers, also reviewed in this issue, argues that SF has become the pre-eminent literary genre of the postmodern era, since it alone has the generic protocols and thesaurus of themes to cope with the drastic transformations that technology has wrought on life in the post-industrial West. Ambitious theorists like Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Donna Haraway turn to SF topoi not only as a major symptom of the postmodern condition, but as a body of privileged allegories, the dream book of the age.

What is it about these two shadowy concepts, postmodernism and SF, that draws them together? Postmodernism has been defined and de-defined enough times to have taken on a shape, a silhouette—but it is the silhouette of an enigmatically protean form. Every discipline seems to have a different focus, drawing on different sources for support—sometimes texts, sometimes artworks, sometimes empirical phenomena. SF has an advantage over most other disciplines in that it has had something like a theory of postmodernism ingrained in its futurism for many years. SF has observed with professional interest the increase, at first gradual and then drastic, in the influence of information/simulation technologies since World War II. The effect of the sciences, technologies, and economies of information has been the emer-gence of a new ideology and practice of power, what Haraway calls the "translation of the world into a problem of coding." As the technologies of informational analysis, high-speed computation, simulation, and communica-tion become more sophisticated, they increasingly determine widely different spheres of culture. One need only contemplate the difference information technology has made in the past 15 years in science, entertainment, politics, personal communications, international finance, and state policy-making and administration to see that it has instigated an entirely new, complex orientation to the world.

In the culture of information, data-flow has an almost autonomous determining character. The traditional connections of information with knowledge and meaning have been loosened by the conscious scientific decision to separate quantitative units of information from culturally relevant meaning, by the voracious appetite of Western scientific culture for innovation, and by new economic and political mechanisms of domination and capital formation in which the cynical control of consciousness is of primary importance. In this milieu, traditional mechanisms for selection eroded long ago, except for the self-perpetuating economy of information itself. The increasing velocity of the feedback of information technology into social life has transformed not only the rhythms of life, but the very ideas of what can be imagined about the future and known about the present. Where hierarchies of selection collapse, all sorts of boundaries break down.

The collapse of traditional values hurts SF less than most forms of literature. For SF has always thrived on the rejection of certain classical "truths": for example, that human nature is unchangeable, that values can be eternal, that social power is derived from nature. A genre born in oxymoron, like the Chinese Stone Monkey, SF has always depended on drastic combinations of incongruous categories presented as if they were truly capable of embodiment. This tendency of SF has reached a pinnacle with postmodernism, articulated in J.G. Ballard's introduction to the French edition of Crash, the de facto founding manifesto of postmodern SF: "I firmly believe that science fiction, far from being an unimportant minor offshoot, in fact represents the main literary tradition of the 20th century." The transformation of the world into a technological project makes SF the only form of literature capable of mirroring reality: "The main 'fact' of the 20th century is the concept of unlimited possibility. This predicate of science and technology enshrines the notion of a moratorium on the past—the irrelevance and even death of the past—and the limitless alternative is available in the present."

With the catastrophic failure of traditional humanistic thought, SF has rushed in with a treasury of powerful metaphors and icons capturing the reality of insecure borders: the Female Man, xenogenesis, the cyborg, the simulacrum, viral language, cyberspace, Mechs and Shapers, and many others.

The initial impulse for our special issue was a wish to translate two of Baudrillard's essays on SF that originally appeared in Simulacres et Simulations and then to invite thoughtful commentators to write reactions. (Incredibly, Baudrillard's rich, provoking essays might still be unknown to English readers were it not for Jonathan Benison's lonely essay in Foundation #52 [1984], "Jean Baudrillard and the Current State of SF," in which we first encountered Baudrillard's provocations and which might thus be considered the seed for this special issue of SFS.) Baudrillard's two essays elaborate his science-fictional vision of the present as a world characterized by a radical collapse of the distance between the real and its imaginary projections; this implosion has resulted in the compression of the

science-fictional imaginary into everyday existence and in the evaporation of both SF and critical theory as domains of the imagination autonomous from reality. Taking *Crash* as his model, Baudrillard delves into the most violent of border violations, the erotic collision of technology and the human body.

The commentators' responses demonstrate the great range of reactions not only to Baudrillard's ideas, but to the hyperreal condition he describes. David Porush casts Baudrillard as a High Priest of the Temple of Textuality crying doom and despair because the "romance of direct cognition and neurophysiology" (represented by Virtual Reality and Artificial Intelligence above all) undermines Baudrillard's own critical alienation. For Brooks Landon, Baudrillard induces the astonishing effect that comes with facing a new set of world-conditions head on, with no place from which to judge. For Katherine Hayles and Vivian Sobchack, in contrast, Baudrillard's intervention is dangerously nihilistic. Sobchack argues that Baudrillard has obscenely misread Ballard's fundamentally moral novel by extolling a fatal objectification of the human body. Hayles, who also contests Baudrillard's reading of *Crash*, is willing to grant Baudrillard respect as a writer of SF: although his account of reality as a world of simulations is inaccurate as description, still he can induce the condition by "systematically eliding the borders that mark the difference between simulation and reality."

Most interesting to me personally is Ballard's short response, which was originally part of our correspondence. It seems curious at first for the author of *Crash* and its "Introduction" to claim that SF is a naive entertainment genre under attack by postmodernist literary critics. Few SF writers have created an oeuvre of such disturbing and sophisticated prose as Ballard, few are less likely to be demolished by academic criticism. Yet the writer who claimed that SF represented the main literary tradition of the century now appears, as it were, to be regretting his words. Literary theory has not had much effect on SF, I think, and what little there has been has not been particularly pernicious. If SF is being killed, it is more likely to be at the hands of the megacorporate incarnation of what Brecht called the capitalist dope trade, described in detail by Cristina Sedgewick in "The Fork in the Road: Can SF Survive in Postmodern, Megacorporate America?" (SFS #53), and by the military culture of high-speed combat simulation. Ballard knows this; it is one of his themes. His tirade against academic criticism and the concept of postmodernism is, I believe, and attempt to protect a border: not between SF and mainstream fiction, but between the fields of art and the locusts of rationalistic analysis.

Baudrillard's essays are exercises in border violation—between technology and the body, chance and order, theory and SF, and others. The responses try either to restore the borders or to redraw them elsewhere. In this they set the tone for the rest of the issue, for each of the essays takes as its theme one or another of the putative barrier-breakdowns that characterize postmodern SF. Luckhurst offers a critique of several literary theoretical claims that postmodernity effaces the borders between SF and the "mainstream" as it effaced the difference between high and low art. He shows that the radical claimants discreetly restore those borders in the margins of their

arguments, usually conferring tacit authority on the mainstream at the expense of SF, whereas the proper task if such criticism would be to question and examine the meaning and authority of categories like "mainstream fiction."

Christopher Palmer's "Postmodernism and the Birth of the Author in Philip K. Dick's *Valis*" argues subtly that the narrator/protagonist in *Valis* represents a striking move in postmodernism's logic of transgressions. Where Dick's earlier fiction had followed the protocol of distancing ethical dilemmas in textuality, *Valis* violates the protocol. The novel acts out a collision between a relentlessly self-proliferating, de-differentiating textuality on the one hand and the embarrassingly concrete ethical presence of Dick the author as the actual split-narrator/protagonist of the novel on the other. Where textual simulations had seemed to kill the author in classic postmodernist fashion, Dick transgresses against that "classicism" by bringing in the author as a disconcerting, uncertain intrusion of the real.

In Scott Bukatman's "Postcards from the Posthuman Solar System," the contested border zone is the interface between the organic human body and technology. Bukatman identifies a mini-canon of SF texts that have proposed versions of "posthuman" universes, where both the human body and the ideology of humanism are violated, deconstructed, and transcended in new cyborg combinations. David Porush explores what might be considered the enabling conditions of such posthuman trajectories. In "Prigogine, Chaos, and Contemporary Science Fiction," he details the ways some SF writers have used Prigogine's ideas about dynamical systems and dissipative structures to represent the emergence of new, unpredicatable, complex orders out of disorder. Finally, in my own essay on "The SF of Theory: Baudrillard and Haraway," I argue that SF has ceased to be a genre of fiction *per se*, becoming instead a mode of awareness about the world, a complex, hesitating orientation toward the future. This SF condition requires a form of theoretical reflection that breaks down the boundaries between theoretical discourse and SF, an approach best exemplified by Baudrillard's and Haraway's cyborg politics.

The essays in this issue share a highly theoretical perspective, derived mainly from poststructuralist literary theory. They are, in addition, almost exclusively concerned with print embodiments of SF, and with fiction written by Anglo-European men. The only reason for this is that things have just turned out that way. It can be argued that the essence of both postmodernity and postmodern SF is in non-print media, the simulation arts of film, video, computer graphics and games, virtual reality, and computer simulation. Furthermore, postmodernity's insistence on dissolving Master Narratives in favor of local narratives implies that cyborg-feminist and race-concerned SF captures vital aspects of postmodern SF that we have not explored here. Finally, the breakdown on the boundaries between SF and non-SF has led to a problematic hybrid, called the "slipstream" by Bruce Sterling and "specular SF" by Veronica Hollinger, that is fast transforming the very "mainstream" that SF is often contrasted with. We trust that in future issues of SFS we will be publishing explorations of these areas as a matter of course.—ICR