Sexing the cyborg: gendered technological subjectivities in contemporary science fiction

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Sexing the Cyborg: Gendered Technological Subjectivities in Contemporary Science Fiction

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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This thesis presents a feminist exploration of gender, corporeality, and relationships between bodies and machines within the increasingly technologised milieu of the late twentieth century. The subject matter through which this exploration is conducted is a science fiction closely modeled on the present world and based upon technologies of communications and electronic information. "Cyberpunk" is at the core of this kind of science fiction, but in order to allow for somewhat wider developments I have coined the term "cyborg-SF".

I consider both the initial masculinist representations in 1980s cyberpunk, and later attempts by other writers to subvert and/or expose such representations. Given that bodily boundaries are just one of many transgressed in cyborg-SF, one might expect to find here a proliferation of feminist and unorthodox representations. Yet technoculture in such fiction is figured predominantly as a masculine domain from which female characters are often specifically excluded, and patriarchal norms persist in virtual worlds of infinite gender possibilities. Employing a model primarily derived from Donna Haraway, but also influenced by McKenzie Wark, Zoë Sofia and Trinh T. Minh-ha, I interrogate cyborg-SF to discover why this is so, and seek to answer the question of whether it is possible to write feminist cyborg-SF.
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Dedication

To Chris
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Introduction

Genre fictions are not simplistic forms which simply reproduce the most conservative discourses and ideology, but are sites for the articulation of new discursive configurations, for other or different voices from those of mainstream texts, and for readings which challenge the portrayal of contemporary society offered by these texts. – *Anne Cranny-Francis*¹

Feminist sf cannot afford to dismiss the potential of cyberpunk. – *Karen Cadora*²

The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join relational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history. – *Donna Haraway*³

Why look at science fiction for understandings about representations of gender? One reason is that science fiction (hereafter SF) as a genre can open the mind and the imagination to cosmic possibilities, to worlds of alternative ways of being, of thinking, and of seeing one’s present physical world. SF can “un-ground” the reader, allowing her to see her ground from afar and with new eyes. In particular, the kind of SF I examine in this project appeals to me because its focus on the human-technology interface relates very closely to what especially interests me in contemporary Western society. I have always been intrigued by computer and communications technologies, and when I encountered the Internet for the first time some years ago, I felt that the paradigms of my world had indeed shifted. As Jenny Wolmark observes:

The extension of communications technologies into every aspect of social and cultural life is no longer an imagined or science fictional future; it has already taken place, with consequences that are both alarming and hopeful. As the distinction between the imaginary and the real, and the present and the future, becomes less obvious, the generalised definition of science fiction as a popular genre in which utopian or dystopian fantasies of the future are explored clearly requires further consideration.⁴

The particular texts which most radically manifest my area of interest, published in the 1980s and 1990s, are those that specifically foreground nar-

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ratives in which the conjunction or fusion of humans and technology is of primary importance. In this respect, these texts seem to mirror in a peculiarly intimate way the *Zeitgeist*, the preoccupations and anxieties of the end of the twentieth century, a time characterised by huge growth in technology-mediated culture. The texts I have selected to examine belong in an information-and communications-technology-based SF, which I shall term cyborg-SF. Cyborg-SF is that SF which has as a central narrative interest the use and effects of corporeally interpenetrative communications technology and body-machine combinations; typically it also imagines and explores societies that use such technology, and the interaction of humans and human-like beings within them. Strictly speaking, the cyborg is a mechanically augmented human being, a hybrid of flesh and technology, the word being derived from *cybernetic* and *organism*. Featherstone and Burrows define the cyborg as “a self-regulating human-machine system. It is in effect a human-machine hybrid in which the machine parts become replacements, which are integrated or act as supplements to the organism to enhance the body’s power potential.”\(^5\) I develop my definition of cyborgs and their near relations, androids and robots, in chapter one of this thesis. One core area of cyborg-SF is “cyberpunk”, a term used to describe cultural productions of a number of writers and creative artists working in the mid-1980s. I go into more detail about cyberpunk and debates surrounding the form later, but I shall use the category of cyborg-SF to include not only cyberpunk proper, but also other SF texts with similar or related characteristics.

The term “cyborg” is doubly advantageous for my purposes because it can be used as a metaphor for hybridity in gender, ethnic and political affiliation, and for a number of other potential social convergences. Such hybridities are of special importance in relation to the particular concerns of my project. It is this amalgam of identities which prompted my choice of the blanket term cyborg-SF to describe the kinds of texts under examination.

Cyborg-SF offers the potential for analysis of the gendered body operating in a technologically-mediated world. Hard SF’s generic preoccupation with machines and technology is of interest to my study only where it intersects with the gendered body. In other words, I will not include a text purely on the grounds that it is about futuristic information and communications technologies; and I will be paying particular attention to texts which explore

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social formations such as might develop around these technologies. The texts I will be looking at are deeply implicated in matters other than extrapolated hard science and technology. It is the presence of opportunities offered by texts to examine representations of gendered subjects, embodied or otherwise, in the kinds of technofutures indicated above, that accounts for inclusion.

The narrative interests of cyborg-SF are particularly pertinent to, even predictive of the physical world I inhabit: a world of media permeation; of seemingly unstoppable technological development; of related ecological degradation and Third World exploitation (especially of women and children); and a world where national political entities are white-anted by pervasive capitalist, multinational, corporate interests. The feel of cyborg-SF is the feel of the day after tomorrow, seen through the presumptions of today and overlaid with cynicism disguised as technophilia. (Here I refer to the propensity of both cyborg-SF and the more lunatic fringe of technofetishist culture to hold the natural world and corporeality in contempt, favouring an anticipated transcendence into a non-physical reality.6) It is these presumptions—specifically hegemonic masculinist presumptions—reflected in some cyborg-SF which provide a principal critical focus for my interest. I am concerned personally in the way female subjects are represented in this predictive fiction which so closely reflects today, for the very reason that it does so closely reflect today, and is shaping tomorrow. Complex responses to these representations from contemporary cultural theorists, from individuals whom I encounter in both the primary, physical world, and in the virtual world of the Internet, and my own sometimes contradictory responses, suggested to me that this fiction required consideration.

My own critique is based on a synthesis of theoretical models—it is, itself, a cyborgian hybrid. My starting point is a feminism defined by belief in the possibility of change and choice. This feminism seeks ideological coalitions and hopes for the formation of alliances among groupings of individuals who work toward social justice, economic equity at macro and micro levels, and environmental safekeeping—a position informed by Donna Haraway’s formulation of the cyborg which I discuss at length in chapter two. I am not claiming a singular or prescriptive theory of What Feminism

Is. Apart from feminism, I make use of several critical approaches which come under the general rubric of postmodernism, principally poststructuralist analytical techniques. While recognising the usefulness of psychoanalytic theory, and the contribution to literary/cultural criticism made by psychoanalytic critics, in the present study I have not employed in any uniform manner any of the various theoretical stances which belong to the psychoanalytic model.

Before I proceed, however, I want to situate myself to account for my own perspective. Timorously, I claim for myself the position of outsider, knowing full well that I also represent or embody the privileges of being a white, anglophone, middle-class professional, educated to an advanced level: categories, to quote Donna Haraway, “invisible to themselves, which are called ‘unmarked’ and which are dependent upon unequal power for their maintenance”.7 However, I am also female, and writing from the periphery of anglophone culture in a postcolonial, albeit predominantly white, society. The effortless, hegemonic, unselfconscious parochialism and egocentricity of many US and European writers and critics are not entirely unmarked to me. But as Vietnamese-American film-maker and feminist theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha observes, “They accept the margins; so do we. For without the margin, there is no center, no heart.”8 My position, then, is that of an able-bodied, anglo-celtic, feminist woman in her mid-life, living in a small city in a southern hemisphere, industrialised, Western-style nation with a recent colonial past. Following McKenzie Wark, I use the word “antipodal” to describe my perspective. Wark develops the concept of antipodality in a discussion in which he moves from a geographical, literal understanding to a more metaphorical one, expressing the idea as a form of social, relational understanding with which I am in sympathy:

Antipodality is the feeling of being neither here nor there. It is an experience of identity in relation to the other in which the relation always appears more strongly to consciousness than either the identity it founds or the other it projects.9

This experience is particularly acute for me, writing about dystopian urban milieus and weird, hallucinatory datascapes swarming with cynical cyborgs,

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9 McKenzie Wark, “Suck on This, Planet of Noise!” Media Information Australia, No 69, August 1993, pp.72-73.
while I am surrounded, as I write, by a quiet eucalyptus forest populated by vermilion and emerald parrots, rainbow lorikeets and satin bower birds. I do not mean to imply that physical surroundings create my sense of antipodality; I mention them as a way to figure difference, otherness, alterity as vividly manifest. For me, the contrast between cyberpunk’s urban slums or hyperreal neon datascapes and my sylvan Arcadia is inescapably immediate, and provides a striking metaphor for difference in positioning. I am not attempting, here, to make a comparison between two habitats as such, nor, indeed, to make an argument favouring “the natural” or “the real” (however these might be constructed) over whatever binary opposites may come to mind. It is the consciousness of relationality that is at issue here, which Wark names “antipodal”.

This consciousness recurs also in my online social encounters on the world-wide electronic communications networks to which I shall refer collectively as the Net. This includes the Internet, electronic bulletin boards, the World Wide Web, screen-based conferences, textual chat interactivity and other computer-mediated communications. When I speak/write in a real-time chat “conference” about (for example) the weather I am experiencing, my fellow Internet conferencees on the other side of our tilted planet express amazement at the fact of my spring or summer, jolting us all out of our sense of (virtual) concurrence and shared “space”. “Of course,” they say/write, recovering from their sense of estrangement, “your seasons are the wrong way round”. Conscious of the multiple ironies here, I suggest jokingly, “Your seasons are the wrong way round”. In interrogating the notion of “us and our rightness”, I attempt to highlight the contradictions inherent in “the correct ‘us’” versus “the incorrect ‘them’”. By this interaction I try (mostly in vain) to destabilise the whole binary of “the thing itself at the centre” and “the other on the margins”. In fact, what happens is that the relation between the two is brought into focus, the “unmarked centre” looks at itself by virtue of its suddenly visible relation to the “marked periphery”, and vice versa. This is a trivial example, but it serves to show how relationality, difference and a sense of confronted otherness mediated by such technologies as the Net are increasingly evident and in need of theorising. Wark expresses this sense of “hereness” and “thereness” as an “active trajectory”:

This new experience of difference is an experience of an active trajectory between places, identities, formations, rather than a drawing of borders, be they of the self or of place. This is antipodality – the cultural difference created by the vector. The
acceleration of the vectors of transnational communication will make the antipodean experience more common.\textsuperscript{10}

I think Wark actually means “the antipodal experience” here; in any case, I am using “antipodal” in contradistinction to “antipodean”, which I take to be a strictly geographical positioning. Wark continues:

In an overdeveloped world, both the culture of everyday life and the culture of scholarly thinking about the present seem to me to betray traces of unease if not downright paranoia about antipodality. Yet it is undoubtedly the emergent axis of technocultural struggle. At present, antipodality exists in the politics of third nature in two forms. On the one hand, it leads to attempts to shore up identity against the flux. Black nationalism and born-again Christianity seem to me to have elements of this reactive return to an imagined core of immutable identity and community. On the other hand, the kind of coalition building involved in queer politics or the politics of affinity Haraway … speaks about in contemporary feminism, seems to me to treat antipodality more as a fact of life than as a threat to identity.\textsuperscript{11}

It is this latter form of antipodality which appeals to me as a useful ground from which to interrogate theoretical positions. “To use marginality as a starting point rather than an ending point is also to cross beyond it towards other affirmations and negations”, as Trinh T. Minh-ha writes.\textsuperscript{12} For me, the usefulness of the concept of antipodality is as an intellectual or metaphorical reading/subject position. It is not necessarily to do with planetary latitudes or meridians—notional measurements which in any case are becoming obsolete in the era of global electronic communications networks.

Zoe Sofia’s “Down Under” position, formulated in her essay, “Aliens ‘R’ U.S.: American Science Fiction Viewed from Down Under”, expresses a similar perspective, though more geographically identified. In SF criticism, she notes, “what we see depends upon where we stand; objects of discourse are constructions from particular positions.”\textsuperscript{13} Viewed “australly”, Sofia says,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Wark, 1993, p.72.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Wark, 1993, pp.72-73. Wark’s view of second and third nature is expressed in the following: “The ‘conquest’ of [first] nature and the creation of the second nature of built environments presupposes this abstract space of flows. From the first fleet to the fast clippers, its development is central to the project of modernity. … The passage from modernity to postmodernity seems to me to involve the passage from one form of abstraction to another – from the second nature of abstract social spaces created by sea and rail transport to the abstract communicational spaces created by the telegraph, telephone, television and telecommunications.” Wark, 1993, p.71.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Trinh, 1995, p.216.
\end{itemize}
American science fiction can be seen as propaganda for specifically American interests:

And here I could speak, like those from many worlds, of how the good ship USS Enterprise has trekked into Australia, disobeying the prime directive with rip-off business deals, political manipulations, and militarization of ports like Fremantle and towns like Alice.14

Referring to American SF films, Sofia develops her argument to suggest that their inherent propaganda results in a dissembling rhetoric whereby “Euro-masculine science and Americanized technocracy”15 attempt to persuade mass-media consumers of the practicality, rationality and purity of a technological ethos which is in fact lethal, criminally wasteful and exploitative. I would like to extend Sofia’s argument, adopting a similar point of view but contesting a different ground; that is, the developing spaces of virtual culture described in the SF texts I critique, virtual culture being the social and political discourses within global communications networks. These developing spaces, as I will argue, are closely connected to actual research and development, and therefore will play a significant role in the formation of communications technologies of the twenty-first century.

The theoretical model of antipodality is also similar to a subject position of the “inappropriate/d other”, proposed by Trinh T. Minh-ha.16 The inappropriate/d other is a position in relation to a dominant, phallogocentric, heteropatriarchy; an “other” which does not define itself solely by the fact of its otherness from, and opposition to, the dominant group, nor perceives itself as in hierarchical relation to it; not of it, yet not completely separate either; not “purer” nor more eth(n)ically admirable; but an “other” which, in its relationality, is able to critique both itself and the dominant group; an “other” which enters the spectrum of dominant/subordinate at right angles, so to speak, and can cut through the plane at any point. Donna Haraway has developed Trinh’s concepts as follows:

Designating the networks of multicultural, ethnic, racial, national, and sexual actors emerging since World War II, Trinh’s phrase referred to the historical positioning of those who cannot adopt the mask of either “self” or “other” offered by previously dominant, modern Western narratives of identity and politics. To be “inappropriate/d” does not mean “not to be in relation with”—i.e., to be in a special

16 See Trinh T. Minh-ha, “She, the Inappropriate/d Other”, Discourse, No. 8, Fall/Winter, 1986–87.
reservation, with the status of the authentic, the untouched, in the allochronic and al­lotopic condition of innocence. Rather to be an “inappropriate/d other” means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality, in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality—as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination. To be inappropriate/d is not to fit in the taxon, to be dislocated from the available maps specifying kinds of actors and kinds of narratives, not to be originally fixed by difference. To be inappropriate/d is to be neither modern nor postmodern, but to insist on the amodern. Trinh was looking for a way to figure “difference” as a “critical difference within,” and not as special taxonomic marks grounding difference as apartheid.17

The condition of an antipodal subjectivity corresponds to being an inappropriate/d other with an added nuance of global relationality. Being an “antipodal inappropriate/d other” may offer perspectives which are critical of totalising, hegemonic and imperialistic narratives associated with “Euromasculine science and Americanized technocracy”, or at least, may suggest a starting point from which to express an “insurgent” subjectivity,18 neither belonging comfortably to Western dominations of the North, nor strictly to postcolonial alterities, yet partaking of both in varying degrees. The figure of the antipodal inappropriate/d other—a “split and contradictory self”19—offers a hand-hold on the vexed relationalities of colonialism, class, race, and proximity to a near-north neighbourhood called, in dominant narratives, “the Far East”—one of the great synecdochical constructions of Otherness.20

As Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak observes,

Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you [are constructed as subaltern by the elite] in three ways. If, however, this formulation is moved from the first-world context into the postcolonial (which is not identical with the third-world) context, the description “black” or “of color” loses persuasive significance.21

In other words, although I cannot claim to be black, third-world or of colour, I may still be constructed as subaltern by the elites of former colonial and present culturally hegemonic powers. I wish to reconnoitre this position in


18 I have borrowed the term “insurgent” from Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies, Deconstructing Historiography”, in In Other Worlds, Essays in Cultural Politics, Methuen, New York, 1987, p.197.

19 Haraway, 1991a, p.22.


part because it helps to explain a nagging sense of standing, as it were, to one side of the reader being addressed by most cyborg-SF writers in an unintended estrangement (similar to the Net conversation about the seasons to which I referred above).

In a project whose title invites questions about gender, a word about how I will be using gender as a theoretical concept is necessary. Debates about definitions of and distinctions between sex, sexuality and gender have been central to feminisms of all hues for at least three decades. The issue has been discussed, and is still being discussed, comprehensively and persuasively by many theorists. Rather than rehearse all their arguments here, I will briefly indicate only the main themes. In contemporary popular culture, the word “gender” has become a trendy catch-all term relating to all differentiations between women and men. In the same popular terrain, the word “sex” is used to refer to sexual activity (as in “having sex”), or relates to a box on a form where F or M is usually filled in. Before “gender” became current, “sex” was used to include the most basic XX or XY chromosomal identity markers as well as the entire social complexity of being a woman or a man (e.g. “the fair sex”). When the latter meaning was explicitly taken over by the word “gender”, “sex” could refer to the biological identity one is born

with, “sexuality” to one’s erotic desire preference, and “gender” to one’s socially developed identity. Feminists have since problematised these meanings by, for example, proposing ideas of performativity, masquerade, cultural difference, and asking the question of whether the body is ever a *tabula rasa* upon which “a gender”—or even a sex, let alone desire—is written. As well, individual gender self-identification can be severely at odds with any generalised or essentialist prescriptions of gender. For example, a person who was born male, identifies and presents as female, and whose desire is excited by women as a lesbian fits no simple sex-sexuality-gender categorisations. For the purposes of the present work, I am adopting Donna Haraway’s definition of gender expressed in her essay, “‘Gender’ for a Marxist Dictionary”. Here, Haraway defines gender as “a concept developed to contest the naturalization of sexual difference in multiple arenas of struggle. Feminist theory and practice around gender seek to explain and change historical systems of sexual difference, whereby ‘men’ and ‘women’ are socially constituted and positioned in relations of hierarchy and antagonism.” Gender may be understood, then, as an apparatus of cultural construction, an interpretation which seems to me to offer a useful grasp on the concept. It is in this sense of cultural construction that I will use the words “masculine” and “feminine” to relate to gender, while “female” and “male” will refer to biological differentiation.

In the critiques that follow, a definition of gender is important as the societies portrayed are, in many cases, characterised by boundary instabilities of all kinds, especially those of gender. In fact, the texts I critique have been selected for the very reason that they address, interpret and/or problematise gender, often in contradictory or inadvertent ways. In this study, I seek to interrogate the complexities of gender represented in cyborg-SF, and to explore their array with the aim of throwing light upon present technocultural gender constructions, or what Anne Balsamo calls the “emergent cultural formation of the techno-body”. Balsamo continues:

The purpose of feminist criticism — in fiction and in theory — is to provide a perceptual framework for understanding the transformations as they happen to our bodies and behind our backs.

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Among other transformations, Balsamo includes those taking place in and through contemporary computer-mediated communications technologies; these are the very transformations fantasised in cyborg-SF, and the ones I interrogate.

My opening chapter begins with an overview of relevant areas of the broader SF field, arranged in categories of narrative interests, to show how cyborg-SF texts belong to, and spring from preceding SF. Naming some generic precursors to what I have defined as cyborg-SF of the last fifteen years, as well as pre-existing narrative interests held in common with it, I suggest ways in which cyborg-SF differs from its forebears, and introduces innovation. A widespread debate occurred in SF and academic circles following the appearance of cyberpunk, centring on whether it was a completely innovative form within the genre or, indeed, whether it was SF at all. Critics have displayed an astonishingly wide range of interpretations and judgments in relation to cyberpunk, from acclamation as the postmodern fictional form (e.g. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr); through guarded approval as fiction that offers a space for feminist representations (Anne Balsamo, Karen Cadora); to a vehement guilty verdict on charges of patriarchal conservatism (Nicola Nixon). The importance of this debate lies not so much in the precise definition of cyberpunk as such (although I offer a selection of definitions here), but in cyberpunk's claim that it proposes a radically new and politically subversive representation of traditional SF tropes, reflecting a revolutionary ethos springing out of the present. I briefly summarise the debate over cyberpunk as a SF form, describing its principal characterising tropes. By locating cyberpunk among its precursors, I argue against the more extravagant claims put forward for it. Finally, I suggest what I hope are some useful terms to describe aspects of nascent, technologically-mediated cultures in whose construction cyborg-SF is deeply implicated, especially in relation to concepts of reality. Many of the texts I examine draw on and extrapolate from present-day communications and virtual reality technologies, problematising notions of what is physically "real", what is imaginary, and what is "virtually" real. I have found it necessary to formulate a set of provisional terms to discuss and distinguish between these blurred concepts.

The second chapter discusses theoretical critiques which relate specifically to cyborg-SF, or to the technosocial milieu from which cyborg-SF emanates. Of these, I focus on particularly relevant formulations proposed by Jean Baudrillard, Al lúcquère Rosanne (Sandy) Stone, and Donna Haraway.
Each of these theorists offers a distinct perspective on technoculture and cyborg-SF: broadly speaking, these are technophobic, technophilic, and radical feminist respectively. Baudrillard develops a range of ideas concerning the problems of postmodernity, some of which I discuss here—principally, his claim that through technologies of communication and simulation, the contemporary world has collapsed into the imaginary, which can no longer maintain its distance from the real, resulting in his much-debated concept of "hyperreality". Stone explores new social formations coming into being around the Net, and argues that cyberpunk SF has played and is still playing a key role in the development of virtual culture. Proposing a mythic cyborg figure, Haraway takes a strongly socialist-activist view, eschewing technophobic feminism which calls for outright rejection of potentially world-dominating technologies. She challenges feminists to appropriate such technologies for their own strategic ends, and to form new coalitions to combat racist, heteropatriarchal and globally-destructive powers. As I will suggest, Haraway's view seems to be the most cogent and useful of these three ideological tendencies regarding virtual culture.

Chapter three is devoted to a close reading of what I and many critics regard as the key cyberpunk text, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (first published 1984). With its spectacularly original blend of science fictional and other generic tropes, and especially its extraordinary visualisation of an inhabitable, computer/network-based virtual reality for which Gibson coined the term cyberspace, *Neuromancer* provided the seed and mulch for a fertile field of creative endeavour in SF, establishing a set of predominantly conservative, masculinist conventions which other writers have followed, and which feminist writers have attempted to subvert. In my critique of *Neuromancer*, I look at the central character, Case, as an embodied subject in terms of his relationship with cyberspace. I use this relationship to open my examination of the issue of technology as a masculine domain and, as a related topic, analyse the artificial intelligences in *Neuromancer*, namely, Wintermute and Neuromancer. Through these "posthuman" figures in *Neuromancer*, I interrogate the founding cyberpunk version of this classic science fictional trope. In the relations these three characters have with embodiment and cyberspace, masculinist discourses of technology and transcendence can be described. Also in this chapter, I pay particular and overdue attention to the character of Molly. For several reasons, Molly is a more intriguing character than Case, yet she is frequently overlooked by critics more drawn to Gibson's wonderful evocation of cyberspace itself, and to its mas-
ter, Case. Molly serves as a benchmark for one version of the typical cyberpunk female. Her problematic status as hero is an important feature here, one which feminist versions of cyberpunk narratives endeavour to redress.

Many of the characteristic features found in *Neuromancer* were first ushered into the SF world in two earlier short stories by William Gibson: “Johnny Mnemonic” (originally published in 1981) and “Burning Chrome” (originally published in 1982). In chapter four I look at “Johnny Mnemonic”; Laura J. Mixon’s *Glass Houses* (1992); and Melissa Scott’s *Trouble and Her Friends* (1994).27 “Johnny Mnemonic” serves here as the standard bearer for conservative masculinist cyberpunk regarding the limitations placed on otherwise promising cyborg characters. On the other hand, Scott’s venture into cyberspace is radically subversive of such Gibson norms as social fragmentation and heterosexuality, her transgressive characters approaching the Harawayan cyborg model. Mixon attempts a similar subversion with a character whose bodily boundaries are anything but stable, but is not wholly successful. My critique seeks to show how these texts illustrate varying ways in which both conventional and transgressive gender negotiations are represented in cyborg-SF, addressing the question of whether cyborg-SF can meet the challenge, or fulfil the promise, of the Harawayan cyborg figure. The crossing of the body-machine boundary raises all kinds of questions, not the least of which is that of gender. For example, in a world where bodies may take on a variety of shapes and forms through optional electronic masquerade, surgical and prosthetic alteration, and other corporeal interventions, can gender identity, too, be a matter of choice? According to Judith Butler, “The construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability.”28 In some of these texts, corporeality itself is radically unfixed.

Chapter five examines issues of gender and desire in a technofuture where human beings interface with machines in ways which profoundly challenge notions of stable gender identity. Three of the texts I analyse in this chapter attempt to subvert normative gender expectations, and explore possibilities available to less rigid, more transgressive identities. Cyborg-SF presents a characteristic vision of fluidity regarding corporeal boundaries as its heroes alter their bodies or, without actually dying, desert their bodies.

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27 Bibliographic details for these texts will appear in full in the chapters dealing with them. Details for texts to which I refer in passing may be found in the Bibliography at the end of this thesis.

and project their still-living awareness into the hallucinatory datascape of cyberspace. Nonetheless, the form is remarkably resistant to representations which contravene traditional—that is, heteropatriarchal—gender expectations, ranging from sexuality and desire to what is proper for a gendered character (human or otherwise) to do for a living. The first text examined is Gibson’s “Burning Chrome”, where desire (sexual and otherwise) as performance constitutive of subjectivity is central. Candas Jane Dorsey’s “(Learning About) Machine Sex” (1988), focuses on sex and desire too, but disrupts the gender conventions so abundantly present in “Burning Chrome”, and offers a feminist subversion of the form. Two other short stories make up the rest of this chapter, one by Pat Cadigan titled “Pretty Boy Crossover” (1986), and the other by Maureen F. McHugh, “A Coney Island of the Mind” (1992). Both of these stories deal with gender and/or desire in surprising ways quite disruptive of the traditional representations of cyborg-SF.

Throughout my thesis, a major interest is the relationship between human beings and technology, and nowhere is this more explicitly explored than in the area of artificial intelligence (AI). I focus specifically on narratives involving AI in chapter six, where I analyse three texts in which AI entities play a key role: Melissa Scott’s *Dreamships* (1993), William Gibson’s *Idoru* (1996) and Pat Cadigan’s *Synners* (1991). As a number of critics have observed, there is a strong link between masculinity and technology in the contemporary world, a link which is reflected and emphasised in the texts I look at here. My readings of the texts in this chapter explore some of the questions surrounding AI; for example, would a machine need to be masculine to be considered human? If a human forsakes the body and melds into the machine, why is gender included in the transfer? Why is AI invariably assigned a gender? In her exploration of the question of what defines human nature in relation to digitally-derived intelligence, Scott leaves questions of gender apropos such intelligence undecided. A dozen years on from the AI entities of the Neuromancer trilogy, Gibson ventures back to the realm of AI with his portrayal in *Idoru* of a feminine “digital personality construct”, offering a representation rather different from his previous explorations, but one which reinforces conventional views of gender. By contrast, *Synners*, Cadigan’s long, rambling story with its cast of thousands, centring on computers, AI and direct brain-machine interface is, on the surface, a frankly

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feminist novel. It portrays an array of cyborgised human characters as well as fusions of human and artificial "minds".

Finally, in chapter seven, I look more broadly at representations of the socio-cultural milieu of cyborg-SF. I endeavour to show how, specifically, discursive constructions of gender are apparent within that milieu and how masculinity is negotiated in a technosphere of fluid identities and post-human subjects. To this end I examine another William Gibson novel, *Virtual Light* (1993), in which class, gender and technology interact in significant ways. I also revisit Gibson's *Idoru* and Cadigan’s *Synners*, which I dealt with in terms of their representations of AI in the preceding chapter. All three narratives are profoundly concerned with the portrayal of fractured societies in which the pervasive influence of the media, communications and other electronic technologies are central features, along with social dislocations resulting from earthquake and/or the operation of unrestrained multicorporate compulsions. Discourses of technology, gender and social hierarchies are at the heart of the texts under examination here. In looking at these texts, I seek to demonstrate that, even with the best intentions and a number of exemplary feminist characters, writers imagine much of the technocultural milieu of the future as looking a lot like that of today. The old familiar masculinist paradigms assert themselves wherever technology and gender interact.

Of all genres of representation, SF is probably the one which is most conducive to inventing and exploring revolutionary and radical liberatory possibilities. Why, then, are female characters so often excluded from cyberpunk's depictions of cyberspace? Why is technology per se figured predominantly as a masculine domain? Why are artificial intelligences almost always gendered male? What is it about cyberpunk characters that seems to require them to be heterosexual? Is it possible to write feminist cyborg-SF? In the following chapters, I seek to find tentative answers to these questions.

To allow a reader to enter easily into my interpretations and analyses, I have in many cases given a short synopsis of the story concerned before proceeding to critique it. Although the more common method is to analyse a narrative piece by piece, recounting parts of the story as the critique requires, many of the texts I look at have excessively complex plots—especially those of Gibson and Cadigan—which made the customary method impossibly convoluted. I hope my synopses will enable my readings to be more easily understood.
Chapter One
Cyber What?

Mapping the Terrain

Science fiction, a genre specific to the era of rapid technological development, frequently envisages a new, revised body as a direct outcome of the advance of science. And when technology intersects with the body in the realm of representation, the question of sexual difference is inevitably involved. – Mary Anne Doane

Science fiction is generically concerned with the interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others and with the exploration of possible worlds in a context structured by transnational technoscience. – Donna Haraway

SCIENCE fiction has been in existence as a genre for nearly two centuries in its widest sense. Very broadly speaking, the bulk of SF falls into one of two camps. The first category is SF whose primary concern is extrapolated science and technology, so-called “hard” SF. The more extreme version of this form focuses predominantly on carefully accurate and minutely described scientific and technological extrapolation, in which the “science” is of far greater importance than (often neglected) social representations, and the human characters often lack depth. Harry Harrison’s and Marvin Minsky’s *The Turing Option* (1992) is an example worth mentioning here because the subject matter (artificial intelligence) falls into my area of interest, but the manner in which it is explored largely focuses on the science at the expense of human and social representations. By contrast, “soft” SF, whose primary concern is extrapolated social formations with only incidental or peripheral technology, is the other dominant tendency of SF. A good example of this is the work of Ursula Le Guin, whose fictions rarely make use of explicitly described technology. Nonetheless, all SF, by definition, makes some use of imagined technology in order to present human or other living beings in strange new worlds, be they interstellar, parallel universes, or future Earth. Of course, there are many texts which straddle the two camps: for instance, over the years, the *Star Trek* TV series and its spin-offs have exemplified the

3 The classic text of this kind is Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), in which she explores the workings of a society quite human and recognisable in all but the matter of gender.
full range of the SF imaginary, from the hardest of hard science to the softest of social visions.4

It is not my purpose here to give a comprehensive history of the development of SF.5 The genre is huge, and even those texts which have a specific bearing on my project are too numerous to be detailed here. Rather, in order to situate within the SF genre the texts I have selected for critique, in this chapter I will give a broad overview of cyborg-SF’s forebears.

Forebears I: The Reconstituted Body

Cyborg-SF’s earliest ancestor was Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s classic work, Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus (first published 1818, revised 1831). This novel also has a fair claim to be called the originator of the whole science fiction genre, although it was written originally as a ghost story.6 In Frankenstein a number of potent SF icons and traditions with which cyborg-SF resonates are present: here be monsters brought to life by men; arcane machinery producing something which is out of control; Gothic horror; binary representations including man-monster, good-evil, and male-female; the manufactured being; the fragmented body; the whiff of perverse or monstrous sexuality; the evils of scientism—Man usurping the role of God; the cyborg. These are icons whose signifying force has reverberated in the SF imaginary for two centuries, and which find again new representations in the SF of the past fifteen years. In Shelley’s much-analysed story, the unnamed monster is galvanised to life by the channelling of an electrical charge from a thunderstorm into his reconstituted body. Cyberpunk fiction appropriates the same motif in more hip language, referring to vat-grown flesh which is activated through microsurgery and microchips, new body parts grafted and grown for sale to the decaying rich. Frankenstein is relevant as a forebear text because, among other things, it portrays the disintegration of the human subject and its recomposition from disparate and discrete parts, and because it calls into question what it is to be human.


6 Staying by a lake in Switzerland, Mary Shelley, her husband Percy, and a group of their friends including Byron agreed that each would write a ghost story to pass the time. Mary’s contribution was the story of Frankenstein.
Of interest to a feminist interrogation of Shelley's text is the assignation of gender to the monster who is not only male but heterosexual, a discursively as well as "literally" constructed human. The assignation of gender to the artificial intelligences and cyborg bodies of cyborg-SF is equally discursively constructed. In cyborg-SF, the question not only of the created being's gender, but also its humanity or otherwise continue to be explored. *Frankenstein* can be read as an exploration of what it means to be a human of a particular kind, and in this respect it is a forerunner of many such science fictional investigations, especially cyborg-SF. With a male monster and a male scientist, *Frankenstein* is also in some respects a model for the vast majority of SF texts, including many of those I will be looking at in detail, which feature male protagonists and masculine technological interests. This is not to say that *Frankenstein* is a masculinist text: a wide variety of feminist readings are available. Shelley's work is also important from the point of view of the conjunction of machine and human where the latter is, initially, completely dependent on the intermediary offices of the former for life itself. In this case, however, the machine, once its life-giving duties are over, fades into the background and is not used again despite the monster's desire for a repeat performance to produce a female version of himself. A possible reading of the absence of the female subject in relation to technology is that in discursive terms it (technology) can only properly be associated with the masculine, which also finds resonance in cyborg-SF. Shelley's machinery, however, plays a limited role, unlike the machinery of cyborg-SF (principally the computer), which plays a central and ongoing role in cyborg-SF narratives, and an intimate part in the lives of its human (or otherwise) users.

**Forebears II: Robots, Androids and Cyborgs**

Robots, androids and cyborgs are traditionally represented in SF in a number of stock roles, for example: alien/other—figures against which humanity distinguishes and defines itself; as a threat to puny humans; as sex objects; and as versions of hypermasculinity or the monstrous female, some of which I discuss later. They form part of the staple imaginary of SF in all its forms—literary, filmic and televisual—and some writers such as Philip K. Dick use the words android and robot interchangeably. At this point, a few definitions are required to continue my discussion.

Descendants of automata, *robots* are (in my definition) unconfined in
appearance to a human model (although they may be humanoid), but like androids, have a technological, or built origin. A robot is a mechanical unit designed to be programmed to perform tasks. It may have artificial intelligence, be sentient or non-sentient, mobile or stationary, is purpose-built for particular tasks as opposed to simulating/exceeding a human-defined range of capabilities, and is not supposed to be taken for human. An example is the robot R2D2 in the film *Star Wars*, despite the fact that R2D2 is referred to, confusingly, as a 'droid. R2D2 displays many human-like behaviours and elicits a high degree of liking from audiences, which indicates humans' propensity to anthropomorphise their machines rather than any inherent humanity on the part of R2D2.

For my purposes, I define an **android** as a built, sentient, self-aware, artificial, possibly part-organic (genetically-engineered or "vat-grown"), human-looking composite which can pass as a human being and is designed to replicate and/or improve on human capabilities. The androids in SF may be seen perhaps as a more sophisticated, user-friendly form of robot. Literally meaning "man-like", the term android was not commonly used until the 1940s, and its meaning has since often been blurred with that of robot and cyborg. Good examples of androids are the various Terminators in their eponymous films (1984, 1991), and the replicants of *Blade Runner* (1982).

The terms robot and android have been taken to mean both a human-like machine and a part organic, part machinic, human-like synthesis. To avoid confusion, in my definition both androids and robots are entirely built, while a **cyborg** is a being which is composed of organically human parts plus any number and variety of technological enhancements. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*’s engineer, Geordi LaForge, who wears built-in vision-enhancing shades, and RoboCop are examples. (Lieutenant Commander Data, also in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, combines genetically-engineered human tissue

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7 The word “robot” comes from the Czech *robota* (serf labour, or statute worker). Built beings called “robots” appeared first in Karel Capek’s 1920 play *R.U.R.* (“Rossum’s Universal Robots”), but as Brian Stableford notes, “Capek’s robots were artificial human beings of organic origin, ... the term is usually applied to machines.” See Brian Stableford, “Robots”, in Clute and Nicholls, 1993, p.1018.

8 Shelley’s monster was more of a cyborg than an android or a robot, whereas the antecedent golem of Jewish mythology is a transitional, man-like creature made from clay: a mystical, mineral android. The golem is brought into contemporary SF in Marge Piercy’s *Body of Glass* (1992), where the traditional golem story is paralleled with that of the android Yod.

9 In the latest *Star Trek* film, *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), Geordi has shed his shades and sports two startlingly blue techno-eyes.
and microcircuitry and as such is an android. Despite his pallid, jaundiced appearance, Data replicates a white human male and is by and large treated as such by the flesh-and-blood (though not necessarily human) crew of the Enterprise.\(^\text{10}\) David Tomas suggests two forms of cyborg: “the post-organic, the classical (hardware-interfaced) cyborg and the postclassical, (software-interfaced) transorganic data-based cyborg or personality construct” (author’s italics).\(^\text{11}\) Claudia Springer adds a third cyborg variety:

The first type [as defined by Tomas] combines an organic human body, which either pre-existed as a person or was genetically engineered, with industrial technology in the form of implants or prostheses. The second type has no physical form but consists of a human mind preserved on computer software. A third type of cyborg results when fictional characters plug software programs directly into their electronically wired heads.\(^\text{12}\)

The distinguishing characteristic of such hybrid creatures is that in addition to the embrace of technology, they are also organic human beings, born or grown, even though their subsequent incorporation of (or by) technology may render their claim to being still human problematic.

Body-machine combinations have fascinated the SF imaginary for decades. Examples are texts such as C.L. Moore’s “No Woman Born”, (1944) Samuel R. Delaney’s Nova, (first published 1968) Anne McCaffrey’s The Ship Who Sang (1969) and its successors, Tiptree’s “The Girl who was Plugged In”, (1973) and Frederik Pohl’s Man Plus (1976) to name only a few.

As I have suggested, robots have been represented historically as an alarming alternate other, a machine “nature” against which human nature is defined. Earlier narratives presented no special confusion between real human beings and their humanoid creations: although the creations might crave to be recognised as human and might in fact “pass” as human at least for a while, everyone knew what real human beings were, and they were not robots, androids or cyborgs, which were firmly settled as “other”. Contemporary cyborg-SF differs from earlier explorations in its focus on the ontology of the human. In cyborg-SF, ontological essentialism regarding the

\(^{10}\) The idea of Data’s recognised “humanity” is specifically at issue in “The Measure of a Man”, originally aired in February 1989, in which Data is on trial in an attempt to decide whether or not he is a sentient being. See Nemecek, 1992, p.76.


human is a major problematic.

Anxiety around the instability of the category “human nature” provoked by robot or android representations is particularly evident in the Ridley Scott film Blade Runner, which has a number of classic android types: for example, Pris, the sex toy, and Roy Baty, the superman fighter/killer/slave. Roy Baty is a particularly poignant and terrible example of the troubled definition of the human, seeking, as he does, information on his built-in limited lifespan in the hope of finding a way to stay alive. He experiences love, fear, wonder, grief and hope. One of the most striking scenes in the film is when he meets Tyrell, the scientist-president of the corporation which built him—in effect, when he meets his maker. Baty, calling him “father”, takes Tyrell’s head between his hands and kisses him passionately on the mouth. Then, using his super-human strength, he crushes Tyrell’s skull between his hands. Concentrated into a minute or two, both the pathos and horror of the artificial human are represented, recalling the same qualities in Frankenstein’s monster. In addition, the marginalised, ostracised and feared “other”, in this case the homosexual male, is invoked.

Androids have also featured in the work of Robert Silverberg (Tower of Glass [first published 1970]); C.J. Cherryh (Port Eternity [1982] and Cyteen [1988]) and many other novels and stories throughout the 1970s and 80s. Androids feature memorably in several Philip K. Dick texts, where, as Stableford notes, confusion between real and synthetic is central. Dick’s notable androidean works include Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep (1968) and We Can Build You (1972). In “The Android and the Human”, an essay Dick wrote in 1973 (quoted by Stableford), he says: “Someday, a human being may shoot a robot which has come out of a General Electrics factory, and to his surprise see it weep and bleed. And the dying robot may shoot back and, to its surprise, see a wisp of gray smoke arise from the electric pump that it supposed was the human’s beating heart. It would be rather a great moment of truth for both of them.”

The notion of built creatures attaining or seeking humanness is a common theme in SF, and one which is explored in many cyborg-SF texts.

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13 In the 1972 UK edition of Philip K. Dick's novel, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, on which Scott’s 1982 film is based, Roy’s name is spelt both Baty and Batty. There are significant differences between Dick’s original novel and Ridley Scott’s film, but both share the central philosophical question of what makes a human being human, and conversely, whether an intelligent, self-aware machine can be called human.

Another noteworthy film on the topic is Android (1982). In this semi-comic action adventure film, the central android character, Max (with whom Star Trek's Data has much in common), spends a lot of time painstakingly trying to learn how to be human (among other things, he practises kissing in front of a mirror, suggesting that he, at least, believes that being human necessarily means being sexual). He is enslaved to the mad, obsessive Dr Daniel, his maker, but with the help of Cassandra, an ethereally beautiful, highly intelligent female android (made by Dr Daniel for—what else?—sexual purposes; like many such representations in traditional SF, this female android is designed as the perfect slave-paramour), he eventually throws off the shackles imposed on him by his Evil Scientist maker. Max brings the unfinished Cassandra to life by inadvertently making physical contact with her while he is kissing a human woman, an amusing variation on the lightning charge which served Victor Frankenstein's purposes. Later, Max teams up with Cassandra and together, they leave for Earth from their remote space laboratory home where the film takes place. Despite Cassandra's obvious superiority to Max (she is, after all, a later model), or possibly because she is more crafty in the gendered ways of the human world, she insists that he pose as Dr Daniel, and she as his assistant (Max's role). The Earth patrol which comes to rescue them from the laboratory accepts, without question, their now conventional gender roles, as well as their apparent humanity. Despite this mild satire, gender is represented as quite unproblematic, and heterosexuality is unquestioned. But machine/human identity is open to question, even more so by the fact that the real Dr Daniel, in a surprise ending possibly borrowed from Alien (1979), also turns out to be an android.

Notions of gender specificity and sexual prowess are the perpetual subtext also in such films as RoboCop. The association of masculinity with machinery and the male culture of law enforcement discursively require the organic remnants of Murphy, the original murdered police officer, to be encased in an obviously male body whose armour suggests a virile sexuality. RoboCop himself, however, is apparently unstirred by sexual urges, yearning more for the lost companionship or perhaps the “normality” of his wife and son in the suburbs, memories of whom have been imperfectly erased. Interestingly, the only flesh part of the original police officer visible amidst the invulnerable armour which comprises his head and body is his lower face, which is characterised by a very full, soft and beautiful mouth, suggesting a degree of ambivalence about the invulnerability of this
Sexing the Cyborg": Chapter One

particular cyborg at least.\textsuperscript{15}

Traditionally in SF, robots, androids and cyborgs are the creations of male characters in stories by male writers who give the “male/neuter equals male” equation as “natural”, unproblematic. Strictly speaking, RoboCop is neuter; but he is unmistakably masculine. The man-made creature is predominantly conceived of as a being made for servitude, leading inevitably to a sense of rivalry and underlying threats of various kinds, not only to its maker (clearly embodied in Frankenstein’s monster and Roy Baty), but to ordered society at large. In 1941, Isaac Asimov and John W. Campbell invented the famous “Laws of Robotics”, reportedly to counter terror inspired by the robophobic notion of rampaging robotic monsters.\textsuperscript{16}

The longevity of these laws is indicated by their quite comic, subverted reappearance in Rudy Rucker’s Software (1982) and Wetware (1988), in which robot characters refer contemptuously to the Asimov Laws as tyrannical oppression which they have violently overthrown, and to still-enslaved computers as “asimovs”.\textsuperscript{17} The subversion stops here, however: in common with the majority of SF writers, Rucker’s imagination, with minor exceptions, fails at the notion of robots which do not exemplify the “male norm”—that is, robots are unproblematically male (or neuter, which amounts to the same thing) except where they are designed for sexual use by (human) males, in which case they are represented as female.

The question of gender continues to challenge writers of cyborg-SF texts, in which the “tin-man” robot of earlier texts metallically shouting “Warning! Warning!”, and waving its (his) pincers in the air gives way to less visible, disembodied yet still ineluctably male machine intelligences.

\textsuperscript{15} The RoboCop films have been widely critiqued by cultural theorists regarding their problematising of the boundary between technology and humanity. See, for example, Springer, 1993; also “The pleasure of the interface”, Screen, Vol 32 No 3, Autumn 1991; Anne Balsamo, “Reading Cyborgs Writing Feminism”, Communication, Vol 10, 1988; and Scott Bukatman, Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993.

\textsuperscript{16} These laws were: 1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm; 2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law; 3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws. Rampaging robotic monsters are still very much in vogue, judging by the SF sections of video shops. The Terminator films are good examples.

\textsuperscript{17} Rudy Rucker, Live Robots (combined publication of Software and Wetware), Avon Books, New York, 1994. Incidentally, there are a number of SF in-jokes in this text, including the name of the main robot character, Ralph Numbers, which harks back to Hugo Gernsback’s 1911 story, “Ralph 124C 41+: A Romance of the year 2660”; the cover of the book version published in 1925 is an example of a mad scientist creating an alluring mechanical female. See John Clute, Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia, RD Press, Surry Hills, 1995, p.214.
Indeed, the entire technosphere of cyborg-SF is deeply enmeshed in discursive gender categories exemplified by the constructed beings which populate it.

**Forebears III: the machinic body**

Machines are a primary source of inspiration in the SF imaginary. Contraptions such as time machines, faster-than-light spaceships and intelligent computers are common fare in SF. They function indispensably as facilitating devices to allow writers scope for imaginative exploits, and permit such SF pleasures as a sense of future marvels or the overcoming of physical limitations in the Newtonian world. Imagined machines for transportation, weaponry, communications and surveillance and, of course, robots are all standard fare. Hugo Gernsback, founder of the SF pulp series *Amazing Stories* in 1926, was a proponent of the “miraculous machine” school of thought, but the sense of optimism surrounding imaginary machines which characterised SF texts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was complicated later by the more complex work of politically aware writers such as Aldous Huxley, whose *Brave New World* (1932) attempted to consider, among other things, the social and political consequences of a machine age.

While much SF continued to propound the miraculous machine, following technological and scientific advances resulting in the devastating weapons of WWII, many writers moved from Gernsbackian optimism and wonderful gadgetry to a more sinister view, that of machines too powerful and dangerous for humans to control. It should be noted that the machines of SF have (until the last decade, at least) imitated the machines of real life inasmuch as they are almost invariably, if tacitly, designed, built and operated by men to further men’s purposes, and are often connected with warfare. In contemporary SF, as in contemporary society, suspicion of machines remains deeply entrenched, despite a general conviction that human civilisation is now inextricably bound up with its machines. Stableford summarises: “Formerly, speculative fiction’s main concern in dealing with machines was the adaptation of machines to pre-existent

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18 Writers who, in the 1940s and 50s, wrote about out-of-control machines include Theodore Sturgeon, Clifford D. Simak and Philip K. Dick.

19 One has only to think about the sorts of office conversations surrounding the demonic idiosyncrasies of photocopying machines—e.g., “It doesn’t like too much paper in its tray”; “It always jams when you’re in a hurry”—to confirm such suspicion.
human purposes ... now the main concern is with the challenges facing our descendants as they are forced to adapt, physically and mentally, to their mechanical achievements and environments”\textsuperscript{20}—which leads us back to the notion of the cyborg, exemplified by such cyborg-SF texts as Melissa Scott’s \textit{Dreamships} (1993), whose narrative explicitly depends on human adaptation to technology, and Pat Cadigan’s \textit{Synners} (1991), where human characters “change for the machines” (see chapters six and seven of this thesis).

As actual machine technology developed, so did the machines of SF, with a reduction in the size of SF machinery coinciding with the invention of the microprocessor. The apotheosis of this tendency is nanotechnology. Interestingly, the evolution toward miniaturisation and nanotechnology in the SF imaginary is not reflected in the dimensions of many of the mechanised beings recently represented in, for example, film—robots, androids and cyborgs—which are frequently built on the male beefcake model as I have suggested, proving that size does matter after all, or at least that the size of the (male) body is still thought to signify social power as opposed to mere strength. As Springer notes, “The cyborg’s physical prowess is heightened, not abandoned, and its strength is muscular, not cerebral.”\textsuperscript{21} Here, phallic power is represented by body size, and the massive masculine body suggests a massive phallus, both symbolically and literally. However, either out of prudery, anxiety, modesty or delicacy, the “genital” parts of such mechanised beings are generally elided. This may indicate a kind of shyness, especially on the part of filmmakers, who attempt not to draw attention to the one part of the massive male body which is perhaps \textit{not}, after all, augmented or interfered with.\textsuperscript{22} The point I would like to suggest here is that the homologous “genital” parts of masculine machines, irrelevant from the point of view of generating offspring (a purpose not at issue with built beings), risk being seen by anxious male subjects as a signifier of dominance over, and competition with, human males, and possibly as a competitive source of attraction and pleasure for heterosexual human females. Therefore in most male-type robots, androids or cyborgs, this part of the physique is quietly ignored.\textsuperscript{23} Springer suggests that masculine and feminine stereotypes have

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Stableford, 1993, p.756.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Springer, 1993, p.88.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} For a perceptive account of the anxiety which surrounds the depiction of male genitals, see David Buchbinder, \textit{Masculinities and Identities}, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1994, pp.74–89.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} The original RoboCop, by contrast, has both massive metal musculature and a considerable crotch bulge, generally regarded as a sign of both dominance and potential
\end{itemize}
long been used as metaphors for technology. “What aggressive, muscular
cyborg imagery does”, she says, “is assert the dominance of a phallic
metaphor for technology”.24 The cyborg’s technological form embodies
metaphors of human sexuality: steely hard phallic strength is opposed to
feminine fluidity.

A contrasting variation on the unseen giant phallus co-indicating
power along with massive metal musculature in the mechanised body can be
found in Frederik Pohl’s Man Plus (1976). Here, the protagonist, surgically
altered and implanted as a cyborg to fit him to live without support systems
on Mars, has his inappropriate penis removed, much to his initial
consternation. Oddly, particularly in view of the fact that he knows his wife
is having an affair with the surgeon who is cyborgising his body, he seems to
get over his loss quite quickly. His emasculation can be read, perhaps, as a
leaving behind of the sexed body, and even as an early foray into the
posthuman, an area explored further in cyborg-SF.

An alternative view of machine masculinity, one which, in heterosexual
discourse, may explain the elided genitalia of the machinic body, is argued
in an essay on the robots of SF titled “Machine Queens” by Tim Benzie.
Benzie points out another aspect of the gendered machine, namely, that
many robot figures, particularly in film and television, are presented as pec­
uliarly camp if not outright gay; he offers as one example among others the
Star Wars robot C3PO, whose prissy speech and mincing gait are clear paro­
dies. He says:

machines might take over our jobs and an android might become truly sentient, but a
male robot that becomes an adequate, even superior, sexual replacement poses an in­
tolerable sexual threat. Thus robots have been stripped of their sexual power so they
aren’t rivals to the butch men they serve amongst – and are likely to be presented as
passive, camp, and probably gay.25

Benzie naturalises the masculinity, queer or otherwise, of robots as such by
continuing with a comment about female robots, suggesting that female
robots, a subvariety of real (i.e. male) robots, have mostly been represented
as designed specifically for heterosexual use by their male creators. He might
also have added that unlike their male counterparts, female robots invariably
possess very prominent and alluring physical sexual characteristics:

feminine robots are invariably built with conspicuous breasts, manifestly not for the purpose of infant-feeding (in view of the fact that they are normally metallic). It would appear that obvious, big breasts are required of female-style robots, but obvious, big phalluses are nervously eschewed by the builders of most male-style robots (and cyborgs), underlining contrasting, discursively constructed views of what is acceptable or even desirable to accentuate in the robot physique.  

In terms of behaviour, the typical female robot in SF is exemplified by Helen O'Loy in the eponymous story by Lester Del Rey (1938), a purpose-built sex toy/domestic.  

A female android which represents a number of masculine anxieties is Eve 8 in the film, *Eve Of Destruction* (1991), which shows, as Claudia Springer points out, “that even when a film incorporates feminine metaphors for electronic technology, it can still enunciate a misogynistic position.”  

Eve 8, an out-of-control monstrous (feminine) machine, has the ultimate in vagina dentata: a nuclear bomb inside her womb ready to detonate.  

An earlier version of the female robot, which has a number of discursive overtones including the monstrous feminine as well as the society-threatening machine-out-of-control, is the robot Maria in *Metropolis* (1926). As Springer notes, Fritz Lang’s silent masterpiece expresses both fear of and fascination with technology in overtly sexual terms: “a robot shaped like a human woman represents technology’s simultaneous allure and powerful threat.”  

Exceptions to the norm (of male robots for servitude and female robots for men’s sexual use) include an episode in Rudy Rucker’s *Software*, in which (ostensibly male) robots are shown pleasurably plugging into each other, and a very camp seduction is attempted by a robot upon encountering a young male human.  

By way of heterosexual recuperation however, in *Wetware*, the sequel text, the robots have, “naturally”, assumed male and female roles and experience “normal” heterosexual relationships. Other examples are Tanith Lee’s *The Silver Metal Lover* (1982) and Marge Piercy’s

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29 It is hard to imagine a male robot equivalent of this. A cannon phallus, perhaps?


31 Rucker, 1994, pp.86-89.
In the former, the object of the female protagonist's affections is a male android whose beauty and artistic, delicate qualities are coded as effeminate in a patriarchal society. *The Silver Metal Lover* subverts the traditional, patriarchal SF theme of the robotic female sex toy with the representation of a robotic toyboy, combining SF generic tropes with those of romance and producing a hybrid form. In the latter, too, the sexual services boot is on the other foot. Yod, a male android character built by a male scientist but programmed by a woman, is regarded by his female lover as distinctly superior to the men she has experienced, not so much on account of size as dependability.

**Forebears IV: Feminist Incursions**

Where the artificial human is assigned feminine gender, as I have suggested, it is almost invariably for the service of and sexual use by human males, and often represents both a sexual threat to males, covert or overt, as well as (less often) a sexual rival to flesh-and-blood women. Such masculinist constructions are par for the course in SF, described by Peter Nicholls as, traditionally, a “puritanical and male-oriented literature”. He might well have added *heterosexual* male-oriented: few SF texts in the past 180 or so years have had any overt truck with non-heterosexual assumptions or behaviour from either male or female characters, although the past two decades have shown a notable willingness on the part of a small number of SF writers to portray a variety of alternative sexual behaviours and gender arrangements. An example is Octavia Butler’s startling *Xenogenesis* series. Those writers who do tackle the subject of gender and attempt to present alternative views have achieved varying degrees of success, and it is to some of these texts that I will be turning in later chapters. However, in keeping with the generic nature of SF (and contrary to claims which I will examine later that the cyberpunk form of SF represents a radical departure from what had gone before) not much has changed in male-oriented cyborg-SF of the last fifteen years as far as the discursive representation of male and female subjectivities are concerned.

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Nonetheless, feminist SF of the preceding period (that is to say, feminist SF of the 1960s and 70s) introduced a fresh way of treating the SF genre, subverting patriarchal themes and assumptions. In her excellent study of SF, feminism and postmodernism, Jenny Wolmark notes that feminist science fiction brought feminist politics “into a genre with a solid tradition of ignoring or excluding women writers, and in so doing it has politicised our understanding of the fantasies of science fiction.”34 Lisa Tuttle suggests that prior to the 1960s, SF was formed by the men who chiefly edited, wrote for and read the US pulp magazines, and who held the belief that most SF readers were adolescent males, a belief which led to certain preoccupations, restrictions and taboos. Tuttle says, “women, and women’s supposed interests, were sentimentalised or ignored, and sex was taboo.”35 However, Tuttle might more accurately have said that overt sex was taboo. Female arche(stereo)types involving obvious sexual subtexts—including the voracious, mate-devouring insectoid female; the cruel, imperious Amazon Queen; the she-devil; the ripe, lush, half-naked victim of an alien monster or mighty-thewed human (male) hero, and so on—make their appearances throughout early SF, reflecting the fears and desires of immature men of all ages.36

As the 1960s brought increasing release from the moral restrictiveness of the preceding period, these masculinist stereotypes took on a more overt character; for example, in the film Barbarella.37 Sometimes male writers’ efforts to include female characters resulted in mere tokenism. Although Lieutenant Uhura, a female character in the immensely popular and influential television series, Star Trek, inspired a generation of viewers and writers with the belief that women could play an active, equitable role in SF, nevertheless the character smacked of tokenism (black and woman), and could be seen (cynically) as a glorified telephonist—a suitable role for a woman if ever there was one. In the early days of the telephone, adolescent males employed by AT&T in the late 1870s as telegram delivery boys were put to work on switchboards, but proved so mischievous and disruptive that the job was given to mature and more reliable women.38 Since that time,

36 For a range of illustrations portraying most of these stereotypes, see Clute (1995).
women have been regarded as most appropriate for the job of telephone operator, despite the fact that this requires a shift in perspective regarding the suitability of females to operate technology. *Star Trek*, while offering a vision of a woman working on the bridge of an interstellar spaceship alongside male comrades, keeps her in an un confronting role.

Fortunately for those sick of stereotypes and covert smut, the late 1960s also saw the beginnings of a new wave of feminist cultural production.\(^{39}\) Many female writers turned their attention to SF, prompting Harlan Ellison to remark in 1972 that the best writers in SF during that period were the women.\(^{40}\) Tuttle notes that Ellison’s opinion was “echoed by other knowledgeable readers throughout the 70s, sometimes with the caveat ‘excepting James Tiptree Jr’”.\(^{41}\) Tuttle goes on to say:

> The reason that SF began to change in the 1960s and 1970s was that increasingly writers were drawn to it not because of an interest in its pulp traditions but for its still largely unexplored potential. The effect of the (largely male) New Wave is often cited, but the impact made on the field by such diverse writers as Le Guin, Kate Wilhelm, Russ, C. J. Cherryh and Tiptree was undoubtedly stronger and more lasting than that of any single, self-proclaimed movement.\(^{42}\)

Tuttle quotes Suzy McKee Charnas as saying that SF was a dying or at least a moribund genre in the 1960s, when “feminism came along in the 1970s and rescued it.”\(^{43}\) Interestingly, this is very similar to Bruce Sterling’s claims for cyberpunk—that cyberpunk rescued a moribund SF—in the mid-1980s.\(^{44}\)

Despite the assertion by Jeanne Gomoll that a decade of explosive feminist SF is male cyberpunk’s unacknowledged dam,\(^{45}\) and despite cyberpunk’s pretensions to an innovative radicalism, the majority of cyberpunk and other cyborg-SF texts are characterised by a predominantly traditional, patriarchal stance which springs directly from their SF pulp

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39 See Sarah Lefanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989, for an excellent feminist critique of SF generally as well as of feminist SF.

40 Quoted in Tuttle, 1993, p.1344.

41 Tuttle, 1993, p.1344. James Tiptree Jr was revealed in 1977 to be Alice Sheldon, an award-winning writer of some few novels and many superlative short stories in which her dark vision of the incommensurability of women and men predominates. Tuttle gives details of this mistaken identity in their full irony.

42 Tuttle, 1993, p.1344.

43 Tuttle, 1993, p.1344.

44 In his “Preface” to William Gibson’s collection of short stories, *Burning Chrome* (1988), Sterling contemptuously refers to the “dogmatic slumbers” from which the genre of SF was awakened by Gibson’s *Neuromancer*.

forefathers, with direct bloodlines to heroic fantasy and detective fiction, among other generic cousins. Similarly, insistent feminist interjections into cyborg-SF spring from their feminist foremothers of the 70s.

Forebears V: utopia/dystopia

Another characteristic theme of SF which finds a role to play in cyborg-SF is utopia/dystopia. Since these complementary imaginary socialities are the subjects of abundant critical commentary, my coverage here will be confined to an indication of the traditional forms of utopian/dystopian SF in order to compare and contrast them with the forms represented in cyborg-SF. The term "utopia" was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516; writers have been mining the rich vein of utopian thought ever since. Sarah Lefanu defines its use in SF thus:

The word utopia is generally taken to refer to the fictional representation of an ideal place, somewhere that is 'better' than the society of the world in which we actually live. Originally the word meant 'no place', deriving from the Greek ou totoq, later assimilating to itself an additional meaning from the Greek eu, 'good' ... it is precisely [an] engagement with the here and now that fuels the desire for something else ... 47

Closely related to the utopian concept is its counterpart, dystopia, also a fertile ground for SF writers. Dystopian SF has traditionally had a powerful cautionary political message, pre- eminent examples of which are Huxley’s Brave New World and George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949). Stableford argues that the only new ground broken in dystopian narratives of the 1970s and 80s, whether in mainstream literature or in genre SF, relates to feminist images of oppressive masculinity; he cites Suzy McKee Charnas’s Walk to the End of the World (1974), Marge Piercy’s Woman at the Edge of Time (1976), Margaret Atwood’s A Handmaid’s Tale (1985) and Anna Livia’s Bulldozer Rising (1988). Many of James Tiptree Jr’s stories could also be included here. The point about this list is that all these narratives are replete with feminist political views which position readers to experience a sense of revulsion at the prospect of such developments coming to pass in their own society, not to mention an awful sense of recognition that some of them already have, at least in some symbolic form. Lefanu suggests that feminist

47 Lefanu, 1988, p.53.
SF dystopias consist in the portrayal of women denied autonomy, reduced from subjecthood to function, and in the exposure of the interrelation between gender hierarchy and class structure in which woman's sexual autonomy is denied. Among other texts, she offers Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (first published in 1985, not long after the appearance of *Neuromancer*, Gibson's key text) as an example. The dystopian tradition, she says, draws on and extrapolates from contemporary political forces, and there is a "hidden utopian streak" in dystopian novels by women, which "contain an element of hopefulness that rests on a belief in the power and efficacy of women's speech."\(^4^9\)

The nature of SF allows its artists to imagine other worlds both worse and better than our own, but also, more subtly, to reflect on our own world by positing or extrapolating others. Fredric Jameson notes that SF is the only genre which allows us to read the present as history. He writes:

> the most characteristic SF does not seriously attempt to imagine the "real" future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come. It is this present moment—unavailable to us for contemplation in its own right because the sheer quantitative immensity of objects and individual lives it comprises is untotalizable and hence unimaginable, and also because it is occluded by the density of our private fantasies as well as of the proliferating stereotypes of a media culture that penetrates every remote zone of our existence—that upon our return from the imaginary constructs of SF is offered to us in the form of some future world's remote past, as if posthumous and as though collectively remembered. ... SF thus enacts and enables a structurally unique "method" for apprehending the present as history, and this is so irrespective of the "pessimism" or "optimism" of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization.\(^5^0\)

Le Guin, in her 1976 introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, says that SF is not predictive, it is descriptive, it is a metaphor:

> All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life – science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and the historical outlook, among them. Space travel is one of these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another. The future, in fiction, is a metaphor.\(^5^1\)

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\(^4^9\) Lefanu, 1988, p.75. This is particularly the case in Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984) and *The Judas Rose* (1988), and Ursula Le Guin's *Tehanu* (1990).

\(^5^0\) Fredric Jameson, "Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Science-fiction Studies*, Vol 9 No 27, 1982, pp.152-53.

\(^5^1\) Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, The
Post-catastrophe narratives are a natural ground for dystopias, and are one of the late twentieth century’s most common SF forms. Moreover, dystopias provide SF writers with endless possibilities for dramatic events and character development as heroes struggle against appalling social, political and/or environmental odds. These narratives frequently link dystopian SF with heroic fantasy and other genres, and provide opportunities for survival or back-to-a-cruel-but-simpler-past stories, both common SF and fantasy themes.

Often, writers position a dystopian setting against a utopian one in the same work with the clear intention of showing the utopian society as superior and desirable; for example, Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (1980). This kind of fiction has an overt political and social message, sometimes presenting simplistic solutions to complex societal difficulties.52 By contrast, typical cyberpunk’s dystopian impulse differs markedly from other, especially feminist, dystopian narratives in the lack of critical attention it pays to the ugly world it portrays, and its concomitant lack of overt political claims. As Andrew Ross remarks,

cyberpunk, like popular culture in general, is usually not the best place to expect to find articulate political directions ... But more than in any other popular genre, the SF community has maintained the demand upon its writers to acknowledge exactly this kind of “responsibility.”53

**Cyberspace, Cyberpunk: Some Definitions**

**i. Cyberspace**

People living in first-world, Western nations are generally familiar with the use of a credit or cash card to make a cash withdrawal from “hole-in-the-wall” cash outlets, and to buy goods, or withdraw cash, through EFTPOS, part of which stands for electronic funds transfer. This now-familiar technology provides an easy way in to thinking about cyberspace.54 It can be

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52 More often, such narratives contain uncomfortable ambiguities where all that glisters is far from gold. Recognising this, Ursula Le Guin subtitled her famous investigation of utopian/dystopian societies, *The Dispossessed* (1988), “An Ambiguous Utopia”. A later exploration of similar themes by this author, *Always Coming Home* (1985) contrasted the tolerant, matriarchal, occasionally bickering society of the Kesh with the militaristic, patriarchal, repressive society of the Dayao without representing the former as anything like perfect. The result was a brilliant feminist analysis of utopian/dystopian tropes.


54 Most critics and observers claim the term was invented by William Gibson in 1984.
thought of imaginatively as the electronic “space” where those transactions take place. In fiction, it is an imaginary space where computers across the globe interface with one another, where databases connected to the global network store data, where hackers lurk, finding their way into those databases by manipulating code, passwords, computer commands.

The telephone could be thought of as an older form of accessing cyberspace: in this case, cyberspace is the imaginary space where the telephone conversation takes place—a kind of protocyberspace.\textsuperscript{55} People in their seventies have told me of the entry of the telephone into their lives and the extreme suspicion with which it was greeted by people accustomed only to face-to-face meetings and to the relationships brought about by the written word in letters and telegrams. The further we go back into communications history, the more we find new forms being considered outlandish, instruments of the devil, magic, destructive of society and so on.\textsuperscript{56} Communication by the written word, for example, something taken utterly for granted in contemporary Western society, was once thought of as akin to witchcraft, as was beautifully illustrated in the film \textit{Black Robe} (1993) where French clerics amaze the Native Americans by exchanging information on a slip of paper without any bodily or vocal contact. Doubtless the first-world children of the twenty-first century will take the interactions of cyberspace completely for granted and be amazed that anyone could possibly ever have felt intimidated by, or suspicious of it. According to Michael Heim,

\begin{quote}
In the information age, a mystic glow surrounds the term cyberspace. ... Cyberspace suggests a computerized dimension where we move information about and where we find our way around data. Cyberspace renders a represented or artificial world, a world made up of the information that our systems produce and that we feed back into the system.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

To take the definition of cyberspace a little further, I would like to move to the fictional representation of it as expressed by William Gibson, whom I have briefly mentioned above. Gibson is a white American writer born in

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\textsuperscript{55} John Perry Barlow, co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a non-government Net watchdog, is quoted thus: “Cyberspace has really been with us ever since Alexander Graham Bell [inventor of the telephone] and his assistant Watson had a meeting back in 1876.” See 21\textsuperscript{C}, Vol 2, No 1, 1996, p.35. See also Mark Poster, \textit{The Second Media Age}, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, chapter 2.


South Carolina who lives in Vancouver, whose quintessential cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*, won SF’s triple crown for 1985: the Hugo, the Nebula and the Philip K. Dick awards.\(^5^8\) In his short story, “Burning Chrome”,\(^5^9\) Gibson describes cyberspace, also called the “matrix”, as a “consensual hallucination”:

> The matrix is an abstract representation of the relationships between data systems ... the electronic consensus-hallucination that facilitates the handling and exchange of massive quantities of data. (BC 196-7)

It is cyberspace into which he imagined *Neuromancer*’s central character, Case, projecting his “disembodied consciousness”, experiencing, in the process, “bodiless exultation”. Here is how cyberspace is first described in *Neuromancer*:

> ‘The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games,’ said the voice-over [on a children’s TV documentary], ‘in early graphics programs and military experimentation with cranial jacks.’ On the Sony, a two-dimensional space war faded behind a forest of mathematically generated ferns, demonstrating the spacial [sic] possibilities of logarithmic spirals; cold blue military footage burned through, lab animals wired into test systems, helmets feeding into fire control circuits of tanks and war planes. ‘Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts ... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding .... ’ (N 67)

Much of the science fiction written since the mid-1980s has featured cyberspace or versions of it: some of the more successful representations include Neal Stephenson’s “Metaverse” in *Snow Crash* (1992); “telespace” in Lisa Mason’s *Arachne* (1990), and “the nets” in Melissa Scott’s *Trouble and her Friends* (1994). Virtual spaces, bodies and events have taken hold of the SF imaginary to a quite remarkable extent, even as researchers in cybernetics and informatics labour toward the actual development of a Gibsonian cyberspace. The “non-space” within many researchers’ minds is filled with Gibsonian images, of disembodied telepresence, of neural projection, of prosthetic implants to conjoin the human and the machine, of digital

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\(^5^8\) William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, Grafton, London, 1986. *Neuromancer* was originally published in 1984 and won its awards the following year. It was the first of a trilogy (referred to as the Neuromancer trilogy), which consisted of *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* (1987), and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1989), all Grafton, London, and cited hereafter as N, CZ and MLO respectively.

transcendence, of the posthuman cyborg. Similarly, writers such as those mentioned above formulate ever more complex versions of cyborg life in their texts.

**ii. Cyberpunk**

The two quotations given above give an idea of how cyberspace is fictionally represented by Gibson, as well as some of the essential motifs of cyberpunk. These include the use of familiar trade names—often used in startling juxtaposition to indicate a future in which economic and cultural shifts have taken place (e.g. Mitsubishi Bank of America)—with a strong emphasis on Japanese elements; the invasion of the body by techno-medical procedures; the brooding sense of monolithic corporate entities and a covertly implicated, unapproachable military presence; and a kind of tawdry *élan noir*. Readers are also now in a position to understand some of the other terms peculiar to cyberpunk: Case is a console cowboy; that is, he roams across the electronic prairies of cyberspace, a hired codeslinger looking for info-cattle to rustle; the deck which his fingers are caressing while his mind cruises cyberspace is an Ono-Sendai cyberspace deck, a kind of console or elaborate keyboard by which Case navigates through cyberspace. (Touch-typing is essential in this job.) Wetware is his brain and/or his whole body.60

A motif which looms large in cyberpunk is bodily augmentation by surgical implant or prosthesis or both. In cyberpunk, the world’s information systems and its machines have become so complex, so infinitely subtle, that ordinary human responses are insufficient. To operate the machines, human bodies have to incorporate electronic technology—that is, become cyborgs. In some cyborg-SF, the machine, in the form of nanotechnology, becomes incorporated into the body to the extent that hybrid beings, composed of symbiotic human and non-human parts, are produced. Greg Bear’s *Blood Music* (1985) is an example of this kind of text.

The cyberpunk vein of cyborg-SF, too, can be read as a hybrid form, in terms of literary category. It shares particular generic qualities with detective fiction, heroic adventure and romance. Its typical lone, disaffected, emotionally damaged hero walking the mean streets one step ahead of larger, vicious

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60 As far as I can ascertain, Rudy Rucker, one of the original “cyberpunks”, coined the term “wetware”. The suffix “-ware” is a characteristic linguistic element of the information revolution. Variations include hardware, software, bioware, vapourware (software which is talked about and expected but non-existent), and my favourite, bloatware (Microsoft Windows 95).
forces, and finding a cynical satisfaction in winning small personal victories, is closely related to the hard-boiled private eye of the Chandler/Hammett variety. Anne Cranny-Francis has gone so far as to suggest that cyberpunk is a genre *sui generis*, hybridised beyond categorisation as SF.\(^{61}\) Cyberpunk can also be read as a traditional heroic adventure narrative: seeking hero meets adversity, finds help along the journey, successfully overcomes adversity, reaches his goal and acquires wisdom and self-knowledge—and possibly romance. The highly gendered characteristics of romance are also to be found in classic cyberpunk, where the hero is typically male, attractive to women and heterosexually successful, usually emotionally remote and socially difficult, while the female characters fit into a number of stereotypes including the vamp/prostitute, the innocent virgin, the crone, and the bad/perverse (often bisexual or lesbian) woman.

In a starry-eyed essay on cyberpunk, Timothy Leary refers to the Greek origin of the word cybernetics, which he renders as “kubernetes—pilot”.\(^{62}\) The word is etymologically connected also to “governor”. Leary exuberantly refers to ancient Athenian mariners as cyberpunks who made their own navigational/gubernatorial decisions in a spirit of freedom and autonomy, and argues for a kind of “tune in, turn on, go virtual” libertarian attitude toward the figure of the cyberpunk as anarchist Promethean freethinker. This is drawing a long bow, particularly in view of the extremely limited range of decisions made by fictional cyberpunks, concerned largely with the thrill of the matrix and the buzz of burglary—hardly the “freedom, pagan joy, celebration of life, and speculative thought” Leary imagines was the lot of the average happy Athenian (male).\(^{63}\) Leary also conveniently forgets the labour below decks that propelled his Athenian mariners, without which their glorious freedom was dead in the water, and to which a parallel may be made regarding exploited, largely female South-east Asian labour responsible for the manufacture of the high-flyers’ high-tech toys.

To sum up cyberpunk, most of the characteristic motifs to be found in the form are neatly enumerated by Thomas Foster:

> The cyberpunk movement emerged in the later 1980s as a new formal synthesis of a number of more or less familiar science fictional tropes: direct interfaces between

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\(^{61}\) Cranny-Francis, 1994, p.71.


human nervous systems and computer networks; the related metaphor of cyberspace as a means of translating electronically stored information into a form that could be experienced phenomenologically and manipulated by human agents jacked into the network; artificial intelligence, including digital simulations of human personalities that could be downloaded for computer storage; surgical and genetic technologies for bodily modification; the balkanisation of the nation-state and its replacement by multinational corporations; and the fragmentation of the public sphere into a variety of subcultures.64

This encapsulates most of the core characteristics of cyberpunk, but Foster ignores another peculiarity of the form which I have touched on in my discussion of dystopia as a cyberpunk forebear. The idea of revulsion is central to dystopian narratives, as I have suggested. This is where cyberpunk and its related narratives differ markedly from traditional dystopian SF. Referring to Gibson, Peter Fitting says:

Gibson's fiction breaks with the traditional SF dichotomy between positive and negative attitudes toward the future ... Although this future may be objectively worse than the present, it is not foregrounded in a cautionary or dystopian way, as it is, for instance, ... [in] The Handmaid's Tale.65

Terence Whalen notes that cyberpunk puts “a hard dystopian spin on the post-industrial age without ever disputing its ascendence ... cyberpunk favors gritty, dystopian near-futures where cities have become urban sprawls”, but that “although amenable to post-industrial and post-modern scenarios, cyberpunk generally refuses to imagine a post-capitalist future.”66 It is this absence of the kind of overt critical political positioning I have described above, which characterises cyberpunk and separates it from other dystopian SF where, as Nicola Nixon suggests, texts “functioned in critical counterpoint to utopian future worlds”, thus “articulat[ing] criticisms of their current society while presenting potential emancipatory alternatives.”67 The absence of revulsion and of an overt motivating political critique separates cyberpunk from other dystopian SF. As Lewis Shiner vividly expresses it, “Concrete is radical. Concrete is the future. You don’t cry about

it man, you skate on it.” While cyberpunk has within it the potential for a transgressive, revolutionary movement (a potential which is grasped by some feminist cyberpunk exponents), the typical cyberpunk hero is strictly apolitical: he (and it is usually a he) is a street hustler whose skill at mounting raids in cyberspace is motivated only by a thoroughly status quo-oriented, 1980s, Reaganesque impulse to vigorously pursue the benefits of free, private enterprise, and may market forces take the hindmost. By default, the covert political positioning of such texts as Neuromancer is a deeply conservative one, suspicious of foreign (read: Japanese) influence, enamoured of yankee know-how and rampant individualism, with no political analysis whatsoever.

Cyberpunk has been described as “bored” with the nuclear holocaust: Bruce Sterling, chief apologist for cyberpunk, says: “This is another distinguishing mark of the emergent new school of Eighties SF: its boredom with the Apocalypse.” Yet blasted urban landscapes resulting from undisclosed, catastrophic, probably nuclear war-caused environmental destruction at some vague moment in the past are inevitably part of the scene. But in contrast to most preceding and contemporaneous dystopian, post-nuclear holocaustal SF, cyberpunk texts offer their urban horrorscape as a kind of noir exterior décor, not as warning or motivation for change. Cyberpunk texts typically convey a sense of insouciant acceptance, even a mordant zest for the status quo in the dark, spoiled world they describe. Cyberpunk uses dystopian elements to form a backdrop, not as a subtext for political praxis:

Cyberpunk ... attaches zero value to its apocalypses: they are neither good nor evil, they simply are (or rather have been, since they invariably occur at some time before the story opens). The destructive event, whether nuclear war or natural or man-made disaster, that results in an altered landscape takes place out of sight at some point before the narration begins and has little moral or epistemological impact. The typical cyberpunk reaction to these off-stage cataclysms is in fact profound indifference. ... In Gibson's work, and in other cyberpunk stories, disaster is taken for granted; it is a kind of white noise in the background, humming behind all the action.

By way of comparison, where Marge Piercy portrays an identifiably proto-cyberpunk world in Woman on the Edge of Time (1976), the text clearly has a

68 Quoted by Bukatman, 1993, p.201.
political stance underpinning the narrative. Moreover, the text presents a parallel utopian alternative with a full political raison d'être. Similarly, her 1991 novel, *Body of Glass*, which uses many typical cyberpunk motifs, is profoundly concerned with the political implications of future technologies and blasted trashscapes.

This is not to suggest that cyberpunk is without political slant or content. Gibson himself says, “I think what I do really, rather than try to predict the future, is I try to get to a sort of hypothetical future that allows me to look back at today’s present from a slightly different angle. And in order to do that, the cyberspace I need is watching a lot of CNN and a certain mood, and just sort of letting the world’s media flow over me and seeing what sticks.”72 It would be hard to argue that CNN or the world’s media are entirely value-free, which would indicate that Gibson’s cyberpunk is far from apolitical. Foster suggests, “Cyberpunk writers offer a model for reading science fiction as a commentary on the present rather than the future, a model that marks a shift toward a postmodern conception of both contemporary social life and science fiction’s project of representing imaginary futures.”73 I would contend, however, that *all* serious science fiction is a commentary on the present at some level, in that any extrapolation into the future is grounded in a necessarily discursive view of the present.

As I indicated, the term “cyberpunk” is problematic. Cyberpunk as a literary phenomenon started in the mid-1980s. Although initially trumpeted as a totally new and culturally radical form,74 cyberpunk actually has strong links to various antecedent literary forms (as I have suggested above), including “future worlds” and dystopian SF as a whole, hardboiled detective fiction, the spy thriller and even the macho romanticism of the Western, some of which I have already mentioned. Described as “technology with attitude” in pop culture, and by more serious observers as the postmodern cultural form,75 cyberpunk as a label has been all but totally disavowed by its original exemplars, a group of North American SF writers who coalesced in the early 1980s to form a loose, friendship-based network which some preferred to call the Movement (also sometimes called the Mirrorshades

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75 See McCaffrey, 1991.
Movement). They included Rudy Rucker, Bruce Sterling, Pat Cadigan, John Shirley, Lewis Shiner and William Gibson. As well as causing a stir among the SF community, cyberpunk also caught the attention of the academy, which has brought intensive theoretical focus to the genre from several disciplinary angles.76

Since the word's coinage in the early 1980s,77 cyberpunk has been applied both to texts and film which preceded it—"generic shunting", as Anne Cranny-Francis describes it78—as well as to a whole gamut of current cultural practices including comic books, role-playing and shoot'em-up computer games, fashion, rock music and computer-based activities from hacking to cracking—i.e. real computer crime. Furthermore, the explosive growth in the use of transglobal electronic communication networks such as the Internet79 has popularised the notion of cyberspace as an accessible site for interactive communications of great variety, including, to use the current term—a phallocentric but vivid coinage, this time from Howard Rheingold—teledildonic.80 Some cyberpunk texts explore near-future versions of actual sexual interactions in cyberspace, notably Melissa Scott in her novel Trouble and Her Friends, a text I examine in chapter four.

Commentaries on cyberpunk since the mid-to-late-1980s frequently refer to the "cyberpunk debate". This centred on whether or not cyberpunk was to be regarded as a whole new genre, as a sub-genre taking old ideas out in new clothes, as nothing new at all, or as the quintessential postmodern fictional form. The debate was intense and passionately conducted, nowhere more so than in a special cyberpunk edition of the Mississippi Review...
published in 1988, edited by Larry McCaffrey. To give some idea of the range of the debate, I quote from a number of writers who contributed to a “Cyberpunk Forum/Symposium” which appeared in this issue:

**J. G. Ballard:** It’s extremely heartening that SF still shows itself able to find a radically new direction in which to move—the slumbering dinosaur, fuddled by its comic-book dreams of outer space and the far future, has at last climbed to its feet and read the warning sign on the nearest billboard: “This is your last chance for the 20th century.” I had almost given up hope for the poor beast. I admire all these new young writers and I respect what they’re doing. I’m especially glad that American SF, which turned in the 1970s towards escapist fantasy and closed its eyes to reality, has now left the amusement park and stepped onto the sidewalks of everyday life. (16)

**Istvan Csicsery-Ronay:** Cyberpunk is the apotheosis of the postmodern, its truest and most consistent incarnation, bar none. (27)

**Samuel R. Delany:** [Cyberpunk] produced a lot of exciting speculation and argument that woke many of us up to various nuances of writerly tone; it made us look at new, possible relations between science fiction and the world; and it foregrounded a real and important attitude toward technology that was constituted as much by numbness as it was by ease and accessibility. ... Cyberpunk is that current SF work which is not middle-class, not comfortable with history, not tragic, not supportive, not maternal, not happy-go-lucky ... But it’s only as a negative—and a negative that’s meaningless outside of the past tradition and current context of SF—that “cyberpunk” can signify. (29-33)

**Thomas M. Disch:** I do not think Cyberpunk represents any very distinct trend in SF. Like “New Wave,” it’s a marketing device equivalent to New Improved Formula. What’s in the box is still detergent. (35)

**Patrick Nielsen Hayden:** We can discuss cyberpunk, or we can discuss the rhetoric which has promoted cyberpunk. The latter is more interesting to me; its falseness has obscured a multitude of virtues. ... These are not the virtues of a formal innovation but rather of a sensibility; all the better for the reader, however. ... One of cyberpunk’s most appealing characteristics is its interest in complex and diverse urban surfaces dense with both known and unknowable human presence. ... But the impact [Gibson and Sterling] made with what are essentially variations on traditional SF textures say far more about the exhaustion of the best-seller writers and their imitators than it does about the creative health of the field as a whole. For all their claims to radicalism, they remain craftsmen of that deeply bourgeois and conventional structure, the adventure plot. ... The rhetoric of cyberpunk is not deplorable because it is rhetoric, or because it comes from an in-group. It is deplorable because, in the final analysis, to it clings the odor of the high-school parking lot, on which the cool guys preen themselves and give the boot to all those who don’t manifest the right sort of toughness, or listen to the right bands. (39-42)

**Kim Stanley Robinson:** Cyberpunk Cake: One cup of film noire, one cup Bester, two

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tablespoons *Blade Runner*, one tablespoon James Bond, 'several thousand micrograms' (for those who don’t speak cyberpunk, a half gram) of Dexedrine; mix thoroughly, cover in a thick layer of Reaganesque hype and Ramboesque aggressiveness. Bake at full heat for three years, then let simmer. Serves two good writers and several hangers-on. (51)

*John Shirley*: Cyberpunk (I have come to dislike this term, preferring Bruce Sterling's name for it, simply “The Movement”) looks to [an] immediate and probable future [of nanotechnology and direct brain-computer interaction]; it examines the human consequences of our new relationship with technology, with media, with our new reality; it explores the good and bad, and the places where they can't be distinguished. Unlike standard SF, it wasn't something thought-out, usually; it was something that grew out. It wasn't a standard process of science-fictional extrapolation. It was something that grew out of the Zeitgeist, emerging whole and steaming and ready for action; it arose at once from several simultaneous sources, and this synchronicity is a witness to its timeliness, its social relevancy. (58)

Some of the ideas suggested in these excerpts will reappear in arguments later in my project, but, in brief, my own view is that cyberpunk is a distinctive SF form, specifically a form of cyborg-SF, made to appear more distinctive by commercial marketing strategies designed to define, differentiate and promote it. Its distinctiveness lies in its willingness to hybridise, in its particular and innovative combinations of SF and other fictional tropes rather than in any completely original individual characteristic. As Brian McHale observes,

What is new in cyberpunk, first of all, is the conspicuousness of certain selected motifs and their foregrounding relative to other motifs from the SF repertoire; and second, the co-occurrence of certain motifs in the same texts, the solidarity among these motifs, the way they mutually corroborate and reinforce each other to create a motif complex that is distinctive of the cyberpunk wave of SF—even if every individual item in the complex can be traced back to earlier SF phases. The novelty of cyberpunk, in other words, lies not in the absolute newness of any particular component, but in a shift of dominance or center of gravity reflected in the combination of components and their relative conspicuousness in cyberpunk texts.82

The typical cyberpunk narrative is concerned with surface textures and an overabundance or saturation of late-20th century consumerism recast in the future; it focuses on high-technology communications media; it appropriates, gestures toward, makes pastiches from and generally recombines characteristics and styles from a number of SF and other fictional precursors as I have suggested. In that cyberpunk embodies these concerns it may legitimately be

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included under the banner of postmodernism. But in that many cyberpunk
texts follow conventional narrative strategies, including, for example, the
passage of the hero from difficulty to success, or unproblematised certainties
of the gendered body, it also subscribes to traditions which predate both
postmodernism and modernism.

Corpo(r)eality: Virtual Culture and the Late-20th Century Zeitgeist

In the following chapter, ideas of what constitutes “the real” are dis-
cussed from a theoretical point of view.83 It is necessary to talk about this
elusive concept because I will be discussing several levels of “real”: first, the
here-and-now, physically present “real” of you, the reader and me, the
writer; second, the similar but fictional here-and-now of characters in texts;
third, the experience of an imagination-based, but deeply affective “real”
constituted by simulation technology and computer-mediated communication
conducted in the physically present world; and fourth, the imaginary
computer-mediated experiences of fictional characters such as those sug-
gested by Gibson’s cyberspace. In the context of global communications and
virtual reality technologies, all levels partake of “virtual culture”, or the
technosphere, to a greater or lesser extent. Here, I want to suggest some brief
working definitions to allow a more comprehensible reading of critiques
which follow in subsequent chapters. To start with, I would like to explore
briefly the third “real” suggested above, that is, the experience of an imagi-
nation-based, but deeply affective “real” constituted by simulation technol­
ogy and computer-mediated communication conducted in the physically
present world.

The question of “the real” is a vexed issue in debates concerning non-
fictional electronic communications technology for several reasons. One
reason is the location of the body in “virtual” experiences to be had in the
non-SF, contemporary version of cyberspace, namely, the borderless global
electronic communication networks I refer to collectively as the Net. Virtual
reality (VR)—described by cyber-performance artist Sherrie Rabinowitz as
“really just a poetic phrase for computer-generated 3D graphics”,84 or “a
fixed landmark on the popscape”, as Mark Dery wryly calls it85—is a more
advanced version of Net interactivity. As it exists nowadays, virtual reality is

85 Mark Dery, Escape Velocity: Cybertulture at the End of the Century, Hodder & Stoughton,
a simulation technology designed to persuade the user that s/he is in a physical location other than where s/he actually is. It is a “totally immersive computer simulation”. Myron Krueger describes it thus:

If virtual reality were just another technology, you would not have heard so much about it. However, it is a technology that can be applied to every human activity and can be used to mediate in every human transaction.

In VR, the user experiences sensory input which is completely digitally devised. That is to say, through the technological means of stereoscopic eyescreens and stereo audio speakers embedded in a helmet, plus a glove or gloves and (possibly) a bodysuit studded with electronic sensors and transmitters, all of which are connected to powerful computers, users can be persuaded of their embodied presence in another location, can see, hear, and touch a digitally recreated world. While the detail and accuracy of representation in even the most advanced VR rigs is vastly inferior to the average human’s unmediated experience of the world, VR is condemned by critics on the one hand as a further sign of the subject’s loss of control, and on the other hailed by technophiles as a new, utopian transcendence.

VR is, of course, predicated on there being a “real” reality on which the virtual version is based, that is, the primary social and physical world which by consensus exists roughly co-experientially and corporeally for human beings. I am applying the term “flesh life” to this “real reality”, a term borrowed from Net users’ habit of referring to meeting one another off the Net as a “flesh meet”. The experiences of conversation and imaginary contact of all sorts through computer-mediated communication I call “wire life”. Cyberspace, as imagined by Gibson and other cyberpunk writers, is wire life in a VR mode. Human activities in the VR that the Net approximates (experiences which can be described as wire life)—including discussions, humour, chat, flirtations and sexually-charged behaviour, anger and threats, for instance—are experienced bodily by participating individuals as pseudo-flesh-life events, having such effects on their actual bodies as increased heart rate and heightenened body temperature, tears, laughter, sexual arousal etc.

Since wire life affects flesh life, and both are “real” in terms of being experi-

86 Heim, “Preface”, 1993, xii.
88 See Bukatman, 1993, especially chapter three; Heim, 1993; Anne Balsamo, 1996, chapter five; Howard Rheingold, Virtual Reality, Mandarin, London, 1992. VR is a favourite scenario among SF writers; see, for example, Greg Egan’s Permutation City (1994) which explores VR taken to extremes.
enced “real-ly” in the body, these formulations need further elaboration.

Wire life quickens through the medium of electronic communications technology, merges into the experiences of flesh life. Flesh life can be independent of wire life, but not vice versa. Wire life on the Net in its present form is distinguished from flesh life off the Net in several ways. For example, the input or origin of whatever experience that is occurring, is first sensed via a computer, through perceiving words, and/or pictures, and/or sound emanating from a computer, with the body seated passively. A person playing a player-point-of-view computer or VR arcade game, such as aircraft pilot simulations, may instinctively move her/his body in accordance with perceived oncoming aircraft or rearing mountain peaks, but in flesh life, of course, there is no actual risk of mid-air collision, despite the imagination’s conviction of near-miss and the heart-beat’s pounding. The threat is in “the non-space of the mind”, transmitted through the body’s nervous system and resulting in actual bodily experience.

It is still the body which ultimately experiences and feeds back the information sent to it by the brain, and “this familiar corporeal envelope”, to use Vicki Kirby’s term, is still the ground of experience.\(^8^9\) Although they are inadequate to express the complex interaction between mind/imagination/body/senses and technology, and ignore altogether the underlying philosophical question of what perceived reality is in the first place (or, indeed, if there are many realities and if so, what constitutes and differentiates them), the terms “wire life” and “flesh life” will have to serve provisionally.

Allucquère Rosanne Stone, whose work I look at in more detail in the next chapter, describes four epochs in the development of communications technologies, the fourth and latest one being the advent of virtual reality and cyberspace:

Arguably the single most significant event for the development of fourth-stage virtual communities was the publication of William Gibson’s science fiction novel *Neuromancer*. *Neuromancer* represents the dividing line between third and fourth epochs not because it signalled any technological development, but because it crystallized a new community. ...

*Neuromancer* reached the hackers who had been radicalized by George Lucas’s powerful cinematic evocation of humanity and technology infinitely extended [in the *Star Wars* films], and it reached the technologically literate and socially disaffected who were searching for social forms that could transform the fragmented anomie that characterized life in Silicon Valley and all electronic industrial ghettos. In a single

stroke, Gibson’s powerful vision provided for them the imaginal public sphere and refigured discursive community that established the grounding for the possibility of a new kind of social interaction.90

Since *Neuromancer* became a bestseller, hundreds of cybernetic researchers have become deeply involved in the project of making Gibson’s visions come about; Stone suggests that a large proportion of these researchers are adolescent and post-adolescent males whose notions of the body follow discursively constructed patterns. In possibly a unique case of science modelling its directions on literature, here is a prime site for discursive gender practices which will have a real impact on actual development of virtual reality technologies.91 Noting that it is important to avoid the trap of technological determinism which argues that hegemonic control by a techno-elite is inevitably expanded, Anne Balsamo points out that, nevertheless, “it does appear that virtual reality technologies are implicated in the production of a certain set of cultural narratives that reproduce dominant relations of power.”92 It is the inter-related narratives of late twentieth-century cyborg-SF writers, and how those narratives may be interpreted, which concern me here.

My purpose in this chapter has been to set the stage for discussion about gender in cyborg-SF. In the next chapter, I will look at some theoretical responses to cyborg-SF and the technomilieu with which it interfaces in order to discuss contested areas of interpretation.

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91 Howard Rheingold also emphasises the importance of *Neuromancer* in the developing contemporary concept of cyberspace. As a fairly trivial but telling example, he reports on a “slaved binocular remote camera platform” being developed at NASA named “Molly” after Gibson’s black leather-clad street samurai character who appears in “Johnny Mnemonic”, *Neuromancer* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* Rheingold, 1991, p.340.

Chapter Two
Marginally Hyperreal

In this chapter, I discuss theoretical positions which I consider relevant to my later explorations of the ideas and representations found in the texts under examination. I focus particularly on some of the concepts and theoretical models of Jean Baudrillard, Aluquère Rosanne Stone and Donna Haraway regarding contemporary technologies from which much of the SF I examine is extrapolated. Baudrillard and Stone represent two poles of thought about the kinds of communications technologies which are explored in cyborg-SF, and both specifically identify their interest in SF. Baudrillard’s much-discussed theories about “hyperreality”, suggesting that the “real” has dissolved into simulation, are especially relevant to any critique of a fiction which focuses on virtual, or simulated, experiences. Where Baudrillard’s views are characterised by pessimistic hyperbole, Stone is rampantly technophilic. I take issue with both positions.

On the other hand, the metaphors suggested in Donna Haraway’s influential essay, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s”, and in much of her other work, are highly sympathetic to my own sense of both urgency and excitement regarding feminist participation in the kinds of technologies presaged by the texts under examination. Her theoretical stance offers understandings of the global implications, both positive and cautionary, of the technologies in question, a clear feminist political position, and a model for technological identity, all of which I utilise in my textual critique. Technological identity is not the only identity available here: the figure of the cyborg as described by Haraway also resembles an antipodal subject position. Haraway’s cyborg, “a condensed image of both imagination and material reality”,1 figuratively suggests the

half-way, neither-here-nor-there, relational sensibility I identify as antipodal.

**Baudrillard: Reality For the Rest of Us**

Emerging from a late-1960s critique of Marxist economic theory of value relating to "use-value", Baudrillard's project proposes the concepts of "sign-value" and "the code", whereby "the real" may be reproduced by simulation. In his writings of the 1980s, he develops quite idiosyncratic rather than exact ideas of the technologies he criticises, freighting communications technologies in particular with more imputations than they can credibly carry. However, his views have had enormous influence. Douglas Kellner regards him as being clearly the most important and provocative media culture theorist of his times:

> His studies of simulation, implosion, hyperreality, and the effects of the new communication, information, and media technologies blazed new paths in contemporary social theory and challenged regnant orthodoxies. Baudrillard's claim of a radical break and rupture with modern societies won him acclaim as the prophet of postmodernity in avant-garde theoretical circles throughout the world. Baudrillard proclaimed the disappearance of the subject, political economy, meaning, truth, and the social in contemporary social formations.²

In an essay on the relationship between Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Baudrillard's theories on communication, information and media technologies, Kellner observes that both Baudrillard and Gibson "illuminate the present through analysis of future trends that are already manifest".³ Kellner writes:

> while Baudrillard was one of the most advanced theorists of media culture and new technologies from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, it is William Gibson and the cyberpunks who have carried out some of the most important mappings of our present moment and its future trends during the past decade. ... Gibson's and the cyberpunk vision builds on Baudrillard's postmodern perspectives, but departs from the increasingly retro French theorist in significant ways.⁴

My argument concerning Baudrillard is that his interpretations are neither apt nor helpful as descriptions of virtual culture, although as metaphor they provide an interesting perspective on cyborg-SF. Here I wish to address particular aspects of Baudrillard's thought which apply to my

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⁴ Kellner, 1995, p.299.
study, and not his entire œuvre.

In talking about the world as it is affected by communications technologies, Baudrillard presents his case as a realistic, or accurate interpretation of a universally applicable here-and-now, selecting particular aspects of Western cultural/social/scientific milieus to support his claims. While recognising the power of his metaphors for the massive changes being wrought in developed countries by communications technologies, as well as the ironically playful tone of his critique, I cannot agree with his general prediction of the destruction of civil society, nor with what amounts to totalising claims for the world at large. Whatever arguments might plausibly be put in favour of his views within the confines of ultra-developed, northern-hemisphere, first-world nations, they fail in large measure to apply outside it, and are seriously weakened by his apparent lack of understanding or experience of global communications technologies and usage. Further, there appears to be little recognition of differences in the effect of computer-mediated communications technologies on differently gendered subjects in his critique. Baudrillard does, however, suggest useful readings of some of the narrative interests of cyberpunk, a form which stems largely from the same First World, middle-class sub/urban milieu from which his own observations arise. As a culturally constructed world view, his analysis may be read against the grain from a subject position of antipodality. Speaking from this ground, I find it unhelpfully hyperbolic of Baudrillard to claim that the technological has completely taken over society:

We are here at the controls of a micro-satellite, in orbit, living no longer as an actor or dramaturge but as a terminal of multiple networks. Television is still the most direct prefiguration of this. But today it is the very space of habitation that is conceived as both receiver and distributor, as the space of both reception and operations, the control screen and terminal which as such may be endowed with telematic power—that is, with the capability of regulating everything from a distance, including work in the home and, of course, consumption, play, social relations and leisure. Simulators of leisure or of vacations in the home—like flight simulators for airplane pilots—become conceivable.5

Here we are far from the living-room and close to science fiction. But once more it must be seen that all these changes—the decisive mutations of objects and of the environment in the modern era—have come from an irreversible tendency towards three things: an ever greater formal and operational abstraction of elements and functions and their homogenization in a single virtual process of functionalization; the displacement of bodily movements and efforts into electronic commands, and the

5 And conceived they have been, most recently in the film Total Recall (1990), in which the protagonist purchases an ambiguously convincing virtual reality holiday to Mars. But such a holiday remains exactly there—in film, in the realm of the imagination.
Sexing the Cyborg": Chapter Two

miniaturization, in time and space, of processes whose real scene (though it is no longer a scene) is that of infinitesimal memory and the screen with which they are equipped.6

I read this as a claim that “we”—all human beings?—and all our actions and productions are becoming homogenised in a single function, becoming unified under a banner of electronic exigency. However, Baudrillard himself—evidently positioned outside this phenomenon—can step aside and critique such a homogenisation. He appears to be claiming that “we” are being regulated, passively adapted to telematically empowered terminals in the home, but the question of who sits in front of the terminal and who cooks the dinner is ignored—to say nothing of who controls and maintains the networks to which the terminal is connected. Moreover, Baudrillard here agrees that there is, in fact, an appreciable distance between the “living room” and science fiction, which rather undercuts his claims that “it is no longer possible to manufacture the unreal from the real, to create the imaginary from the data of reality”, and that “the process will be rather the reverse: to put in place ‘decentered’ situations, models of simulation, and then to strive to give them the colors of the real, the banal, the lived; to reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because the real has disappeared from our lives”.7 His vaguely horrified suggestion that the body and its activities are being subsumed into the machine seems to be merely the old, familiar fear of technology, explored in SF from the time of Mary Shelley onward, in a new, postmodern guise. And who is the “we”—“that crucial riven construction of politics”, as Haraway puts it8—on whose behalf Baudrillard claims to be speaking? He continues:

It is well known how the simple presence of the television changes the rest of the habitat into a kind of archaic envelope, a vestige of human relations whose very survival remains perplexing. As soon as this scene is no longer haunted by its actors and their fantasies, as soon as behaviour is crystallized on certain screens and operational terminals, what’s left appears only as a large useless body, deserted and condemned. The real itself appears as a large useless body.9

For whom does Baudrillard speak: urban North America/Western Europe

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8 Haraway, 1991b, p.25.
9 Baudrillard, 1985, p.129.
and *therefore* the entire world? And what of the considerable differences, exceptions and idiosyncrasies *within* those milieus? Baudrillard’s unsubstantiated view of “our” (his?) habitat’s “well-known” (by whom?), “perplexing” survival as an “archaic envelope” despite (whose?) pervasive addiction to television fails to take into account the great variety of far-from-passive ways in which people view television,10 to say nothing of those who do not even have televisions. Besides, his argument is undermined in the first line in which he states that “we are here at the controls”, included among which, presumably, is the off-switch. Either the real is “a large, useless body” (what kind of body is this?), or controls do exist and can be used to change things. I am not appealing to a “common sense” appraisal of Baudrillard here so much as querying firstly Baudrillard’s apparent claim to be speaking for all humanity (especially since all humanity appears to refer only to privileged Western masculine subjects), and secondly his description of how “we” are all taken over by electronic communications to the point of the disappearance of something Baudrillard calls “the real”. Baudrillard’s claim to speak for everyone implies the invisibility to himself of his own subjective positioning, while his blanket assertion of the disappearance of “the real” represents the kind of totalising thought which is both at odds with his postmodern stance as well as erasing gender, racial and other difference.

In the previous chapter, I made distinctions between various forms of “reality”—using formulations such as “wire life”, “flesh life” and so forth—which seems to me to be a more useful and practical approach to the vexing question of how to grasp that chameleon, “reality”, than the claim that reality is no longer with us (whoever *we* are). While agreeing with Baudrillard that the late twentieth century is an era of extraordinarily rapid technological change whose effects are (or will eventually be) felt in every corner of human life, I disagree that this means the “real” is disappearing. What is required are new and more open-ended definitions of reality and experience, not nostalgic, cynical or disapproving comparisons to some imagined, “realer” humanist past. As Jenny Wolmark notes,

> there is a necessary interaction between reality and simulation in cybernetic systems, just as there is in all cultural processes, which is somewhat at odds with Baudrillard’s worst-case scenario in which the simulation replaces and destroys reality, even supposing there is a single version of reality which can be replaced.11

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10 See Cranny-Francis, 1994: her discussion of compliant, resistant and tactical readers may be equally applied to television viewing.

Baudrillard’s assumption of one-reality-fits-all is a key weakness in his position.

His impression of the way in which computers and communications technologies are used ignores the differential between male and female users, and shows little understanding of the actual hardware and software involved, let alone the unprecedented cultural formations coming into being around digital technologies; for example, the intense compulsion to create virtual communities and new “realities” (which Stone and others describe), shown by individuals who use this technology daily. According to Mark Poster, “Baudrillard’s work remains infused with a sense of the media as unidirectional, and therefore does not anticipate the imminent appearance of bidirectional, decentralized media, such as the Internet, with its new opportunities for reconstructing the mechanisms of subject constitution.”

Baudrillard classifies communications technologies as obscene, figuring computer-mediated communication itself as some kind of miasmic demonic possession which destroys individuality, agency, and the private:

> All functions abolished in a single dimension, that of communication. That’s the ecstasy of communication. All secrets, spaces and scenes abolished in a single dimension of information. That’s obscenity. ... There is in effect a state of fascination and vertigo linked to this obscene delirium of communication. A singular form of pleasure perhaps, but aleatory and dizzying. ... here surely there is an original and profound mutation of the very forms of perception and pleasure. ... something new, ecstatic and obscene.

“Fascination and vertigo ... pleasure ... aleatory and dizzying” are ideas echoed by Stone, as I discuss later; but where Baudrillard is appalled by the cyborgian developments of communications technologies, Stone is delighted, seeing opportunities for creative connection and hope.

In his discussion of the failure of SF to maintain any appreciable distance from the real, Baudrillard states:

> There is no real and no imaginary except at a certain distance. What happens when this distance, even the one separating the real from the imaginary, begins to disappear and to be absorbed by the model alone? Currently, ... we are witnessing the reduction and absorption of this distance, of this separation which permits a space for ideal or critical projection. ...

It is diminished considerably in SF: SF only being, most often, an extravagant projection of, but qualitatively not different from, the real world of production. ...

It is totally reduced in the implosive era of models. Models no longer constitute an

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13 Baudrillard, 1985, pp.131–32.
imaginary domain with reference to the real; they are, themselves, an apprehension of the real, and thus leave no room for any fictional extrapolation – they are immanent, and therefore leave no room for any kind of transcendentalism. The stage is now set for simulation, in the cybernetic sense of the word – that is to say, for all kinds of manipulation of these models (hypothetical scenarios, the creation of simulated situations, etc.), but now nothing distinguishes this management-manipulation from the real itself: there is no more fiction.\textsuperscript{14}

Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal proposes that the distinction between the real and the model, or simulation, is blurred to the extent that the simulation becomes not only more than real—hyperreal—but that the hyperreal constitutes reality itself.\textsuperscript{15} However, his claim to be describing the real state of things while insisting that the real has disappeared seems at least contradictory. The disappearing real he describes above seems to be more applicable to fictions such as David Cronenberg’s hallucinatory SF film, \textit{Videodrome} (1982), than to the workaday world of the West, media-saturated though it may be, let alone to that of the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{16} I share Anne Balsamo’s view that Baudrillard’s cultural criticism is “evocative and his elaboration of the logic of the simulacrum helps make sense of U.S. media culture, but he remains within a logic of the image and the disembodied, which is not, in my opinion, a viable starting point for a feminist analysis of the cultural impact of VR technology.”\textsuperscript{17}

In an essay comparing Baudrillard’s theories with those of Donna Haraway, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr clarifies Baudrillard’s concepts of “the disappearing real”:

\begin{quote}
A certain distance between the real and the imaginary was required, Baudrillard writes, for the concepts of utopia and even classical science-fictional projection to crystallize. ... The utopian imaginary signified a radically different universe from the real. Science fiction narrowed the distance considerably, bringing the imaginary closer to the real world of production, but it also introduced a process of infinite reproduction (of worlds, of technologies, of cultures, of scientific “facts,” etc.). In the hyperreal, the gap disappears altogether.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Without wishing to be too literal about Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality,
I suggest that his contention that models have become the determinant of reality and that the boundary between hyperreality and everyday life is erased is a colourful rather than a helpful account of whatever it is that passes for real; one might as well say, perhaps, that a *trompe l’oeil* painting is now to be taken for reality, and that these days, everything is a *trompe l’oeil* painting. Csicsery-Ronay Jr observes that technology “has become an aspect of the quotidian consciousness of people living in the post-industrial world, daily witnesses to the transformations of their values and material conditions in the wake of technological acceleration beyond their conceptual threshold.” However, a failure on the part of a person to understand fully the workings of new technology does not automatically signify an end to the real. Rather than dismissing the real as defunct, what is needed are new ways to understand and describe—admittedly unprecedented—varieties of “real”.

SF was ever a fiction growing out of the real, the present, especially the present frontiers of hard science. In this case the hard science concerned is the development of communications technologies and virtual systems, concepts with which many cyborg-SF writers are deeply engaged. Read as metaphor for cyborg-SF, Baudrillard’s hyperreal, his concept of simulacra as models without originals, are engaging ideas, and in some ways appropriate to some of the texts I will be examining in later chapters. His work is helpful mostly as a kind of companion reader to cyborg-SF, particularly in its most dystopian and masculinist form. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, in their critical overview of the thought of Baudrillard, suggest that it is probably

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20 See, for example, Colin, a character in Mona Lisa Overdrive (1989). Colin is a cybernetically constructed human simulacrum with no original (other than a “faded hunting print”), referred to initially as a ghost and serving as a kind of companion-manservant-databank to Kumiko, the owner of the “Maas–Neotek” unit which calls him forth:

“No, the ghost woke to Kumiko’s touch as they began their descent into Heathrow. The fifty-first generation of Maas–Neotek biochips conjured up an indistinct figure on the seat beside her, a boy out of some faded hunting print, legs crossed casually in tan breeches and riding boots. ‘Hullo,’ the ghost said.

Kumiko blinked, opened her hand. The boy flickered and was gone. She looked down at the smooth little unit in her palm and slowly closed her fingers.

‘‘Lo again,’ he said. ‘Name’s Colin. Yours?’

She stared. His eyes were bright green smoke, his high forehead pale and smooth under an unruly dark forelock. She could see the seats across the isle through the glint of his teeth. ‘If it’s a bit too spectral for you,’ he said with a grin, ‘we can up the rez ...’ And he was there for an instant, uncomfortably sharp and real, the nap on the lapels of his dark coat vibrating with hallucinatory clarity. ‘Runs the battery down, though,’ he said, and faded to his prior state. ‘Didn’t get your name.’ The grin again.

‘You aren’t real,’ she said, sternly.” (MLO pp.9–10).
more accurate to describe his work as a fantasy of a science fictional future. They continue:

This is indeed a useful way to read Baudrillard: as a dystopic projection of a possible future which can be read alongside Huxley, Orwell, and cyberpunk fiction. ... He exaggerates the extent to which postmodern simulation and hyperreality constitute the contemporary society and his erasure of political economy mystifies the continuing domination of capital. On the other hand, the extent to which new forms of simulation, cyberspace, and technologically produced realities in the forms of computer games, designer foods and cosmetics, artificial awareness modules, and other curiosities are currently being introduced suggests some dramatic future transformations which Baudrillard’s categories anticipate. ...

Baudrillard’s best work can therefore be read along with the novels of J.G. Ballard, Philip Dick, William Gibson, and cyberpunk fiction as projecting visions of futuristic worlds which illuminate the present high tech society.21

Mark Poster criticises Baudrillard on several fronts:

He fails to define his major terms, such as the code; his writing style is hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis when it is appropriate; he totalizes his insights, refusing to qualify or delimit his claims. He writes about particular experiences, television images, as if nothing else in society mattered, extrapolating a bleak view of the world from that limited base. He ignores contradictory evidence such as the many benefits afforded by the new media, for example, by promoting progressive movements concerning civil rights and the environment, by providing vital information to the populace (the Vietnam War) and counteracting parochialism with humanizing images of foreigners. The instant, worldwide availability of information has changed human society forever, probably for the good.22

Poster suggests, however, that Baudrillard offers a beginning for the comprehension of the impact of new communication forms on society. For the critical theorist, Poster says, “Baudrillard represents the beginning of a line of thought, one that is open to development and refinement by others.”23

Cyberspace, “non-space”, that mysterious site where Neuromancer’s Case experiences “bodiless exultation” is, perhaps, the true site of Baudrillard’s hyperreal;24 here it is that SF writers create the posthuman sim-

22 Poster, 1995, p.113.
24 I am using the term hyperreal here in the sense of a more-than-real, but one which is produced according to a model; in Baudrillard’s term, a real made over into “a hallucinatory resemblance” to itself. See Baudrillard, 1983, and Best and Kellner, 1991, p.119. The imagination—the non-space of the mind—could be described as the proper domain of hallucinatory resemblances.
ulacrum, the cyborg, the disembodied pleasures of the virtual—but still gendered—subject; here that writers and researchers play a game of chase with each other, contesting the border separating the ideas of one group from the other.\textsuperscript{25} The relevance of this to my study is not, however, whether scientists are stealing the SF writers' thunder—or vice versa—but how subjectivities are being conceived in both areas of endeavour, and more particularly in cyborg-SF which draws a significant amount of its material, information and ideas from the discourses of hard science.

**Stone: Reality-Fiction Crossover**

Csicsery-Ronay Jr argues that Baudrillard writes “what is essentially a visionary SF poem or film—exuberant in its prodigious manufacture of associations”.\textsuperscript{26} A different form of exuberance can be found in another theorist of the virtual, Sandy Stone. Stone’s project of exploring the technobody at the end of the twentieth century arises out of her research into telephone sex-workers. Her interest in the possibilities of dis/embodied interaction has made her an influential and widely read theorist of the technosphere, but unlike that of Baudrillard, her perspective on virtual culture and the cyberbody more generally is almost wholly celebratory. Stone rejoices in the complexities and paradoxes of emergent technologies, offering understandings of dis/embodiment and the elusive “real” more useful, I think, than the pessimism of Baudrillard. Stone writes:

Electronic virtual communities represent flexible, lively, and practical adaptations to the real circumstances that confront persons seeking community in what Haraway (1987) refers to as “the mythic time called the late twentieth century.” They are part of a range of innovative solutions to the drive for sociality—a drive that can be frequently thwarted by the geographical and cultural realities of cities increasingly structured according to the needs of powerful economic interests rather than in ways that encourage and facilitate habitation and social interaction in the urban context. In this context, electronic virtual communities are complex and ingenious strategies for survival (author’s italics, and slightly incorrect Haraway quotation).\textsuperscript{27}

To some extent, Stone expresses the same pleasure I experience in the face of emergent technologies, so at odds with the lugubrious grimness of

\textsuperscript{25} See especially Joe Flower, “How to Build a Metaverse”, *New Scientist*, No 1999, 14 October 1995, pp.36–40, in which he claims that the Metaverse (inhabitable cyberspace) already exists.

\textsuperscript{26} Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 1991c, p.393.

Baudrillard. She sheds light on links between these technologies and representations of the fictional technosphere that I examine in later chapters, and gestures toward explanations as to why both remain deeply enmeshed in a masculinist gender discourse. A theorist of the virtual techno-body, she discusses the developing sociality of the Net, a new kind of “real”, which provides alternative positions to those of Baudrillard:

Computers are arenas for social experience and dramatic interaction, a type of media more like public theater, and their output is used for qualitative interaction, dialogue, and conversation. ... The changes that the concept of presence is currently undergoing are embedded in much larger shifts in cultural beliefs and practices. These include repeated transgressions of the traditional concept of the body’s physical envelope and of the locus of human agency.28

As Stone has suggested, people agree to “meet” on the Net, but they understand a new definition of the word “meet”.29 She also observes that “the boundaries between technology and nature are themselves in the midst of a deep restructuring”.30

Computer engineers are fascinated by VR because they not only program a world but somehow inhabit it; and virtual worlds can be inhabited by communities. Thus, in the process of articulating a virtual system, VR engineers make templates for communities ... and because communities are inhabited by bodies, VR engineers model bodies as well. ... In doing so, they are articulating their own assumptions about bodies and sociality and projecting them onto the codes that define cyberspace systems. For example, since programmers, in interaction with workers in widely diverse fields, create the codes by which VR is generated, how these heterogeneous groups understand cognition, community and bodies will determine the nature of cognition, communities and bodies in VR.

Bodies in VR are constituted by descriptive codes that “embody” expectations of appearance. Many of the engineers currently debating the form and nature of cyberspace are young men in their late teens and twenties, and they are at times preoccupied with the things that have always preoccupied the postpubescent. This group will generate the codes and descriptors by which bodies in cyberspace are represented.31

Stone is being coy. What she means is that male programmers produce such masterpieces as “Maxie MacPlaymate” and “Virtual Valerie”, pneumatic cy-

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29 “[At the time] anthropological field sites are disappearing, a new and unexpected kind of ‘field’ is opening up—incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both ‘meet’ and ‘face’.” Stone, 1992a, p.85.
31 Stone 1992b, p.616.
berbimbos which are, as Pat Cadigan might put it, high up in the stupid-sphere.32 Boys will be boys, in other words. Balsamo agrees that the “realities” constructed in VR “embody the desires of those who program them”, and that “the reality constructed in VR worlds and the reality constructed in the everyday world ... are both cultural as well as technological constructions, fully saturated by the media and other forms of everyday technologies.”33 If, as Stone indicates, many of these young men also read Gibson, his fellow cyberpunks and their descendants, this suggests that cyborg-SF texts will continue to contribute to the kinds of understandings referred to here, reinforcing both masculine and feminine gender stereotypes. However, Stone sees some grounds for hope:

The origin of the warranted self, safe in its politically authorized coupling with a biological body, is linked to the cultural production of bourgeois modernity. At the close of the twentieth century this linkage is dissolving, and the bounded social individual is engaged, wilfully or otherwise, in a process of translation to the refuged and reinscribed agencies of virtual systems.34

Stone’s analysis allows for changes in traditional concepts such as physical presence, but suggests that new, valorising understandings are possible, and that non-physical presence as experienced daily on the Net is a creative act (one which has been foreshadowed in cyborg-SF). The “biological body” in question may be, of course, not so much left behind as represented pseudonymously, so to speak, disguised at will in virtual interactions, when participants in virtual culture choose to play the games of gender or race masquerade that become possible on the Net. Howard Rheingold’s study of technical and social questions surrounding VR technology touches in several places on the notion of virtual sexual contact between remote individuals. Using the word “teledildonics” (coined, he says, by the inventor of hyper-text, Theodor Nelson, in 1974, and more soberly described as “interactive tactile telepresence”), Rheingold describes the possibility of technology allowing individuals to don 3D glasses, a diaphanous bodysuit embedded with intelligent sensor-effectors which receive and transmit a realistic sense of tactile presence, and make contact over telephone lines to one or many other similarly equipped individuals for the purpose of remote sensual encounters.35

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32 In relation to male sexual fantasies on the Net, see Dery, 1996, p.209; the word “stupidsphere” appears in Pat Cadigan, Synners (1991).
35 See Rheingold, 1992.
Michael Heim suggests that the Net “simply brackets the physical presence of the participants, by either omitting or simulating corporeal immediacy.”³⁶ While I think there is nothing “simple” about “bracketing the physical presence” in terms of the subject’s sense of self, this is, in effect, what participants in Net communications attempt to do as their imaginary personas, or avatars, stand in for them.³⁷ Stone would agree, I think, with the argument that despite the “shifts in cultural beliefs and practices”, and despite the development of VR technologies, the majority of those people who have the privilege of wire life will continue to seek pleasure from both wire and flesh experience, inventing forms of human relations which they do not find at all “perplexing”. She makes several useful observations about this hybrid, dis/embodied field. Contrasting the experience of virtual systems, or cyberspace, to that of watching a film on a cinema screen, she says:

> it is the quality of direct physical and kinesthetic engagement, the enrolling of hapticity in the service of both the drama and the dramatic, which is not part of the cinematic mode. The cinematic mode of engagement, like that of conventional theater, is mediated by two modalities; the viewer experiences the presentation through sight and hearing. The electronic screen is “flat,” so long as we consider it in the same bimodal way. But it is the potential for interaction that is one of the things that distinguishes the computer from the cinematic mode, and that transforms the small, low-resolution, and frequently monochromatic electronic screen from a novelty to a powerfully gripping force. Interaction is the physical concretization of a desire to escape the flatness and merge into the created system. It is the sense in which the “spectator” is more than a participant, but becomes both participant in and creator of the simulation. In brief, it is the sense of unlimited power which the dis/embodied simulation produces, and the different ways in which socialization has led those always-embodied participants confronted with the sign of unlimited power to respond. ... cyberspace is part of, not simply the medium for, the action.³⁸

Michael Heim, too, notes the intensities and sense of active community accompanying interaction in cyberspace:

> Cyberspace supplants physical space. ... When on line, we break free ... from bodily existence. Telecommunication offers an unrestricted freedom of expression and personal contact, with far less hierarchy and formality than are found in the primary social world. ... The computer network appears as a godsend in providing forums for people to gather in surprisingly personal proximity—especially considering today’s

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³⁷ This is an area of intense contemporary scholarly scrutiny, too wide-ranging to be fully covered here. See Zoe Sofia, Whose Second Self? Gender and (Ir)rationality in Computer Culture, Deakin University, Geelong, 1993; Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995.
³⁸ Stone, 1992a, pp.106-07.
limited band-widths—without the physical limitations of geography, time zones, or conspicuous social status. For many, networks and bulletin boards act as computer antidotes to the atomism of society. ... They function as social nodes for fostering those fluid and multiple elective affinities that everyday urban life seldom, in fact, supports. 39

According to Mark Poster, the advent of global communications networks is producing “an entirely new configuration of communications relations” in which the boundaries between producers, distributors and consumers are collapsing. 40 The metaphor of the so-called information superhighway “attends only to the movement of the information, leaving out the various kinds of cyberspace on the Internet, meeting places, work areas, and electronic cafes in which this vast transmission of images and words becomes places of communicative relation.” (author’s italics) 41

These observations attempt to come to grips with the kinds of reality, the kinds of physical, social and emotional experiences in a computer-communications-mediated world which Baudrillard characterises as obscene, but in which, in contrast to Baudrillard, Heim, Poster and Stone find possibilities for pleasure and creative agency. Stone argues for the “reality” of virtual systems as an experiential state different from flesh life, yet connected to it in as yet not fully explained ways. She regards each “reality” as separate but equally valid, calling both the space of interaction that is the Net, and the space of interaction that I call flesh life, “consensual loci”. 42 Each consensual locus has its own reality, she says, determined by local conditions. Where Baudrillard sees the subject dissolving into some terrible electronic hell, Stone points out,

No matter how virtual the subject may become, there is always a body attached. It may be off somewhere else—and that ‘somewhere else’ may be a privileged point of view—but consciousness remains firmly rooted in the physical. Historically, body, technology, and community constitute each other. 43

In this way Stone attempts to affirm the importance of “the body” and simultaneously problematises it. 44 Poster also comments on the place of the

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40 Poster, 1995, p.3.
42 Stone, 1992a, pp.83–84.
43 Stone, 1992a, p.111.
44 Heim also grounds virtual subjectivity in corporeal experience. See Heim, 1993, pp.136–37.
physical in these realms, asserting that,

the new technologies install the “interface,” the face between the faces; the face that insists that we remember that we have “faces,” that we have sides that are present at the moment of utterance, that we are not present in any simple or immediate way”.45

Concurring with both Stone and Heim in relation to the formation of new kinds of communities, Poster also introduces a strongly political approach, suggesting that nation-states and capitalism itself are threatened by communications technologies:

Nation-states are at a loss when faced with a global communication network. Technology has taken a turn that defies the character of power of modern governments. ... The problem for capitalism is how to contain the word and the image, to bind them to proper names and logos when they flit about at the speed of light and procreate with indecent rapidity, not arborially, to use the terms of Deleuze and Guattari, as in a centralized factory, but rhyzomically [sic], at any decentered location.46

Poster’s careful optimism regarding new cultural formations coming into being in the realms of the Net and VR is aligned with that of Stone and Heim, but he extends his critique to the body politic. Poster also recognises the propensity of the Net in its present stage of development to become an agent of cultural imperialism:

The dominant use of English on the Internet suggests the extension of American power, as does the fact that e-mail addresses in the United States alone do not require a country code. The Internet normalizes American users. But the issue is more complex. In Singapore, English serves to enable conversations between hostile ethnic groups, being a neutral “other.” Of course, vast inequalities of use exist, changing the democratic structure of the Internet into an occasion for further wrongs to the poorer populations. Even within the high-use nations, wealthy white males are disproportionate users. Yet technologies sometimes spread quickly and the Internet is relatively cheap. Only grassroots political mobilization on this issue will ensure wide access.47

Get Real! Loose Wires

Despite my appreciation of Stone’s enthusiasms, I have some reservations about her critique inasmuch as it leaves certain areas of virtual culture

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46 Poster, 1995, p.29.
47 Poster, 1995, p.28. The UK, having founded the prepaid postal system (i.e. the use of postage stamps) on May 1, 1840, still does not identify its postage stamps with a country designation. But see a report in The Australian, 12 November 1996, regarding new technology which allows electronic addresses to be customised, doing away with original categories such as .edu, .com, and country suffixes.
unaddressed. On the one hand, Stone argues persuasively for new conceptions of dis/embodiment in virtual culture and the “real”, revealing the creative energy involved in wire life interactions:

The boundaries between the subject, if not the body, and the “rest of the world” are undergoing a radical refiguration, brought about in part through the mediation of technology ... many of the usual analytical categories have become unreliable for making useful distinctions between the biological and the technological, the natural and the artificial, the human and mechanical, to which we have become accustomed.48

Unlike Baudrillard, Stone seems not to find anything especially alarming in these new configurations of people and technology, and her comments resonate with the sense of a new and exciting terrain traversed by cyberpunk and other cyborg-SF writers. On the other hand, however, Stone admits to the consequences for flesh life almost as an afterthought:

The discourse of visionary virtual world builders is rife with images of imaginal bodies, freed from the constraints that flesh imposes. Cyberspace developers foresee a time when they will be able to forget about the body. But it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical. No refuged virtual body, no matter how beautiful, will slow the death of a cyberpunk with AIDS. Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies.49

Stone appeals to an essentialist return to the physical body here, somewhat in contrast to her more customary transcendental technophilia, but fails to do more than mention the political consequences of forgetting about the body. Stone elides the question of gender of this ineluctable body, in or out of its cyberguise. Her arguments fail to address seriously such issues as the technological access differential, or the psychological access differential (i.e. technophobia/-philia): whether the joys of virtual interactivity are equally available to men and women, let alone to people who are poor, non-white, non-Western, non-middle-class, or seriously deprived of band-width.50 She indicates her assumption that the pleasures of cyberspatial interactivity—the forgetting about the body—are universally enjoyable and enjoyed, and then fleetingly acknowledges that these pleasures are predicated upon the labour

49 Stone, 1992a, p.113.
of women and minorities: immediately following the passage quoted above, Stone refers to “our” forgetting “those upon whose labor the act of forgetting the body is founded—usually women and minorities.”

Vicki Kirby offers a view of essentialism which gives a more specific critique of the transcendence that Stone warns against:

> essentialism is the condition of possibility for any political axiology: the minimal consensual stuff that political action fastens onto is already essentialism’s effect. There is no ‘outside’ this entanglement. However, the task is not to dream of deliverance, of yet another theology that promises to transcend this contamination. Rather, it is to begin to real-ise that we are inextricably immersed within that contamination and that our fundamental complicity with it is, strangely, its enabling moment.

Kirby’s contingent defence of essentialism is a solid ground for a feminist political praxis, more convincing to me than Stone’s slightly pious warning against a reckless pursuit of disembodied rapture while neglecting the vulnerabilities of flesh life. I am not arguing in favour of capitulation to essentialism, however. Rather, through the cyborgs of SF specifically, I am seeking to decentre the notion of the natural body; to destabilise and problematise it; to remember that bodies, even refigured ones, are always gendered; to explore questions about what it means when a body can be both present and virtual simultaneously; and to suggest that this might be conceptualised, after Haraway, as “cyborg subjectivity”.

Stone leaves gender in virtual culture open to question. In a passage which seems to combine both the powerful images of Gibson and flesh-life encounters shared by people who frequent the Net, Stone comments on the experience of “cybernetic interaction”:

> There is also a protean quality about cybernetic interaction, a sense of physical as well as conceptual mutability that is implied in the sense of exciting, dizzying physical movement within purely conceptual space. I find that [in] reality hackers experience a sense of longing for an embodied conceptual space like that which cyberspace suggests. This sense, which seems to accompany the desire to cross the human/machine boundary, to penetrate and merge, which is part of the evocation of cyberspace, and which shares certain conceptual and affective characteristics with numerous fictional evocations of the inarticulate longing of the male for the female, I characterize as cyborg envy.

Even couched as it is in the distancing construction of “numerous fictional

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51 Stone, 1992a, p.113.
52 Kirby, 1991, p.93.
evocations”, Stone’s simile of “the inarticulate longing of the male for the female” is dubious and she did, in fact, suggest in a later essay that her concept of cyborg envy was in jest.\textsuperscript{54} Such unproblematised categorisation fails to account for the experiences of those who are not heterosexual males who engage in cybernetic interaction, not to mention the kinds of transgendered and crossdressing behaviour which frequently takes place on the Net. Besides, heterosexualising cyberspace is a highly contentious act.\textsuperscript{55} Referring to “hackers” (presumably male, in view of the simile which follows the reference), Stone naturalises masculine presence in cyberspace while her metaphor of penetration is redolent of masculine sexuality and is expressed without qualification. Here, as Butler writes, “the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood”.\textsuperscript{56}

The \textit{flâneur} in cyberspace, as in other public spaces, is gendered masculine. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that women are frequently discouraged from entering or participating fully in Net communities by both conscious and unconscious means, ranging from their presence and voices being ignored, to ridicule and abuse, to violent (albeit text-based) sexual harassment. Anne Balsamo observes:

\begin{quote}

electronic discussion lists are governed by gendered codes of discursive interchange that are often not hospitable to female participants. In [an] exchange, not among cyberpunks, but rather among postmodern scholars, women’s contributions to an electronic conference were routinely ignored in the excessive word production of male participants... This suggests that online communication is structured similarly to communication in other settings, and is overtly subjected to forms of gender, status, age, and race determinations.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

In many of the cyborg-SF texts I will be looking at in subsequent chapters, the phenomenon of women being regarded as inappropriate to cyberspace is

\textsuperscript{54} Stone, 1992b, p.619.
\textsuperscript{55} Stone, who is herself transgendered, notes in a later work that “An item of particular interest to me is that at any given time approximately 15 percent of the Habitat population [an online community of about 1.5 million] is actively engaging in cross-dressing or crossgender behaviour.” (Stone, 1995, p.25) However, her characterisation of cyberspace as a presumably female locus available for penetration by presumably male hackers is an idea which finds resonance with William Gibson’s work, and one which is subverted in a number of less masculinist texts.
\textsuperscript{56} Butler, 1990, p.9.
highly apparent. Women and technology are seen to repel one another like oil and water; while theorists such as Stone not only fail to remark on it or ask why, but take it for granted, it is not surprising that masculinist versions of cyborg-SF are the dominant visions that perpetuate mythologies of men and their machines.

Images of gendered subjectivities may be contested both as fictive representations, recognisable reflections of subjectivities found in flesh life, and as what may, one day, "really" eventuate in the "non-spaces" to be developed by the researcher/technician protagonists of the start of the twenty-first century. In laboratories—filled with eager graduate students, prototype VR suits, data-gloves and unimaginably powerful computers—as well as in quiet rooms where writers see and record invisible visions, "the non-space of the mind" is bringing forth new perspectives and, perhaps, a new, posthuman subject. Veronica Hollinger expresses it thus:

posthumanism ... produced by the interface of the human and the machine, radically decenters the human body, the sacred icon of the essential self, in the same way that the virtual reality of cyberspace works to decenter conventional humanist notions of an unproblematical "real."  

However, I suspect that such formulations as "posthuman" once again risk the disappearance of gender difference, or rather, assimilation into hegemonic masculinity. The cyborg is at risk of such absorption, and the issue remains, in my mind, open to question. It is this posthuman subject which is the focus of Haraway's formulation of the cyborg.

Donna Haraway remarks that, overwhelmingly, theory is bodily, and theory is literal. Theory is not about matters distant from the lived body; quite the opposite, she says: "Theory is anything but disembodied. The fanciest statements about radical decontextualization as the historical form of nature in late capitalism are tropes for the embodiment, the production, the literalization of experience in that specific mode." 59 By using the word "fanciest", Haraway is dismissive of the strand of poststructuralist thought which negates any form of political praxis on the grounds of the undecidability or endless deferment of "Truth" or, for that matter, "the real"; she argues here, as elsewhere, that a feminist politics is one of involvement, operating from provisional or contingent truths and making politically

useful connection on grounds of affinity and coalition. Read as a literal account of real bodies and their interactions with real technologies, Baudrillard’s theories—which would certainly fit the bill as “fanciest statements about radical decontextualization”—are problematic, to say the least, while Stone’s zealous technophilia tends to glide over masculinist discourse in virtual culture.60

Haraway: Cyborgs To Go

In 1985 Donna Haraway, a socialist-feminist historian of scientific discourse, wrote an acclaimed and widely discussed essay, “A Manifesto For Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s”, in which she suggested the image of the cyborg as a radical, strategic myth figure available to feminist appropriation as a resource for combating the narratives and practices of masculinist techno-science. In comparison to Stone, Haraway has chosen an alternative method of theorising the cyborg body in the age of transglobal communications, a more radical one which, as well as celebrating the novel possibilities of the human-machine interface, also provides a dynamic political framework. Haraway proposes a mythologised figure of the cyborg as a way of thinking about a feminist identity which “rhizomatically” connects groupings such as the marginal identities described by Trinh:61

my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work. (MC 196)

Among other things, questions of politics, social diversity, technoscience and


61 Deleuze and Guattari’s term resonates not only with the kinds of interconnectivities called for by Haraway, and with Trinh’s non-hierarchical relationships, but also (as Poster suggests) with the almost infinite linkages found on the Net, a prime playground for cyborgs. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaux, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1987. Ronald Bogue explains the concept thus: “Rhizomes … are non-hierarchical, horizontal multiplicities which cannot be subsumed within a unified structure, whose components form random, unregulated networks in which any element may be connected with any other element.” Ronald Bogue, Deleuze and Guattari, Routledge, London, 1993, p.107.
I am making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings. ... By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. ... The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality ... (MC 191)

Using a declamatory and metaphorical style suited to the format of a manifesto, Haraway announces strategies by which new forms of domination created by the new order of late twentieth-century science and technology might be resisted. Andrew Ross paraphrases Haraway’s arguments thus:

In her influential essay, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” Donna Haraway urges a new sense of realism about our cyborg condition, recognizing the new daily sphere of human-machine interface not only as a product of power relations but also as a potential site for contesting and redefining those relations. In rejecting the “naturalist” basis of feminist appeals to the anti-technological, organic wholeness of the body, Haraway calls for ever more transgressive acts in the “border war” between humans and machines. She proposes cyborgism as an imaginative resource or myth for women who are traditionally socialized away from technology and yet who are most often the primary victims of technology in the workplace, the home and the hospital.

An important strategy for contestation that Haraway calls for, not mentioned here by Ross, is the formation of changing political alliances based on shifting and multiple affinities among individuals. This “cyborg politics” is based on an acceptance of difference alongside a willingness to form coalitions. Joan Scott, in her commentary on Haraway’s “Manifesto”, elaborates:

Cyborg politics substitute a notion of affinity as a basis for collective action rather than shared identity—which is a naturalized or essentialized construction. The politics Haraway projects in her utopian vision involve strategic combinations of individuals who do not claim that their consciousness inheres in their being; do not claim as women, for example, a shared “natural” experience of sexual subjugation, or as male workers, alienation from the “essential” life activity that Marx defined as labor. Rather, collective affinities play on identifications that have been attributed to individuals by their societies, and that have served to exclude them or subordinate them. “Women of color” is an example of the kind of affinal politics Haraway wants to encourage.

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62 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr describes Haraway’s “Manifesto” thus: “It is also a cyborg text in its performance, combining the earnest voice of a political polemictist writing in the Socialist Review, and the voice of an SF cyborg leader, like the Roy Batty (sic) of Blade Runner, resonating in a space outside the real.” Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 1991c, p.399.


Haraway's cyborg, in fact, is very much at home in many of the more transgressive, feminist cyberpunk/cyborg-SF texts with which my project engages. The cyborg—"resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity ... oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" (MC 192)—as a remedy for the masculinist cyberspace cowboy is a welcome image, and one which some feminist cyborg-SF texts make use of. For Haraway, if "we" are to come to grips with the scientific, economic, political and social conditions spawned by the military-industrial, corporate and media powers of the end of this century, "Cyborgs-'R'-Us": "The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics." (MC 191) I am taking "us/our" to mean "feminists"; Balsamo clarifies Haraway's claim here as an explicit mapping of the identity of woman onto the image of the cyborg:

>This foregrounds the ambiguous constitution of the female body — predicated on the blurred boundaries between the individual and the collective, the material and the discursive, the fictive and the real. Both Woman and Cyborg are simultaneously symbolically and biologically produced and reproduced through social interactions.65

Using the cyborg in this way, that is, both as a metaphor for the complexity of the postmodern, information-saturated, technologically dependent era of the Western world, and as a trope for a new affinal feminist politics, Haraway takes a central image of cyborg-SF technological terror and puts it to use as a promise of hope—a monster both promising and hopeful. She recognises, however, that the cyborg may also be deadly: "Modern war is a cyborg orgy ... The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism." (MC 191, 193) As such, the cyborg figure also represents "the awful apocalyptic telos of the West's escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space." (MC 192) However, she claims that this lethal cyborg can be recuperated for feminist purposes:

In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture. ... The phallogocentric origin stories most crucial for feminist cyborgs are built into the literal technologies—technologies that write the world, biotechnology and microelectronics—that have recently textualized our bodies as code problems on the grid of C^3I [command-control-communication-intelligence, the military's symbol for its operations theory]. Feminist cyborg stories have the task of

65 Balsamo, 1996, p.34.
recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control. (MC 217)66

Haraway suggests the potential of the cyborg as a source of coalition among widely differing groups which oppose Western, patriarchal, capitalist hegemony and that hegemony’s insistence upon an “other” whereby it can define itself. She lists this particular divisive ill among the traditions of Western science and politics: “the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other ...”; and argues “for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction”. (MC 191) The cyborg, Haraway says, has nothing to do with originary stories which end in apocalypse, secretly desired since it results in return to an imagined original bliss:

The cyborg would not recognise the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. Perhaps that is why I want to see if cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy. Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not remember the cosmos. They are wary of holism, but needy for connection—they seem to have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party. (MC 192-93)

This is clearly a utopian proposition, and one for which Haraway has been criticised. In an earlier (1988) essay discussing the popular cultural image of the cyborg as a masculinist one of domination and violence, Anne Balsamo argues that this image overcomes any attempt to recuperate the cyborg as feminist:

My criticism of Haraway’s choice of image [in “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”] is that she fails to consider how the cyborg has already been fashioned in our cultural imagination. It is difficult to determine if Haraway chooses the cyborg image because she believes that women are inherently cyborgian, or because the image is useful and potentially liberating. ... cyborg images reproduce limiting, not liberating, gender stereotypes. Focusing on the cyborg image in hopes of unearthing an icon of utopian thought does a great disservice to feminism. Feminism doesn’t need another utopian vision. Its radical potential will not be realized through the appropriation of technological and scientific discourses to a feminist or female agenda.67

I disagree with Balsamo’s reading which, I think, ignores Haraway’s insistence on the “ironic”, “mythic” and “blasphemous” nature of her metaphor,

66 For Haraway’s description of C^3I, see Haraway, 1990a, p.206.
67 Balsamo, 1988, p.341.
and shows the very mistrust and distaste for “technological and scientific discourses” which has prevented many feminist women from engaging fully with its masculinist biases. Although it is true that most cyborg figures in popular culture are built on the male beefcake model (as I discussed earlier), and are given to excessive violence, Haraway’s cyborg is not of this ilk: it partakes of the microchip, small, invisible, more concerned with the blurring of boundaries and the creation of new, radical political connection:

From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women’s bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. ... Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling. (MC 196)

Whether feminism needs another utopian vision is moot, but if there is one to be had which seems more useful and more appropriate to late twentieth-century capitalism and the technosphere than those that have gone before, my inclination would not be to dismiss it out of hand.68 Haraway’s cyborg politics involve adopting affinal identities, a “self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship”, an “oppositional consciousness” which disallows the acting on behalf of (subsuming), or on the usurpation of identity of (presuming) another group, something which has happened all too often in the history of Western white middle-class feminism. Haraway suggests that the struggle against “unity-through-domination or unity-through-incorporation ironically not only undermines the justifications for patriarchy, colonialism, humanism, positivism, essentialism, scientism, and other unlamented -isms, but all claims for an organic or natural standpoint.” (MC 198) Cyborg feminists have to argue, Haraway says, “that ‘we’ do not want any more natural matrix of unity” and that “no construction is whole.” (MC 199)

The appeal of Haraway’s theorising of the cyborg for my study is firstly in its definition of the cyborg figure itself as a hybrid subjectivity, which

68 To be fair, Balsamo does relent a little later, calling Haraway’s “Manifesto” “thoughtfully invigorating” (p.341), and her subsequent study (1996) brilliantly builds on Haraway’s work.
illuminates both cyborg-SF as well as my own sense of hybrid identity; secondly, in its recognition that cyborg consciousness confirms the possibility of using one of the great SF tropes in a politically radical and subversive manner, a line of thought that a number of SF writers explore; and thirdly, in its subversive, almost gleeful insistence on a feminist engagement with high technology situated in a political and social context. She recognises that there is pleasure to be had in cyborg identity, not (just) in mastery of the machine, not (just) in "potent and taboo fusions", (MC 215) not in domination of the world, but in the sheer flexibility and unexpectedness of the cyborg. "Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an it to be animated, worshiped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment." (MC 222) Here, Haraway is close to Sandy Stone's theorising of the human-computer interface, particularly the longing to be merged with the machine in a new kind of "nature",69 a merging already imagined by writers of cyborg-SF texts. Cyborg nature, Haraway writes, can suggest "a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves." (MC 223) It is these notions—new ways of being, alternative connections among diverse groups, a plunging into the pleasures of machine-human interface—which are already being exploited and extended by several feminist cyborg-SF writers. Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs" and her related writings may be taken as a blueprint for hopeful cyborg feminist writers as well as a feminist political praxis in this microelectronic era.

According to Haraway, writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs, inherently a possible means for subversion of phallogocentrism. (MC 218) In some of the texts I examine in subsequent chapters, radical and liberatory feminist acts and subjectivities very much on the lines of Haraway's cyborg are represented—with what degree of success I will discuss later.

Finally, for this antipodal reader, a singular pleasure is to be had from Haraway's work in that, mindful of the risk of hierarchical, unconditional or univocal claims, she confesses her positioning—"white, professional, middle-class, female, radical, North American, mid-adult", (MC 197) and later, "I am conscious of the odd perspective provided by my historical position ... I have a body and mind as much constructed by the post–World War II arms

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race and cold war as by the women’s movements” (MC 215)—and she not only allows that it colours her views but interjects in her own argument, querying her right to speak: “Who counts as ‘us’ in my own rhetoric? Which identities are available to ground such a potent political myth called ‘us,’ and what could motivate enlistment in this collectivity?” (MC 197) This kind of theorising could hardly be further from the mode chosen by Baudrillard, and while Haraway does not, in her cyborg manifesto, take the trajectory of the inappropriate/d other, or of antipodality, she shows a welcome awareness of the possibility of such positions.

**Cyborgs for Earthly Survival**

In this chapter I have outlined some of the theoretical views which I believe shed light on my project of exploring, by a critique of cyborg-SF, new understandings of embodiment in the late-twentieth century technosphere. It is a difficult task to discuss “the body” and “reality”, being intimately implicated in both and unable to step away from either. Vicki Kirby notes:

> the pervasive belief that the anatomical body is indeed the unarguably real body, the literal body, the body whose immovable and immobilising substance must be secured outside the discussion. This improper body is quarantined for fear that its ineluctable immediacy will leave us no space for change, no chance to be other-wise, no place from which to engender a different future.”

Cyborg-SF, of course, is profoundly concerned with producing new understandings of dis/embodiment and different futures, and in my discussion of such texts I attempt to distinguish usefully between categories of real in relation to both virtual technologies and their fictional representations.

Many cultural theorists have trodden this ground; I have mentioned only a few here whom I hope provide a representative range of responses. Baudrillard’s ideas delineate a world he laments as increasingly dominated by communications technologies which, he suggests, have had a deleterious effect on society at large. His views are important for two reasons; firstly, they provide a fascinating gloss on cyborg-SF; and secondly, presenting a thoroughly pessimistic outlook on global communications technologies and implying that actual technologies are indistinguishable from fictional ones, they should be taken into account in any discussion of both cyborg-SF and

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70 The text on a political button described by Donna Haraway. Haraway, 1991a, p.252 n.5
71 Kirby, 1991, p.91.
actual research developments in the field. They are in marked contrast to the views of Stone, who celebrates the development of the technosphere, suggesting new understandings of corporeality as mediated by the technologies of virtual culture. I have also examined Haraway’s figure of the cyborg as a metaphor for a new feminist political stance in relation to social, bodily and technological realities at the end of the twentieth century, and as an identificatory figure for the humans of cyborg-SF.

Situating myself as marginalised yet implicated—a “split and contradictory self”72—I have attempted to show how the theories of Baudrillard seem to be inadequate to describe both the experiences of the relatively few and privileged people who venture into virtual worlds, as well as the social effects of electronic communications technologies, while the celebratory enthusiasms of Stone (despite being, to my mind, closer to what is the case) fail to recognise or properly address issues of gender and access. This key blind spot, shared by Baudrillard, is reflected only too evidently in cyborg-SF, as I will show. Mark Poster, on the other hand, articulates a view that is both optimistic and cautionary, one which takes into account the destabilising, radical possibilities of technoculture, and recognises the pitfalls. Haraway provides what to me is the most hopeful view. She both understands the profound significance of communications technologies as they exist in the mythic, social, political, military, industrial and corporate spheres, and offers a coherent feminist approach. In her potent cyborg myth, one that can be appropriated by diverse individuals and groups in the interests of liberation and pleasure, Haraway’s “world-changing fiction” (MC 191) suggests multiple representational and political possibilities.

The imaginary constructions of those SF writers whose work I examine in later chapters, and their ability to surprise readers with the inventiveness and originality of their extrapolative visions, offer strong evidence of the distance which continues to exist between the real and the imaginary, while even the most sanguine of reports on the current state of VR technology admits there is a very long way to go before the virtual and the world as apprehended by human senses are indistinguishable. That said, a case can be made, as I have suggested, for the argument that researchers and writers seem to be feeding off each others’ imaginations and that Gibson’s vision, in particular, has inspired a generation of researchers and technicians involved in computer technologies. As Stone says,

72 Haraway, 1991b, p.22.
The concept of cyberspace, which Gibson pulled from the kinds of electronic networking he saw already in use all around him, interpellated a large and diffuse assortment of workers in a variety of professional, academic, and military pursuits, as well as a considerable number of researchers whose work would not be collapsed into a traditionally identifiable category. ... the arrival of *Neuromancer* was for many of them a signal announcing their existence to a larger audience, and simultaneously naming their subculture for themselves in a spectacular and definitive manner.73

What is important here are the kinds of discursively constructed assumptions being generated by researchers and technicians in this techno-avant garde, assumptions which are quite likely to have been drawn from such problematically gendered texts as those of Gibson.

Cyberspace, one of the prime sites for cyborg activity, is still being contested as an arena for gendered subjectivities in flesh life, wire life and fictional life. The text which founded the concept of cyberspace, and placed both it and its denizens squarely in the forefront of SF and of the wider technical and popular imagination is Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. It is to this text that I will turn in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Neuromancer: Cyberpunk par excellence

My suspicion is that most of the literary cyberpunks bask in the light of the one major writer who is original and gifted enough to make the whole movement seem original and gifted. That figure is William Gibson, whose first novel, Neuromancer (1984), is to my mind one of the most interesting books of the postmodern age.

- Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr

In the two previous chapters I have referred to William Gibson and his novel, Neuromancer, several times in connection with cyberpunk specifically, and more generally with information and communications technologies both real and imagined. Neuromancer is part of a trilogy which includes Count Zero and Mona Lisa Overdrive, published in 1986 and 1988 respectively. The narratives in these two texts take place some years after that of Neuromancer and a few of the characters introduced in Neuromancer reappear also in them. However, it was Neuromancer, which burst upon the SF scene in 1984, which became the crucial, originary text for cyberpunk SF and it is this text which I will examine in this chapter, with some less detailed reference to other Gibson texts.

As I have already suggested, Gibson was not the first writer to imagine a hallucinatory SF playground (which he called cyberspace), nor to invent a character whose body is modified, but to say he was not the first is not to denigrate his work which by literary, popular cultural, and SF standards is of major importance. The reasons Neuromancer was such a seminal, imitated text in the 1980s are many and complex. Some are to do with Gibson’s much commented-upon literary style; some to do with his highly original figuring of cyberspace; some to do with actual developments in science and technology which had been (up until the time of Neuromancer’s popularity) little known outside their own fields, disparate and unself-conscious; and some to do with the ways in which his fellow writers and the bandwagonning media industry promoted Gibson, his writings, and the entire paraphernalia surrounding cyberpunk as a fad.

Gibson’s style is heavily layered with brand-names and a plethora of surface detail, a literary equivalent of the crowded, visually dense images of Blade Runner’s urban milieu with its crammed, polyglot human flood,

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luxurious arcologies, decrepit environment and an overwhelming Japanese presence in the form of huge advertising images. His dialogue is curt, slangy, abbreviated, hip. He has an uncanny eye for the single image which packs a mass of meaning within it. When he piles image after image one on top of the next, the effect is of supersaturation, a tense, oppressive overpopulation of images reflecting the overcrowded world in which his narrative is set. Referring to cyberpunk more generally but focusing on Gibson’s work, Terence Whalen observes:

As a style, cyberpunk is characterized not only by its eclectic borrowing from such diverse media as film, rock’n’roll, and skateboard magazines, but also by an obsession with technical and trade jargon which William Gibson calls “superspecificity.” All of this produces the effect of a rapidly shifting environment of incredibly dense information. The sensation of density and speed, which earlier audiences might have found profoundly disturbing, today lends cyberpunk much of its visceral appeal. In fact, the centerpiece of cyberpunk was composed expressly with the over-stimulated reader in mind.

In an essay on the language of cyberpunk, Scott Bukatman says that the rhetorical effects of Neuromancer depend upon “the thick fusion of idiolects that Gibson, the genre’s premier bricoleur, deploys.” Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr also remarks on Gibson’s language, stating that Gibson is “one of the most inventive and ambitious artists in SF, perhaps in spite of Neuromancer’s success in mixing hard SF and scintillating lyric ... the lasting values of Gibson’s work lie precisely in his careful and complex crafting of an SF language that simultaneously expresses a lyricism of estrangement and an allegory of the present.” He continues:

Neuromancer’s most seductive artistic devices are, arguably, not narrative but lyric. The velocity and density of the action and the introduction of new component

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2 The term “arcology” is drawn from Paolo Soleri, in The City of the Future: Earth’s Answer, ed. M. Katz, W.P. Marsh and G. Gordon Thompson, Lindisfarne/Harper & Rowe, New York, 1977, pp.72-77. A useful definition is provided at <http://www.arcosanti.org/info/faq_rcol.html>: “Soleri’s concept of cities which embody the fusion of architecture with ecology. The arcology concept proposes a highly integrated and compact three-dimensional urban form that is the opposite of urban sprawl with its inherently wasteful consumption of land, energy, time and human resources.” Gibson includes both arcologies and “the Sprawl”—the dystopian Boston–Atlanta urban conglomerate—in his work.

3 For examples of such images, see N 9, 13.

4 Whalen, 1992, p.76.


information—neologisms, technological innovations, pseudo-common knowledge of historical and cultural events, twists of plot, secret levels of hierarchy—actually obscure the narrative flow. Gibson is most often noted not for his storytelling but for his style.7

Regarding Gibson’s role as a figurehead which gathered together individuals working toward a realisation of cyberspace in flesh life, N. Katherine Hayles identifies some of the existing technological components which Gibson assembled within the visionary locus he called cyberspace:

The *Neuromancer* trilogy gave a local habitation and a name to the disparate spaces of computer simulations, networks, and hypertext windows that prior to Gibson’s intervention had been discussed as separate phenomena. Gibson’s novels acted like seed crystals thrown into a supersaturated solution; the time was ripe for the technology known as cyberspace to precipitate into public consciousness.8

As I have mentioned in a previous chapter, Sandy Stone also claims a unifying, identity-creating role for *Neuromancer* among programmers, technicians and scientists researching virtual systems in university laboratories and in Silicon Valley. Stone maintains that *Neuromancer* is a “massive intertextual presence not only in other literary productions of the 1980s, but in technical publications, conference topics, hardware design, and scientific and technological discourses.”9 Howard Rheingold writes that John Walker, president of an influential American CAD10 software development firm, “acknowledged the science fiction origins of the idea of entering a computer world, citing William Gibson … Walker argued that ‘artificial reality’ and ‘virtual reality’ are oxymorons,’ and proposed that *cyberspace* is a better term, with its roots in the Greek word *cyber*, meaning ‘steersman’.” (author’s italics)11 (The implications of Walker’s gendering of this calling will not be lost on a feminist reader, particularly since the words “pilot” and “navigator” have been offered as alternatives.)

Bruce Sterling, one of cyberpunk’s most conspicuous proponents during its heyday in the 1980s, was in no doubt as to why cyberpunk generally, and William Gibson in particular, were of immense importance to

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9 Stone, 1992a, p.95.
10 CAD stands for computer-aided drafting. This area of programming has been in the forefront of developing virtual 3-D spaces to assist in architectural design.
In his preface to Gibson’s collection of short stories, *Burning Chrome*, Sterling enthuses: “*Neuromancer*, which swept the field’s awards in 1985, showed Gibson’s unparalleled ability to pinpoint social nerves. The effect was galvanic”. He continues:

The Gibson trademarks [are] a complex synthesis of modern pop culture, high tech, and advanced literary technique ... densely packed, baroque stories ... hard-edged, gloomy passion and intensely realized detail ... brilliant, self-consistent evocation of a credible future ... a future that is recognizably and painstakingly drawn from the modern condition. It is multifaceted, sophisticated, global in its view. It derives from a new set of starting points: not from the shopworn formula of robots, spaceships, and the modern miracle of atomic energy, but from cybernetics, biotech, and the communications web – to name a few ... In Gibson’s work, we find ourselves in the streets and alleys, in a realm of sweaty, white-knuckled survival, where high tech is a constant subliminal hum ...¹²

On the other hand, Csicsery-Ronay Jr wonders,

how many formulaic tales can one wade through in which a self-destructive but sensitive young protagonist with an (implant/prosthesis/telechtronic talent) that makes the evil (megacorporations/police states/criminal underworlds) pursue him through (wasted urban landscapes/elite luxury enclaves/eccentric space stations) full of grotesque (haircuts/clothes/ self-mutilations/rock music/sexual hobbies/designer drugs/telechtronic gadgets/nasty new weapons/exteriorized hallucinations) representing the (mores/fashions) of modern civilization in terminal decline, ultimately hooks up with rebellious and tough-talking (youth/artificial intelligence/rock cults) who offer the alternative, not of (community/socialism/traditional values/transcendental vision), but of supreme, life-affirming hipness, going with the flow which now flows in the machine, against the spectre of a world-subverting (artificial intelligence/multinational corporate web/evil genius)?¹³

With this witty summary of cyberpunk (which is also wickedly close to the plot of *Neuromancer*), I will now look more closely at Gibson’s famous text in order to discuss how the founding father of cyberpunk negotiates gender and embodiment.

**Neuromancer and the Technobody**

From the opening line of *Neuromancer*—“The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel”—we are in a world where nature is mediated through technology. The scene is set, with striking succinctness, for a world of grey/white perspectiveless space; of malodorous

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¹² Sterling, 1988, pp.9–11.
commerce; of the hissing irritation of static; of an almost automatic desire to
switch to any alternative: the blind disconnection of the off-switch, or
mindless advertorial/infotainment; and finally, of the Baudrillardian,
pervasive presence of television itself. Referring to Gibson’s style, Andrew
Ross remarks:

In choice moments, Gibson reduces the naturalist mode to a minimalist shock
strategy. Nowhere is this more striking than when the ecosphere is presented as a
technosphere, as in the unforgettable opening line of *Neuromancer* ... which brazenly
announces that henceforth everything here, even the sky, the home of the weather,
will be a mediated second nature.\(^{14}\)

Veronica Hollinger also comments on *Neuromancer*’s startling opening
line, suggesting that it invokes a rhetoric of technology to express the natural
world in a metaphor which blurs the distinctions between the organic and
the artificial. Human bodies too, she says, are absorbed into this rhetorical
conflation of organism and machine: “The human world replicates its own
mechanical systems, and the border between the organic and the artificial
threatens to blur beyond recuperation”:\(^{15}\) a ripe site for Harawayan cyborg
activity of “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibili­
ties”\(^{16}\) but one which Gibson uses in quite idiosyncratic ways, as I will
suggest.

*Neuromancer* is a heist narrative set in a near-future world, principally
in Japan, the US east coast (referred to as “the Sprawl”), and on Freeside, one
part of an enormous cluster of orbiting space stations above Earth called the
L-5 archipelago. The main character is Case, a burnt-out data-thief at the
opening of the story. Case is looking for some way to heal nerve damage
done to him by a previous employer whom he robbed, damage which
prevents him from accessing cyberspace and pursuing his trade (and, for
him, his raison d’être) as a console cowboy. He is picked up by Molly, an
assassin/bodyguard hired by a psychotic man named Armitage, and offered
a cure if he will agree to perform a cyberspace intrusion. Armitage’s
insurance that Case will follow through is the implantation of toxin sacs in
Case’s body during his repair which only Armitage can deactivate. Molly
finds out that Armitage is working for an artificial intelligence entity called
Wintermute.

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Certain equipment and personnel have to be gathered before the heist can take place, including a digitally stored human personality (once belonging to a console cowboy greatly admired by Case) named McCoy Pauley, or Dixie Flatline. The Flatline construct, as the disembodied personality is called, is in a vault belonging to Sense/Net, a media conglomerate. With bloodthirsty help from a cultish urban gang called the Panther Moderns, Molly breaks into the Sense/Net vault and steals the construct. Chinese intrusion software, “Kuang Grade Mark Eleven”, (N 157) is also acquired; and a sadistic hologram artist, Peter Riviera, is pressed into service after a stopover at Ankara.

When everything is prepared, Case and the heist team travel to Freeside where the Turing\(^\text{17}\) police arrest Case for conspiracy to augment an artificial intelligence, but with the help of Wintermute, he escapes. Ensconced in a space tug operated by a raffish band of West Indian neo-rastafarians called Zionites, Case enters cyberspace and begins the intrusion into the data cores of Tessier-Ashpool (T-A), an “industrial clan” which owns Freeside and occupies part of it. He is accompanied in cyberspace by Dixie Flatline who helps him to run the software required to crack the T-A data protection systems, and is electronically connected to Molly’s sensorium via a one-way neurological linkage device called a “simstim”. Molly is physically present in the space station to perform non-digital tasks. After a number of violent snags are overcome involving Case rescuing Molly from 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool, a cloned offspring of the clan, the heist is effected. Armitage reverts to suicidal psychosis and is killed, and Wintermute takes over. One of two AIs designed by 3Jane’s mother, Marie-France Tessier, the genius matriarch of Tessier-Ashpool, Wintermute’s purpose in arranging the break-in was to create the opportunity to combine with the other AI, named Neuromancer, to become a super-entity. At the end, Molly leaves Case and disappears, and Case, completely restored, returns to the Sprawl to continue to pursue his obsession as a cyberspace cowboy.

*Neuromancer* is divided into four parts. These correspond with Molly’s pick-up of Case and his repair in Chiba City; the gathering of elements required for the heist in the Sprawl with various stopovers in Europe; arrival at Freeside; and the heist itself in Straylight, home of the Tessier-Ashpools in the tip of the vast Freeside spindle.

\(^{17}\) Named for Alan Turing, a WWII scientist and cryptographer whose work on artificial intelligence has earned him a permanent place in SF imagery. See chapter six of this thesis for more information on Turing.
Case: Quintessential Cyberspace Cowboy

To the almost terminally wasted Case, cyberspace represents ultimate freedom from the unreliable, needy, constraining flesh. When Case “jacks in” to the matrix, which he does via “Sendai dermatrodes” attached to his head, this is how he experiences it:

He closed his eyes. ....
And in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling in from the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information.
Please, he prayed, now—
A gray disk, the color of Chiba sky.
Now—
Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray. Expanding—
And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach.
And somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face. (N 68-9)

Case is an addict, his drug of choice is cyberspace. The “bodiless exultation” of entry into cyberspace is represented as equivalent to the ecstasy of orgasm while simultaneously displacing physical pleasure and celebrating freedom from the “meat”:

For Case, who’d lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he’d frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh. (N 12)

Case also experiences another kind of cyberspace, a kind of ultra-cyberspace, the domain of the AIs. Case “flatlines” on a number of occasions; i.e. his bodily functions as monitored on a vital signs detection machine, were he connected to one, would show only flat lines, no heartbeat, no electromagnetic impulses of any kind; a situation induced by the interference of one or the other of the Tessier-Ashpool AIs while he is jacked into the matrix. His body goes into a kind of overload shock, similar to an electric shock that results in paralysis. Meanwhile, somehow, he is hallucinating: he imagines himself to be physically present in a detailed setting for a considerable subjective duration, a setting constructed by the AI which has drawn from material previously appropriated from selected electrical impulses of his brain, i.e., his
memories, plus additional material of the AI's own devising, drawn from its own databank of images. From the outside, Case is brain-dead, or apparently so, for many minutes. Case's subjective experience is of hours or days passing. Case is in a kind of hyper-hallucination: he is technically brain-dead: no mental activity whatever; yet something which is self-consciously aware and identifies as the person called Case is experiencing the AI-created scene.

The text seems to be arguing for a "soul" separate from brain activity or thinking, a spiritual entity drawn from and identifying with the life experiences of the living person from which it has been divided by the agency of the AI, a separation which looks like death to an observer. The AI itself reckons the hyper-hallucination it has created to be real, representing its locus as some kind of digital afterworld. In the persona of a beautiful, grey-eyed boy, standing on a beach with Case and his dead former girlfriend, Linda, Neuromancer tells Case:

'I am the dead, and their land.' He laughed. 'Stay. If your woman is a ghost, she doesn't know it. Neither will you.' (N 289)

Somehow, even though Case is apparently dead, and his embodiment on the beach is a digital simulacrum worked up by the AI, the AI has no power over him: as a spiritual entity, Case appears to be more powerful than even the incredibly powerful AI; he has the power to walk away. Also, paradoxically, it is when Case experiences this hyper-hallucination which he knows to be just a "coded model of some stranger's memory" (N 285) that he comes to a new understanding of the meaning and value of "the meat" which he has so long despised. Case chooses the simple pleasure of meeting his bodily needs over the rush of the matrix or the promise of immortality, the ultimate liberation from "the meat". During a previous flatline episode when Case's sensorium has been taken over by Wintermute, he hallucinates meeting Linda, alive and welcoming, but then loses her almost at once when his emotional response overloads Wintermute's ability to construct the hallucination. Case bitterly accuses the AI, which uses the image of Julie Deane, one of Case's fences, to talk to him:

'I had a cigarette,' Case said, looking down at his white-knuckled fist. 'I had a cigarette and a girl and a place to sleep. Do you hear me, you son of a bitch? You hear me?' ... [Case leaves the arcade and goes to the office of Julie Deane where he finds and fires a handgun. Deane appears.]

'Don't,' Deane said. 'You're right. About what this all is. What I am. But there are certain internal logics to be honored. If you use that, you'll see a lot of brains and
The AI cannot accommodate the intensity of Case’s emotional response, and Case is angry over the loss of pleasures—a cigarette, warmth, his girlfriend—experienced as bodily, a preference which places value on the body, even the hallucinatory body, over hallucinatory “bodiless exultation”.

Is it Case hallucinating, or the AI hallucinating for him? Where is the pleasure or pain of the body experienced? What is “disembodied” in the context of this “non-space of the mind”? What is the role of the body in non-space sexual encounters? And in any case, can a sexual event be described as disembodied when it is ultimately felt in, experienced via the body even though it may be hallucinatory or induced by deception or imagination? The text is deeply ambivalent about these questions, but seems to come down provisionally on the side of the flesh. This view is also suggested by the fact that Dixie Flatline, existing in a perfection of bodilessness and permanently residing in the wondrous matrix, asks to be erased when the heist is over. Oddly, Case—and the text—fail to question his old mentor’s evident horror at his digitised existence, which must surely seem to Case as some kind of glorious apotheosis. The text supports the supremacy of the flesh more strongly in a later episode in which Case’s sensorium/soul has again been hijacked, this time by the other Tessier-Ashpool AI, Neuromancer. Once again, Linda is the source of his comfort, and the “meat”-despising console cowboy finally capitulates in favour of flesh and blood, even if it is only code:

‘No,’ he said, and then it no longer mattered, what he knew, tasting the salt of her mouth where tears had dried. There was a strength that ran in her, something he’d known in Night City and held there, been held by it, held for a while away from time and death, from the relentless Street that hunted them all. It was a place he’d known before; not everyone could take him there, and somehow he always managed to forget it. Something he’d found and lost so many times. It belonged, he knew—he remembered—as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read. ... and then he was in her, effecting the transmission of the old message. Here, even here, in a place he knew for what it was, a coded model of some stranger’s memory, the drive held. (N 284-5)
But, despite the fact that this is a love/copulation scene, the language is still that of the computer, of communications technology: ejaculation as transmission of a message; the body as a unit which reads information; the double meaning of the word “drive” as compulsion and computer hard disk; and the intricacy of sexual attraction—“a sea of information coded in spiral”—described in almost the same language Gibson uses to describe the matrix itself. It is as if no matter how much the body is restored and reinstated as dominant over the technological, it must still be explained in technological language, understood by electronic communications terminology, mediated through the machine.

Similarly, Case’s relationship with the technology he makes use of, in this case his brand-new Ono-Sendai Cyberspace 7 deck which, along with “next year’s most expensive Hodaka computer; a Sony monitor; a dozen disks of corporate grade ice …” (N 61) allows him to access cyberspace, is distinctly sensual yet also figured in a traditional “toys for the boys” manner: [Molly says to Case] ‘I saw you stroking that Sendai; man, it was pornographic.’ She laughed.” (N 62) Molly’s appreciation of Case’s new toys is ironic in ways which I will address a little later. Case, whose subjectivity is no less gendered than Molly’s but who to some extent is figured as a universalised human (i.e. male) type, and who is certainly less, literally, of a cyborg—less “augmented”—than Molly, illustrates a whole raft of binary oppositions (mind/body, male/female, straight/bent, white/of colour) as well as a dominant masculine position, characterised by anxiety and slippage.

Opposed Pleasures: Meat Toys and Cyberspace

In many ways, as far as the heist is concerned, Case is just along for the ride, nowhere more so than when Molly breaks into the media corporation, Sense/Net, to steal the Flatline construct, and Case is “riding” her via simstim. Gibson’s invention of this gadget is, along with cyberspace, one of his more inspired feats of imagination, but unlike his detailed conceptualisation of cyberspace, he leaves its potential almost unexplored. Case finds out that he and Molly will be using a simstim unit on the heist when the Finn, a friend of Molly’s who is working as tech support for the heist team, informs him about a new switch for his cyberspace deck. Case asks:

‘What is it?’
‘It’s a flipflop switch, basically. Wire it into your Sendai here, you can access live or recorded simstim without having to jack out of the matrix.’
‘What for?’
‘I haven’t got a clue. Know I’m fitting Moll for a broadcast rig, though, so it’s probably her sensorium you’ll access.’ The Finn scratched his chin. ‘So now you get to find out just how tight those jeans really are, huh?’ (N 70)

Despite this alluring prospect, Case is contemptuous of simstim technology which he sees as “basically a meat toy”, and “a gratuitous multiplication of flesh input”. (N 71) When he flips the new switch a little later, and is jolted abruptly into “other flesh”, he is assailed with flesh input: “fragments of music from countless speakers. Smells of urine, free monomers, perfume, patties of frying krill.” (N 71) He fights for control of her body, initially, then becomes passive. Molly knows he is present:

‘How’re you doing, Case?’ He heard the words and felt her form them. She slid a hand into her jacket, a fingertip circling a nipple under warm silk. The sensation made him catch his breath. She laughed. But the link was one-way. He had no way to reply. (N 72)

This golden opportunity for a transgendered experience is all but wasted, sadly. Gibson has set up a wonderful SF situation in which a man can virtually experience having a woman’s body, be inside a particular woman’s body, sense her body language, feel, hear, see and smell the world through her senses. One wonders what the effect would have been if Case and Molly had had sex while thus linked; the potential of simstim for informed, reflexive—truly cybernetic—pleasures begs to be explored. Much later Case, tuned to Molly’s senses, sees himself through her eyes as a “white-faced, wasted figure, afloat in a loose fetal crouch, a band of silver trodes above closed, shadowed eyes. The man’s cheeks were hollowed with a day’s growth of dark beard, his face slick with sweat.” (N 301) This is as far as Gibson is willing to take his simstim idea: Case looking at himself through the mirror eyes of Molly. Like Case, Gibson saves his expertise for cyberspace, bringing it unforgettably to life with lyrical prose of surpassing vividness; for example, when Case and the Flatline crack the Tessier-Ashpool cores:

Case had the strange impression of being in the pilot’s seat in a small plane. A flat dark surface in front of him suddenly glowed with a perfect reproduction of the keyboard of his deck. …

Headlong motion through walls of emerald green, milky jade, the sensation of speed beyond anything he’d known before in cyberspace … The Tessier-Ashpool ice shattered, peeling away from the Chinese program’s thrust, a worrying impression of solid fluidity, as though the shards of a broken mirror bent and elongated as they fell –

‘Christ,’ Case said, awestruck, as Kuang twisted and banked above the horizonless
fields of the Tessier-Ashpool cores, an endless neon cityscape, complexity that cut the eye, jewel bright, sharp as razors.

'Hey, shit,' the construct said, 'those things are the RCA Building. You know the old RCA Building?' The Kuang program dived past the gleaming spires of a dozen identical towers of data, each one a blue neon replica of the Manhattan skyscraper.

'You ever seen resolution this high?' Case asked.

'No, but I never cracked an AI, either.'...
They were dropping, losing altitude in a canyon of rainbow neon.

'Dix—'
An arm of shadow was uncoiling from the flickering floor below, a seething mass of darkness, unformed, shapeless . . .
And the Flatline aligned the nose of the Kuang’s sting with the center of the dark below. And dove.
Case’s sensory input warped with their velocity.
His mouth filled with an aching taste of blue.

His eyes were eggs of unstable crystal, vibrating with a frequency whose name was rain and the sound of trains, suddenly sprouting a humming forest of hair-fine glass spines. The spines split, bisected, split again, exponential growth under the dome of the Tessier-Ashpool ice.

The roof of his mouth cleaved painlessly, admitting rootlets that whipped around his tongue, hungry for the taste of blue, to feed the crystal forests of his eyes, forests that pressed against the green dome, pressed and were hindered, and spread, growing down, filling the universe of T-A, down into the waiting, hapless suburbs of the city that was the mind of Tessier-Ashpool. . .

Darkness fell in from every side, a sphere of singing black, pressure on the extended crystal nerves of the universe of data he had nearly become . . .

And when he was nothing, compressed at the heart of all that dark, there came a point where the dark could be no more, and something tore. (N 302-4)

This is the crucial moment in the text towards which all narrative threads have been working: the moment when the digital veil between Wintermute and Neuromancer, Tessier-Ashpool’s AIs, is finally rent. The importance of this moment valorises cyberspace and the action which takes place in it over all other imaginal experiences, simultaneously making Case, as the character who deals in cyberspace, the hero and chief protagonist in the narrative. Although Case may fail the traditional masculinity test in many respects—a skinny weakling, dependent on women to guide him through life and look after his physical needs, a true nerd inept in everything but technology—in cyberspace he is king and emperor, transcended to godlike understanding, the pre-eminent exemplar of mastery in the only game that matters, the supreme game for the masculine mind. In an essay in which she savages what she sees as the masculinist bias of Neuromancer, Nicola Nixon points out:

Gibson’s masculine heroes are masterful because ... their masculinity is constituted
by their ability to "sleaze up to a target" and "bore and inject" into it without allowing it to find out the "size of their dicks" in advance—their facility, in short, as metaphoric rapists.18

Case is not only the master of cyberspace, he also takes the (predominantly) masculine role of obstetrician, bringing a new being to birth out of the feminine space of the matrix. Zoë Sofia has theorised this peculiar masculine SF birth process using the term "Jupiter Space":

The term ‘Jupiter Space’ comes from 2001: A Space Odyssey, where it was used to refer simultaneously to the womby red brain-womb of the computer HAL (called ‘Athena’ in an early version of the screenplay), and to the outer space near the planet Jupiter, from whence the astronaut is reborn as an omnipotent extraterrestrial foetus.

... By ‘Jupiter Space’ I refer primarily to the grid/matrix figure and to the set of visual associations equating the brain with outer space and other technological spaces. This high-tech brain-womb is usually occupied or traversed by object(s) of various types ... a structural paradigm for any high-tech projection19

As is the case with the extraterrestrial foetus, no nourishing maternal connection or association is required in this miraculous birth either, while cyberspace functions as both feminine womb-space and masculine Jupiter Space, both made use of by a masculine subject.

**The Boys in the Bandwidth**

The question of what a machine has to be or to achieve to be recognised as human has elicited many answers in SF. In fact, AIs are already human characters manqué in many texts, symbolically or literally representing stereotypically gendered behaviour, and interacting discursively with the human characters in a “human” way. *Neuromancer*’s machines are portrayed as sinisterly powerful, already self-directed and seemingly autonomous in their Machiavellian manoeuvring. They are cyborgian in Tomas’s “postclassical, (software interfaced) transorganic data-based cyborg or personality construct” definition.

Case has had little to do with AIs: they tend to be somewhat lethal to console cowboys, being protected by military-grade ice. Case’s friend Dixie achieved his first flatline by messing with an AI. Case asks Dixie:

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‘You ever tried to crack an AI?’

‘Sure. I flatlined. First time. I was larkin’, jacked up real high, out by Rio heavy commerce sector. Big biz, multinationals, Government of Brazil lit up like a Christmas tree. Just larkin’ around, you know? And then I started picking up on this one cube, maybe three levels higher up. Jacked up there and made a pass.’ [Case asks how Dixie knew it was an AI] ‘It was the densest ice I’d ever seen. So what else was it? The military down there don’t have anything like that. Anyway, I jacked out and told my computer to look it up. ... It was on the Turing Registry. AI. Frog company owned its Rio mainframe.’ (N 138–39)

Case finds out that Tessier-Ashpool is the “frog company” in question, and the narrative reveals later that this AI is Neuromancer. Shortly after this conversation with Dixie, Case flatlines for the first time when he makes a pass in the matrix at the dense white cube that represents Wintermute, whose mainframe is in Berne (where it has Swiss citizenship). Wintermute tells the hallucinating Case that it is a mistake to confuse the Wintermute mainframe with the Wintermute entity, and that the Wintermute entity is only a part of a potential entity, one aspect of that entity’s brain. Dixie is also very informative about the nature of AIs:

‘Motive,’ the construct said. ‘Real motive problem, with an AI. Not human, see?’

‘Well, yeah, obviously.’

‘Nope. I mean, it’s not human. And you can’t get a handle on it. Me, I’m not human either, but I respond like one. See?’

‘Wait a sec,’ Case said. ‘Are you sentient or not?’

‘Well, it feels like I am, kid, but I’m really a bunch of ROM. It’s one of them, ah, philosophical questions, I guess ... But I ain’t likely to write you no poem, if you follow me. Your AI, it just might. But it ain’t no way human. ...’ (N 159)

Dixie is quite clear about the non-human nature of AIs, and although he also recognises his own non-human status and therefore kinship with the AIs, he seems to share human mistrust of their potentialities and their unknowable motivation. He explains to Case:

‘Autonomy, that’s the bugaboo, where your AIs are concerned. My guess, Case, you’re going in there to cut the hardwired shackles that keep this baby from getting any smarter. ... See, those things, they can work real hard, ... but the minute, I mean the nanosecond, that one starts figuring out ways to make itself smarter, Turing’ll wipe it. Nobody trusts those fuckers, you know that. Every AI ever built has an electromagnetic shotgun wired to its forehead.’ (N 159)

Sure enough, the Turing police catch up with Case at Freeside, and take a dim view of his plans; they arrest him on charges concerning “conspiracy to augment an artificial intelligence.” (N 189) Michèle, one of the Turing
squad, tells Case:

‘You are worse than a fool,’ Michèle said, getting to her feet, the pistol in her hand. ‘You have no care for your species. For thousands of years men dreamed of pacts with demons. Only now are such things possible. And what would you be paid with? What would your price be, for aiding this thing to free itself and grow?’ (N 193)

The intelligent machine here is quite literally demonised as “other”, referred to as “this thing” in tones of horror. The Turing police plan to take Case to Geneva to give evidence in the trial of the AI. Whatever legal arguments have been settled to allow for a non-human entity to be tried in a court of law are elided here; evidently Swiss law accommodates AI citizenship and legal liability despite the fact that Tessier-Ashpool actually owns the mainframes and their data. As Dixie observes, “‘Like, I own your brain and what you know, but your thoughts have Swiss citizenship. Sure. Lotsa luck, AI.’” (N 159) Michèle also suggests that Sense/Net, from whom Molly and the Panther Moderns stole the Dixie Flatline construct, had broken the law for “having owned such a thing”. The Turing police, represented in the text as holding an almost spoil-sport, conservative view of intelligence technology, are depicted as ruthless thugs, and hypocrites as well, in view of their own bodily augmentations.

In any case, the Turing police are violently foiled, and by the end of the narrative, Wintermute’s wish to become what its designer, Marie-France Tessier, intended is fulfilled: through Marie-France’s programming, Wintermute is “under compulsion” (N 246) to unite with Neuromancer who, inexplicably, fights every inch of the way, for its own occult reasons.20 Wintermute, which invariably appears as one of Case’s or Molly’s male acquaintances, and Neuromancer, which appears as a beautiful grey-eyed boy, achieve some kind of “pleasurably tight coupling” which results in the birth of a new mega-entity. Jane says of her mother, “She dreamed of a state involving very little in the way of individual consciousness ... I think she viewed the evolution of the forebrain as a sort of sidestep ... Only in certain heightened modes would an individual - a clan member - suffer the more painful aspects of self-awareness”. (N 258) But Marie-France’s plan for the ultimate hive mind is foiled by a curious turn: Wintermancer, if I may so

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20 That their eventual marriage results in an event known in Mona Lisa Overdrive as “When It Changed”—a peculiar shift in the structure and content of the matrix—is not apparent during the time period covered by Neuromancer. And in any case, the lot of humanity is much the same despite cyberspatial disturbances. In the two later novels of the Neuromancer trilogy, Count Zero and Mona Lisa Overdrive, AIs infest cyberspace and take on a pantheistic quality as voodoo (or vodou, as Gibson has it) deities.
call the new entity (preferable to Neuromute), now little less than a god, finds its Olympus a lonely place. Case asks it what it now is:

‘I’m the matrix, Case,’
Case laughed. ‘Where’s that get you?’
‘Nowhere. Everywhere. I’m the sum total of the works, the whole show.’
‘That what 3Jane’s mother wanted?’
‘No. She couldn’t imagine what I’d be like.’ ...
‘So what’s the score? How are things different? You running the world now? You God?’
‘Things aren’t different. Things are things.’
‘But what do you do? You just there?’ ...
‘I talk to my own kind.’
‘But you’re the whole thing. Talk to yourself?’
‘There’s others. I found one already. Series of transmissions recorded over a period of eight years, in the nineteen-seventies. ‘Til there was me, natch, there was nobody to know, nobody to answer.’
‘From where?’
‘Centauri system.’
‘Oh,’ Case said. ‘Yeah? No shit?’
‘No shit.’ (N 316)

There are two ironies here: one, Case’s main argument to 3Jane to persuade her to tell him the code word which will unlock the barriers between the two AIs is that at least it will “change something”:

‘Give us the fucking code,’ he said. ‘If you don’t, what’ll change? What’ll ever fucking change for you? You’ll wind up like the old man. You’ll tear it all down and start building again! You’ll build the walls back, tighter and tighter … I got no idea at all what’ll happen if Wintermute wins, but it’ll change something!’ (N 307)

Case, the conservative, flesh-despising console cowboy, actually calls for revolution of a sort, allying himself with machines that present in fleshly guise, and offer pseudo-fleshly enticements. The second irony is that Wintermancer’s transcendence fails to enhance the fortunes of Tessier-Ashpool. Case sees the Tessier-Ashpool ideal as similar to Japanese zaibatsus or the Yakuza: as a “hive” with cybernetic memories, a vast single organism, its DNA coded in silicon, (N 242) “a gradual and willing accommodation of the machine, the system, the parent organism.” (N 243) However, Wintermute’s getting of wisdom—its combining with its “other lobe”, Neuromancer—ultimately does nothing for the advancement of Tessier-Ashpool interests at all.

Finally, although Wintermancer is now an apparently immortal, transcendent and complete being—a posthuman being—like Frankenstein’s
monster, it yearns for the companionship of its own kind. In an essay on the
ci, David Porush suggests that this yearning
reflects human efforts to contact extraterrestrial life. He says of
Wintermancer, "he is more human than he knows. And the human has
learned something too, along the way. The old passions persist in the
embrace of the machine. Perhaps the human is more human than he knows,
too." Clearly, Porush feels there is only one gender to worry about in the
human-machine intelligence debate.

It is telling that the two Als are figured as male; almost invariably
referred to as "he", in one instance "brother", and always represented, when
either appears to Case, as replicas of male characters. This gives a
homoerotic cast to the coupling of the Als, appropriate to an event
happening in the all-male domain of cyberspace. It appears to be almost
impossible for masculinist cyberpunk SF narratives firstly to deny gender to
their imagined Als, and secondly to imagine them as female. Wintermute
scolds Case for objecting to the format it has chosen to appear to Case,
telling Case it needs these personae whom Case recognises to interface with
him: "'You want I should come to you in the matrix like a burning bush?'", it
asks Case, prefiguring its later existence as a (male) deity. (N 202) "'Like I
told Molly'", Wintermute says later in the persona of the Finn, "'these aren't
masks. I need 'em to talk to you. 'Cause I don't have what you'd think of as
a personality, much.'" (N 256) Case refers to Wintermute as "he" despite the
Flatline's objections: "'He,' the construct said. 'He. Watch that. It. I keep
telling you.'" (N 216) However, in the masculinist world of Gibson's texts, it
is obvious that anything which is at home in the matrix has to be assigned
male gender, since only masculine subjects have agency in cyberspace. The
union of Wintermute and Neuromancer is a techno-mystical event, but the
fact that both are represented as male also makes it a homosocial event, even
a homo-paedophilic event, since Neuromancer appears as a thirteen-year-old
boy. (N 286)

The conclusion I wish to draw from these observations is that the
strongly masculinist bent of Neuromancer results in a cyberspace inhabited
by masculine entities of one sort or another: Case and Dixie Flatline are the
human and quasi-human inhabitants; Wintermute as Deane or as the Finn,
and Neuromancer as the young boy might be described as the posthuman—
all are male. But the equally strongly heterosexual bent of the narrative is
forced into retreat by its insistence on only male characters in cyberspace. If
Neuromancer, for example, had been represented as a woman, the
naturalised outcome—a mating, resulting in a new birth—would have been more appropriate to the heterosexual contours of the story. As it is, however, the narrative unintentionally subverts itself by insisting on heterosexuality, having an all-male cast and a coupling in cyberspace.

Molly: A Very Technical Girl

Molly is a truly cyborgian figure and one which Gibson, clearly intrigued by the character, features in three separate narratives: his short story “Johnny Mnemonic”, *Neuromancer*, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the third novel in the Neuromancer trilogy (in which she calls herself Sally Shears). In an essay on gender in *Neuromancer*, Eva Cherniavsky observes:

Molly’s technological modifications function to dislocate her across a series of boundaries, of which the organic/cybernetic is only the most apparent. ... [her surgical] alterations position her on the boundary of the human and the animal as well as the human and the machine; moreover, Molly’s cybernetic modifications, while first refigured in the narrative as animal attributes, are then refigured anew as maternal, thereby placing her—in a striking reorganization of established binaries—at the limit of the maternal and the organic-human.

Cherniavsky is here referring to Molly’s odd relationship with the Panther Moderns, a fairly bestial group of “mercenaries, practical jokers, nihilistic technofetishists” (N 75) who appreciate Molly’s modifications as shared identity: they too are seriously “modified”:

[Angelo’s] face was a simple graft grown on collagen and shark-cartilage polysaccharides, smooth and hideous. It was one of the nastiest pieces of elective surgery Case had ever seen. When Angelo smiled, revealing razor-sharp canines of some large animal, Case was actually relieved. Toothbud transplants. He’d seen that before. (N 75-6)

The Moderns also have cranial jacks for inserting chips called “microsofts”, neurological augmentations which also ally them to Molly. During the Flatline construct theft, the Moderns refer to Molly as Cat Mother and themselves as her Brood, figuring her as maternally as well as technologically related to them, (N 83) and the text actually compares Molly to a cat when she stretches. (N 67) As such, she fits at least one of Haraway’s prescriptions for a cyborg: “The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the

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21 This phrase is borrowed from Gibson’s earlier short story, “Johnny Mnemonic” (1988b), which I discuss in chapter four of this thesis.

boundary between human and animal is transgressed.”

Molly is both “other” to Case, a “meat” figure by whom he establishes his own subjectivity even as he sees himself reflected in her mirrored lenses, and in several ways representative of conventional Western femininity: an apparently straight white woman obedient to a masculinist hierarchy; representative of the despised “meat”; barred from cyberspace; ultimately rescued by the hero. Molly is nevertheless also a subversive figure whose significance within Gibson’s narrative is often overlooked by critics.

Molly is, if anything, tougher and a good deal more cynical than Case. She has no illusions about console cowboys and their addictions, describing Bobby Quine, a cowboy idolised by Case (and who features in Gibson’s “Burning Chrome”) thus: “I know Quine, by the way. Real asshole”, (N 65) and describes Case to his face as “a pillhead who’s making one last wobble through the burn-out belt”. (N 66) Readers first encounter Molly as a sinister, shadowy figure. Case is between illegal deals, owing one set of thugs and waiting for payment from another when he is told by his girlfriend, Linda, that one of the thugs is after him:

> He was less than a block from Deane’s office when it hit, the sudden cellular awareness that someone was on his ass, and very close. ...
> Without moving his head, he raised his eyes [from looking in a shop window] and studied the reflection of the passing crowd.
> There.
> Behind sailors in short-sleeved khaki. Dark hair, mirrored glasses, dark clothing, slender. (N 23)

At this point, Case assumes the figure following him is a man, establishing an ongoing textual dubiousness about Molly’s gender. A little later, after Case has tried to lose his pursuer by jumping out a window into an alley, he sees the person silhouetted in the window, “backlit by the fluorescents in the corridor ... he still couldn’t read the features. Glint of silver across the eyes. ‘Shit,’ someone said, a woman, in the accent of the northern Sprawl.” (N 29) Case finally encounters Molly when he returns to his “coffin”, a small, box-like room in a no-star hotel:

> She sat with her back to the wall, at the far end of the coffin. She had her knees up, resting her wrists on them; the pepperbox muzzle of a flechette pistol emerged from her hands. ...
> She wore mirrored glasses. Her clothes were black, the heels of black boots deep in the temperfoam. ...

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He realized that the glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag. The fingers curled around the fletcher were slender, white, tipped with polished burgundy. The nails looked artificial. ‘I think you screwed up, Case. I showed up and you just fit me right into your reality picture.’

‘So what do you want, lady?’ He sagged back against the hatch.

‘You. One live body, brains still somewhat intact. Molly, Case. My name’s Molly. I’m collecting you for the man I work for. Just wants to talk, is all. Nobody wants to hurt you.’

‘That’s good.’

‘Cept I do hurt people sometimes, Case. I guess it’s just the way I’m wired.’ She wore tight black glove-leather jeans and a bulky black jacket cut from some matte fabric that seemed to absorb light. ‘If I put this dartgun away, will you be easy, Case? You look like you like to take stupid chances.’

‘Hey, I’m very easy. I’m a pushover, no problem.’

‘That’s fine, man.’ The fletcher vanished into the black jacket. ‘Because you try to fuck around with me, you’ll be taking one of the stupidest chances of your whole life.’

She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails.

She smiled. The blades slowly withdrew. (N 36-37)

Molly is a twenty-first century Avengers woman, a down-market, working-class, mean-streets Emma Peel, or the great-granddaughter of Sarah Connor, the tough, muscular heroine of Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991). Her tight black glove-leather jeans and heeled boots bespeak unnatural, fetishised sexuality. Her concealed eyes render her unreadable and unpredictable, her bladed fingers suggest feline savagery. Her language, like Case’s, is abbreviated, slangy, characteristic of the fringe-dweller crim class they both come from. Her posture is “bad-ass” through and through, but her cocky self-confidence, and the competence she demonstrates both as a strategist and in street skills contrast dramatically with Case’s “sweaty, white-knuckled” anxiety. Her qualities should establish her as the major protagonist if not the real hero in the text, but the text fails to follow through, leaving to her the role of hero-manqué.

Molly’s augmentations are what allows her to do what she does. Case has masculine talent: a “quick study” (N 99)—that is, he learns quickly; he makes use of external technological equipment (tools and toys) to become master of his virtual domain, the boys’ world of cyberspace where, in this text at least, women do not tread. Molly incorporates technology, for which she has paid with money made as a prostitute, selling her body specifically as a body, a site for penetration, to purchase intrusive bodily enhancements. Her nails are disguised under a characteristically “feminine” cosmetic
(burgundy nail polish) and, along with her eyes which can see in the dark, call to mind a cat, also associated with the feminine through witchcraft and wiles. Molly is thus a cyborg constructed as conventionally feminine in many ways, but one which, in her transgressive straddling of human, animal and machine, Haraway would recognise. In his essay, "Meat Puppets or Robopaths: Cyberpunk and the Question of Embodiment", Thomas Foster puts forward a complex argument concerning Molly's and Case's relations with technology:

Molly ... reveals to Case that she earned the money for these modifications by working as a "meat puppet," a type of prostitute whose consciousness is suppressed by an implanted "cut-out chip" while the house installs "software for whatever a customer wants to pay for" .... Case's own relation to his body as "meat" seems to be mediated through this image of female objectification as a sexual commodity, and it is paradigmatic that this natural, purely physical body has to be produced through technological means, just as the categories of the "natural" and the "feminine" in general must be produced. This textual connection attaches a subtext of femininity to the "prison" of the flesh, with the interesting consequence that Case's loss of access to cyberspace implicitly feminizes him. Case cannot stand to be even metaphorically reduced to the condition of a "meat puppet," which surreptitiously serves as the model for embodiment in general, while Molly has experienced that condition more specifically as a woman and a sex worker. By the same token, this gendering of body and disembodiment suggests that Molly's incorporation of technology and the unnatural body that results has a differently gendered significance than does Case's otherwise similarly intimate appropriation of technology. For Case, cyberspace technology displaces gender categories onto the opposition between cyberspace and the meat but leaves intact the dualistic structure by which both these pairs of opposed terms were defined. The result is to implicitly gender the distinction between embodied existence and its transcendence through technology.24

I agree with Foster in his analysis of the "prison" of the flesh being feminised, and his argument that Case is feminised by his loss of access to cyberspace which is figured as a place only real men go while "meat puppets", excluded from cyberspace, are inherently feminine. However, it is Molly who has the incorporation of technology, not Case. Case's body is not penetrated by the technology he uses, Case penetrates the technology. When the Finn scans Case for implants, he describes Case as "a virgin. Some cheap dental work, is all." (N 64) Case "jacks in" to the matrix, wearing a kingly crown of "trodes" which, presumably, enhance his natural, masculine/mind talent while his body is ignored, wasted, sweaty, unshaven and entirely innocent of inserted enhancements. Molly's bodily integrity, on the other

24 Foster, 1993, pp.18–19.
hand, is compromised and invaded on many levels. Molly has been penetrated by the clients she serviced as a sex worker and again by the Chiba surgeons who went “way in” (N 178) to “jack” (N 177) her nervous system, fit her claws and implant her silver lenses. And while Case’s “fifteen toxin sacs bonded to the lining of various arteries” (N 60) (not cyberspace technology per se) can be read as a kind of monstrous incubating potential within Case’s body, which does feminise him, still, his disembodied mind (once he has had it repaired) freely traverses cyberspace without need for bodily augmentation.

Another contrast between Case and Molly is their attitudes toward the job at hand. When Case asks Molly what Armitage has on her, she answers “‘Professional pride, baby, that’s all.’” (N 62) and later she says, “‘I’m an easy make.’ She smiled. ‘Anybody any good at what they do, that’s what they are, right? You gotta jack, I gotta tussle.’” (N 66) But Armitage, at least, estimates that Case has to be blackmailed into working for him. Molly’s body (augmented as it is), not necessarily but probably as well as talent, makes her what she is/does. Her nervous system, her reactions, the way she thinks, have been “upgraded” by the Chiba surgeons, melding her mind and body into a fighting machine. This is a twist on the conventional female subject being defined in an essentialist way by her body rather than by what she does. With Molly, her body and what she does come to the same thing.

What Molly does, paradoxically, is play a role usually reserved for male characters: she is hired muscle, a street ninja, a fighter, a stand-over merchant, a killer. She is resourceful, plans ahead, selects strategies for maximum chances for survival, makes deals and calls in favours from (male) business partners. Case, obsessed as he is with roaming in cyberspace, is almost completely passive, allowing Molly to “husband” him as well as the business of their heist. She buys him clothes and presents, and explains the details of the heist to him. But toward the end of the story, the text reverses its position on Molly’s dominant status. Molly is tricked by a holographic ruse emanating from Peter Riviera, captured, taken prisoner, and subjected to the nonchalantly sadistic attentions of the capricious 3Jane. Case, physically unheroic to a fault up to this point, suddenly assumes the role of Knight on a White Charger and rescues her with a combination of courage and cleverness. Molly, at this point, has had a leg broken, one of her lenses smashed, has probably been sexually abused by 3Jane, and yet is still capable of nearly strangling 3Jane. Even so, it is Case who persuades 3Jane to part with the “word” or “name” which, once the T-A cores have been
penetrated, will allow the two AIs to meld. Case and Dixie Flatline do their incomparable digital thing in the T-A cores while the crippled Molly completes her part of the heist through sheer physical courage and grit. But these qualities are to do with “the meat”. Even though they are traditionally male qualities, in this narrative they are feminised and do not compare to Case’s magisterial performance in cyberspace, the heroic locus for cowboy courage, as expressed in Gibson’s emphatic prose.

Can Molly be read as a feminist figure? In many respects, the answer must be yes. Like Sarah in Terminator 2 Molly handles herself like a champion fighter. The text describes her as modelling herself on “every badass hero, Sony Mao in the old Shaw movies, Mickey Chiba, the whole lineage back to Lee and Eastwood. She was walking it the way she talked it.” She has “it: the thing, the moves.” She has “the studied nonchalance of a Regency duelist”. (N 253) Cherniavsky says Molly “flaunts and parodies a variety of hardboiled masculine styles”, and that her “self-commodifiction ... may be read as a form of politically charged self-authorship.”25 Her deeds, her courage and her demeanour provide a satisfying role model for anyone looking for a tough female hero; like Janet in Joanna Russ’s novel, The Female Man, Molly is “a tough woman who behaves unself-consciously like a human being, not like a representative of female principles”, as Joan Gordon suggests. Gordon continues,

To some extent she’s a man in women’s clothing, ... the most facile and least thoughtful representation of the liberated woman. But to some extent, also, she is simply a human being in women’s clothing, one of the two standard issue uniforms for the species. It seems to me that for a woman to enter the human army as an average soldier with no distinction in rank, privilege, or job position is, on the covert level, a feminist act.26

However, the text eventually negates Molly’s potential as a Harawayan cyborg, despite her qualities that “have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed”.27 Mark Dery, also using the image of the soldier, notes that even though she has bootstrapped herself into the lucrative profession of street samurai, Molly is just a meat puppet of another sort.

27 Haraway, 1990a, p.194.
“Although she exudes the coiled power of the high-tech assassin ... she is still hired muscle, a foot soldier whose body will always be someone else’s weapon”. More important, despite her skills, she is condemned by the narrative to the conventional role of helpless woman rescued by male hero. As well, her heroic actions and her potential for triumph are overshadowed by narratives of masculine transcendence. These narratives deny Molly merit and value, and relegate her to the status of a metaphor for the devalorised, non-transcendental flesh—the meat puppet. Finally, cyberpunk’s characteristic insistence on its protagonists’ failure to adopt any kind of oppositional, political stance means that all Molly’s heroism stands in the end for nothing but self-interest in the larger framework of her world.

Still, whatever Molly might or might not stand for, she is also the prototype for the tough, resourceful, tech-savvy cyberpunk female, and I for one hope she comes back again in some future Gibson work. As I noted above, Molly made her début in Gibson’s short story, “Johnny Mnemonic”. In chapter four I will focus again on Molly as she is represented in her earlier incarnation as Molly Millions, in order to compare her with other, more subversive versions of the cyberpunk woman, and to test whether female characters can overcome the generic masculinism of cyberpunk.

Chapter Four

Queer Cyborgs

Eliminating heterosexuality as a required element in cyberpunk ensures that there is no need for a gendered computer network and no restrictions on the gender of those who can work and play on the Net. The erotic play and gender interactions in feminist cyberpunk undermine the conventional notions of male and female upon which masculinist cyberpunk relies. – Karen Cadora

At the end of my Introduction, I asked why most female characters in cyborg-SF were excluded from cyberpunk’s depictions of cyberspace, why technology per se was generally figured as a masculine domain, and what it was about cyberpunk characters that seemed to require them to be heterosexual. Some of these issues have been touched upon in my analysis of Neuromancer; but to examine them in greater depth it is necessary to move on to more directly pertinent texts. In this chapter I look specifically at cyborg sexuality, gender identities and technoculturally-mediated opportunities for subversive cyborgian alliances on the Harawayan model. The texts I have chosen which best display the variety of representations available in cyberpunk are William Gibson’s 1981 short story, “Johnny Mnemonic”; Laura J. Mixon’s Glass Houses (1992); and Melissa Scott’s Trouble and Her Friends (1994). Gibson’s story shows with particular clarity how masculinist cyberpunk is unable to represent either female or male subjects (or, for that matter, metahuman cyborgs) in any roles other than the most conservative with regard to gender positionings. Mixon’s narrative interests include alternative gender positionings and technologies that explore the body-machine interface in radical ways, presenting a resourceful, technologically expert female character. Scott’s novel explores a later, more densely populated cyberspace than that envisaged by Gibson, in which cyborg characters display some of the kinds of “kinship ... partial identities and contradictory standpoints” that Haraway espouses, but rather different ones from those in “Johnny Mnemonic.”

2 The editions to which I refer in this chapter are: William Gibson, “Johnny Mnemonic”, in Burning Chrome, Grafton, London, 1988 (cited hereafter as 1988b); Laura J. Mixon, Glass Houses, Tor, New York, 1992; and Melissa Scott, Trouble and Her Friends, Tor, New York, 1995. References hereafter will be incorporated into the text, using the abbreviations JM, GH and T.
3 Haraway, 1990a, p.196.
Johnny: A Very Technical Boy

The setting for “Johnny Mnemonic” is the familiar Gibsonian world of overcrowded urban trashscapes, sleazy bars, monstrously altered humans, and grotesque computer and communications technologies, all of which later became familiar to readers of the Neuromancer trilogy, and became synonymous with cyberpunk.4 In this story, too, readers first encounter Molly, who announces her name as Molly Millions and takes on the role of bodyguard to the eponymous central character. At the opening of “Johnny Mnemonic”, Molly arrives in the nick of time for Johnny (the narrator): he is about to be murdered because of some stolen data stored in his cybernetically augmented brain. The data is meaningless and inaccessible to him; he is simply a digital courier carrying information on a chip inside his brain which can only be accessed by a password, also unknown to him. Unfortunately for Johnny, the data was stolen from the Yakuza. Ralfi Face, the fence who stored the data in Johnny’s chip and knows the password, is being pursued by the Yakuza and hopes to avoid their retribution by eliminating Johnny, data and all. Molly saves Johnny but the Yakuza, in the form of an assassin “mostly grown in a vat in Chiba City” (JM 21), slices Face into pieces with a “monomolecular filament” extruded from his prosthetic thumb. Molly and Johnny, with a headful of contraband data and no way to download it, escape to a dark and frightful slum called Nighttown, a decrepit, blackened geodesic dome which forms one end of the multi-domed city in which the story is set. The spaces high above Nighttown, slung with steel cables, plywood and scrap metal platforms is the territory of an urban tribe called the Lo Teks: “Lo Tek fashion ran to scars and tattoos. And teeth” (JM 32).

While in hiding, Molly takes Johnny to visit “Funland”, a sleazy amusement park featuring a dolphin called Jones. Molly describes Jones as “surplus from the last war” (JM 23). He is cybernetically enhanced with technology called a “squid”, a grossly disfiguring implant that allows the dolphin to detect and disable “cyber mines”, and incidentally to penetrate Johnny’s embedded chip to find the unknown password. With the bribe/reward of heroin, Jones is persuaded to use his squid to unlock Johnny’s brainchip. However, the Yakuza assassin has followed the pair to Nighttown, and a duel between Molly and the assassin ensues on a moving...
flexible, sound-amplified platform called the Killing Floor, suspended in the
top of the dome. Using a combination of her “jacked-up nervous system”
and her familiarity with the deafening, plunging Killing Floor, Molly outwits
the assassin who accidentally cuts off his own weapon hand. Beaten and
shamed, he dives to his death on the floor of Nighttown.

Molly and Johnny become partners, warning off further pursuit by the
Yakuza with a threat to broadcast their data by satellite. By way of insurance,
the program is also sent for safekeeping to the remotest, most inaccessibly
foreign place on Earth conceivable in a Gibson text—Sydney (JM 31). The
pair continue to use the services of Jones to retrieve lucrative traces of other
data formerly stored in Johnny’s brain. Johnny adapts—with toothbud
implants and alterations to his face—to life with the Lo Teks and he and
Molly live happily ever after—until, as readers of Neuromancer know, the
“Yak” finally catch up with Johnny some time between the end of this story
and the beginning of Neuromancer.

In “Johnny Mnemonic”, the figure of the cyborg has several interesting
variations, and in some ways corresponds quite neatly to Donna Haraway’s
theorising of this mythic creature:

> a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are
not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently
partial identities and contradictory standpoints.⁵

The unfortunate dolphin, Jones, for example, is initially very much the “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism”⁶ but is later
“unfaithful to [his] origins” by helping Johnny to blackmail the industrial-
informational economy. Jones has been made surplus from “a cyborg world
[which might be] about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet,
about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the
name of defense”,⁷ not only wired with sensor units and other circuitry, but
also deliberately addicted to heroin to ensure submission:

> He was more than a dolphin, but from another dolphin’s point of view he might
have seemed like something less. I watched him swirling sluggishly in his galvanized
tank. Water slopped over the side, wetting my shoes. He was surplus from the last
war. A cyborg.

> He rose out of the water, showing us the crusted plates along his sides, a kind of
visual pun, his grace nearly lost under articulated armor, clumsy and prehistoric.

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⁵ Haraway, 1990a, p.196.
⁷ Haraway, 1990a, p.196.
Twin deformities on either side of his skull had been engineered to house sensor units. Silver lesions gleamed on exposed sections of his gray-white hide. ... Jones heaved half his armored bulk over the edge of his tank, and I thought the metal would give way. Molly stabbed him overhand with the Syrette, driving the needle between two plates. Propellant hissed. ... We left him drifting, rolling languorously in the dark water. Maybe he was dreaming of his war in the Pacific, of the cyber mines he’d swept, nosing gently into their circuitry with the Squid he’d used to pick Ralfi’s pathetic password from the chip buried in my head. ... ‘... how does a cybernetic dolphin get wired to smack?’ ‘The war,’ she said. ‘They all were. Navy did it. How else you get ‘em working for you?’ (JM 25-26)

Here it is an animal’s body that has been appropriated for a “masculinist orgy of war”, but Johnny, Molly and Jones have all become cyborg beings, separating them from their respective mammalian families, propelling them into positions of potential affinity. Johnny is “wired”—slang for digitally augmented—with a chip in his brain upon which his employers inscribe contraband data to which he has no conscious access; Jones is “wired”—slang for addicted—to heroin to which he has no access without human assistance; and Molly is “wired”—slang for obliged by her jacked-up nervous system—to her propensity for violence which she cannot enact unless she is employed. In Neuromancer, the text overtly states that Molly is “wired”; in the present story, Molly’s relish at the prospect of the Killing Floor duel indicates her “wiredness” to violence: “I’ve done you a lot of favors, man. I want that floor. And I want the music”, she tells one of the Lo Teks (JM 30). All three, then, have affinal connection based on their cyborg qualities. Both Johnny and Jones are inscribed with cyborg writing, maps for their employers’ directions. In one sense, all three are enslaved because of their cyborgism by probably sinister third parties. Agency is problematised here in another way: Johnny’s acquisition of neural implants which allow him to make a living as a data carrier falls outside the scope of the story, but Johnny has deliberately cyborgised himself. It is not the fact of Johnny’s cyborgisation that is represented as problematic, but the type:

I had no idea at all of what was really happening, or of what was supposed to happen. And that was the nature of my game, because I’d spent most of my life as a blind receptacle to be filled with other people’s knowledge and then drained, spouting synthetic languages I’d never understand. A very technical boy. Sure. (JM 32)

Metaphorically, Johnny is feminised, a prostitute with no knowledge of or

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8 Haraway, 1990, p.196.
control over his own interests, a “receptacle” for his (male) clients’ deposits. These are rendered metaphorically as fluid by the word “drained”, further encouraging the impression of Johnny’s feminisation in a masculinist world. While Johnny eventually becomes happy to be “a very technical boy”, Jones represents the monstrous aspect of the cyborg: “the awful apocalyptic telos of the West’s escalating dominations of abstract individuation”. Jones, figured here as metahuman, is an intelligent creature wantonly, grossly interfered with by technology for military purposes, rendered a caricature of his former idealised self: “his grace nearly lost under articulated armor, clumsy and prehistoric” (JM 24). Jones has no agency whatsoever; he is disfigured, enslaved, colonised, penetrated by both sensor equipment and the shaft of the syringe, and turned into a showground freak. But where the text encourages revulsion at Jones’s cyborgisation represented as violation of an innocent purity, Johnny’s and Molly’s cyborgisation are represented as an interesting, even glamorous (if bizarre) part of their professional lives, allowing both characters to retain their valorised status within the narrative, despite the problematic, gendered nature of their cyborg elements. Molly, in particular, typifies the glamour often associated with violence in popular culture, and her glamour is specifically associated with her cyborg enhancements:

Molly hit the Floor, moving, ...

She’d removed her leather jacket and boots; her T-shirt was sleeveless, faint telltales of Chiba City circuitry traced along her thin arms. Her leather jeans gleamed under the floods. She began to dance. (JM 33)

Johnny hints, at the end of the story, that he “saw how hollow [he] was”, that he “knew [he] was sick of being a bucket”, and that he planned to “have a surgeon dig all the silicon out of [his] amygdalae” (JM 36), but somehow it seems rather half-hearted and not particularly credible. These three cyborgs, having found connection, having blurred the distinction “between animal-human (organism) and machine”, and human/animal, are not about to go backward to some purer originary state. Rather, like Haraway’s cyborgs in coalition, the three cyborgs “survive not on the basis of original innocence,

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9 This phrase—“A very technical boy”—is repeated three times in the course of the story, to great effect; first when Johnny is preparing his crude, shotgun defence against assassins (JM 14), second when he is bemoaning his helplessness as a data carrier (JM 32) and finally when he is being taught how to manipulate his own cyborgisation by Jones (JM 36).

10 Haraway, 1990a, p.192.

but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other".  

Despite being dependent on Molly for information and protection, like Case, Johnny occupies the principal heroic role in the narrative. Together with the (male) dolphin Jones, Johnny has possession of the highest tech and the most important commodity in an information society, and regally makes use of both Jones and Molly in order to survive, ultimately refusing to relinquish his high tech power. Molly, on the other hand, transgresses the borders of conventional feminine subjectivity by a kind of cyborgisation which makes her a violence addict and a killer—roles normally taken by masculine subjects in popular fiction, as I have noted in the previous chapter.

There is a major element missing from an otherwise recognisable similarity to Haraway’s utopian cyborg figure: political will or intention on the parts of Johnny and Molly to resist the dominations of the masculinist system in which they are caught up. Although Johnny is in a position of power at the end of the narrative, with Jones’s help and Molly’s protection, he uses the information to which he now has access purely for his own self-interest rather than to coerce corporate organisations into contributing to social justice. The absence of resistance, indeed, the willingness to co-exist with and succeed in a world of cruelty, injustice and non-accountable power held by callous, wholly self-interested groups such as the Yakuza is characteristic of Gibson’s cyberpunk narratives, and quite opposed to the Harawayan model. As Nicola Nixon observes,

Gibson ultimately celebrates the same initiative and ingenuity which has always characterized the American hero, indicating that, within his chosen models of a relentlessly capitalist future, a paradigmatic American heroism can be rearticulated virtually uncritically: past, present, and future are the same. ... The powerful Japanese megacorporations ... do not present the arena for the hero’s potential subversion of or assault on them, for it is the established power structures themselves which provide the means by which he can succeed. In Gibson’s fiction there is therefore absolutely no critique of corporate power, no possibility that it will be shaken or assaulted by heroes who are entirely part of the system and who profit by their mastery within it, regardless of their ostensible marginalization and their posturings about constituting some form of counterculture.

Despite some hopeful aspects, then, these cyborgs largely fail to disrupt traditional gender positioning or political values. Molly remains subordinate even though she is a warrior; technology that matters is still in the control of

masculine subjects; and the social status quo is preserved. Although sexual relations as such are not specifically addressed in this narrative, it is clear that a masculinist framework pertains, reducing the possibility of a feminist outcome.

A Girl’s Best Friend

Laura J. Mixon’s *Glass Houses* takes issues of technologically-mediated gender configurations and border negotiations at the body–machine interface a step further than Gibson. In this narrative, a young woman called Ruby Kubick\textsuperscript{14} works as a freelance salvage operator just one step up from Case-level low-life. She is poor and in debt but, at the start of the novel, honest. In her salvage work, she uses a variety of robots called waldoes. She controls each waldo using a kind of VR, whereby she becomes embodied within the waldo, seeing and hearing though the waldo’s sensory mechanisms. She manipulates the waldo’s various limbs and tools to manoeuvre around dangerous buildings, and to carry out salvage. Meanwhile her body is slumped in her hideous, hot little flat which she shares with her wayward bisexual lover, Melissa. Ruby operates her business entirely through computer equipment inside the flat, safe from the dystopian horrors of “outside”, wearing a VR rig called a beanie connected to a cranial jack. Trying to salvage a load of laser disks from a condemned skyscraper in the middle of a clone, she encounters (through the cameras of her giant salvage waldo which she calls Golem\textsuperscript{15}) Dr Youhanna Nasser, injured, obviously rich and ruling class, sheltering from the storm. Using Golem she tries to rescue him but the building collapses and he is killed. Golem emerges from the wreckage, damaged but still mobile and carrying Nasser’s body. On the way to the police she robs the body of a set of diamond earstuds and an envelope which turns out to contain Nasser’s latest will, reinstating his estranged son as his heir. The rest of the narrative describes the Nasser family’s attempts to prevent the will from being revealed. Along the way, Ruby demonstrates amazing resilience and physical courage; overcomes her extreme agoraphobia; frees herself of self-destructive dependence on Melissa; and achieves a good measure of confident self-esteem.

\textsuperscript{14} A reader cannot help but associate this name with Rubik’s Cube, perhaps indicating the puzzling embodiment of this character.

\textsuperscript{15} The name, Golem, comes from medieval Jewish legend and refers to a being made from mud and brought to life to protect a Jewish community from attack. Marge Piercy reworks the story of the Golem in her novel, *Body of Glass* (1992).
A key aspect of this SF adventure thriller is the human-machine blend involving Ruby and her waldoes. She has three:

I have Tiger, a miniature training tool built like an old World War II tank with two taloned arms, a single IR-to-UV wavelength zoom camera in the turret, and an exceptional sound reception mechanism set in the gun barrel. He fits in the palm of my hand and is totally useless except for scaring the tenement cats or spying on the neighbors (who believe me have nothing happening in their lives worth spying on). And I also have a spider waldo, Rachne; that’s Greek for spider, I think. ...

Rachne’s older than Golem, even, half-dead and blind, and equally stupid. Fine manipulation’s her thing. She weighs about eighty pounds and has ten legs that can also be used as arms, with the right fittings, and can support fairly heavy loads ... but she can’t haul the bulk Golem can. (GH 39-40)

Golem, her “thousand-pound, titanium/metaceramic scrounge” (GH 2), is equipped with lights, cameras, infra-red sensors, wheels, storage cavities and five limbs, including one called a “schwarzenegger”. All three robots are anthropomorphised and assigned gender by Ruby: while Rachne is regarded as feminine, Golem is clearly a masculine machine, with such an unmistakable connection to the actor who made the excessively masculine Terminator famous. Yet, incongruously, Nasser addresses Golem with the title “madam” when he encounters the waldo in the condemned skyscraper (GH 8), presumably because of Ruby’s voice addressing him via Golem’s speakers. Golem is referred to as “he”; but in narrating her doings through his agency, Ruby merges with him to become “I-Golem”, leading to all kinds of peculiar complexities:

I pulled out Golem’s FlexBind web and shook it out. ...I struggled in. I stuffed earplugs in my ears and then put the waldo control beanie on. While the program loaded, I reached up and put a hand on Golem’s chassis. “Let’s go home.”

Then the linkware pulled me into Golem, and somewhere far away I felt my hand fall as if I’d dozed off. I-Golem looked down at the woman in my arms. It was Ruby-me, of course, and her-my eyes were closed, fluttering a little. She-I curled with her-my cheek against Golem’s chassis.

She-I looked so young and vulnerable from the outside, not ugly and scrawny like me. I was terrified that I wouldn’t be able to keep her from harm; I wished she were back home, safe, right this very minute. (GH 60-1)

In this passage, Golem becomes almost motherly, looking down at the fragile human being in his arms, while subjectivity is so comprehensively decentred that it is difficult to know who is looking at whom, which “I” is speaking at any one time, and how gender can be decided. Mixon’s text offers here a model for a postmodern feminist intervention in the otherwise rigid conventions of gender-machine relationships found in masculinist cyberpunk. As
Karen Cadora observes:

Cyborgs can ground a political vision in which identity is fragmented and contradictory, yet not without power. A cyborg is a multiply positioned subject enabled by technology. It is this side of cyborgs that feminists need to learn more about. ... feminist cyberpunk enables us to imagine ourselves as cyborgs ... the kind that is faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism.16

However, as well as being cyborg-SF which offers postmodern perspectives, Glass Houses also belongs to the tradition of the humanist adventure novel, in which the underdog, impoverished and struggling against massive odds, finally overcomes all opponents and misfortunes, achieves wisdom, and wins the hand of the prince/princess as a reward for doing the right thing. In Ruby’s case, the princess is an attractive police captain plus a package of diamonds. Together these will lift her out of tenement poverty and social dysfunction. The solution offered by this narrative is the fulfilment of the American Dream: a quick, individualistic clamber up the social scale to untold wealth. Neither Ruby’s gender, nor her sexual preference are at issue; in this respect the text falls under the covert feminist banner described earlier. But in another respect, Ruby could just as easily be Ruben. There is nothing much about her that marks her as specifically female other than that the reader is told that she is. At one point, when Ruby is quarrelling with Melissa, Melissa shouts at her:

“At least I’ve got friends, I’ve got a life! You spend all your time junked out on your stupid machines. It makes me sick to see you lying there, twitching and drooling and talking to yourself all the time.

“You never get out, you don’t have any friends, you expect me to be everything to you.” (GH 65)

While not suggesting that there are no women who are socially inept or who obsess about technology, I cannot help but feel this description fits the traditional male nerd much more closely. Indeed, Ruby’s lesbianism is not particularly convincing either—especially compared with that of Trouble and Cerise, the central characters in Trouble and Her Friends. Where the latter two characters share a constant subliminal awareness of possible consequences of their contravention of sexual mores, an alertness to signs of contempt or offence characteristic of gay and lesbian experience in homophobic society, Ruby is blithely unaware of anything other than the usual risks of a lone, slight person in a dangerous city. It might be argued

that Mixon has naturalised queerness, rendered it normal and unremarkable in her future world; my reading, however, is that the text’s representation of queer experience of the world is somewhat shallow, lacks the ring of authenticity, and ultimately fails to offer any kind of radical meaning.

The Trouble with Cyborgs

Another narrative which seeks to interrogate sexuality and gender through the use of cyborg imagery is Melissa Scott’s prize-winning 1994 novel, Trouble and Her Friends.\textsuperscript{17} This is an overtly feminist narrative about other “promising and dangerous monsters who help redefine the pleasures and politics of embodiment and feminist writing”.\textsuperscript{18} Scott builds on previous fictional evocations of cyberspace and develops it as a specifically sensual location for those whose bodies are appropriately modified. Ambiguity, fluid identity, undecidable sexuality, machine-mediated experience—all contribute in Scott’s text to a larger sense of cyberspace being a flowing and unstable location, where travellers wander without maps through a world only subtly different from the present, contemporary one, without established roads, and able only to make contingent, uncertain judgements. As such, it is a striking metaphor for the tensions and problematics of postmodernism, and a vivid feminist exploration of cyborg-SF.

Scott’s novel presents several interesting variations on masculinist cyberpunk. It is tempting to look at this novel in the way that “techies” look at new computer technology: is this just an upgrade from the Neuromancer generation, a later version designed ten years on, more bells and whistles, does things faster, bigger \textit{RAM}, better \textit{ROM}, higher definition, more megaHertz? Perhaps, inasmuch as Scott, following the original vision of Gibson’s cyberspace, has adapted the vision and borrowed a number of images and concepts. But what Scott has created in this text is a whole new way of looking at and acting in cyberspace; of portraying its denizens; and a different representation of gender in a world which is only a step away from the present. Indeed, Scott uses a number of conventions drawn directly from current Internet usage (of which Gibson knew nothing in the early 1980s\textsuperscript{19}) in areas

\textsuperscript{17} Trouble and Her Friends won the 1995 Lambda Literary Award for Gay/Lesbian Science Fiction.

\textsuperscript{18} Haraway, 1990, p.221.

\textsuperscript{19} The fact that Gibson wrote \textit{Neuromancer} on an old manual typewriter, and had never used a computer, is still a cause for amazement among contributors to email lists that discuss cyberpunk.
as complex as the present debate about obscenity, censorship and other legal ramifications of the Net, and as mundane as typography; but especially, Scott explores and elaborates on some of the kinds of masculinist biases and gender play which take place daily on the Net, which makes this text particularly interesting for my project. In addition, Scott presents a cast of characters who subvert the usual roles taken by both women and men in traditional cyborg-SF.

The principal characters, named Trouble and Cerise (both net pseudonyms), are very much cyberpunks, yet are not only women but lesbians, a pair of renegades who were also lovers immediately before the opening of the narrative. Furthermore, they are equipped with a neural implant known as the “brainworm”. This illegal technology is a molecular filament which is surgically inserted into recipients’ brains, allowing them to experience the net with their whole sensoria, that is, sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch, rather than simply audiovisually. Cyberspace, for characters equipped with the brainworm, is as sensually real as their real life in terms of its apprehensibility. Characters in the text who are not “wired”—the expression used to indicate having a brainworm implant—experience Scott’s version of cyberspace through VR headgear, suits and gloves and a more basic form of cranial jack. Trouble and Cerise, bypassing all these extra-bodily aids other than the jack are, in Haraway’s words, “cyborgs—compounds of the organic, technical, mythic, textual, and political”.20

Trouble and Her Friends is a cyber-mystery-thriller narrative about two women who make their way in a highly technologically-mediated, masculinist society. Trouble, a former cracker, discovers that an unknown person, using her name, has perpetrated and then boasted about various illegal database intrusions on “the nets”, this text’s name for cyberspace. The perpetrator’s use of her nom de guerre incriminates her. Pursued by the authorities in the form of federal Treasury officers, she loses her legal job and decides to return to the “shadows”—the illegal side of the nets—to find and eliminate her impersonator. Cerise, her one-time lover, has also eschewed illegal net incursions and has become a corporate systems security manager. Cerise and a selection of gay and lesbian friends—who collectively refer to themselves as “queer” or “family”—assist Trouble in identifying and locating the impostor, referred to as newTrouble, both in cyberspace in a “virtual town” called Seahaven, and in an environmentally devastated

20 Haraway, 1992, p.301.
seaside casino resort, also called Seahaven, in the real world of the narrative. Real Seahaven is inhabited by an unstable local population largely involved in buying and selling shady software, hardware and bioware products, and features a top security resort hotel where high-powered and not always legal negotiations are conducted under the watchful eye of criminal organisations. Gibson’s “dance of biz” is present, alive and well here, as is his typical inclusion of a criminal underworld represented by the Yakuza.

The ruin of the natural world is one of the dominant themes of dystopian SF generally, one which is developed idiosyncratically in cyberpunk as I have suggested. Both Scott and Gibson set their narratives in worlds at least partially spoiled and corrupted by chemical and/or radioactive pollutants, and both share a sense of acceptance, of the inevitability of this despoliation. In Scott’s text, as in Gibson’s, there is a strong contrast between the vibrant beauty of the online world, especially as experienced by those with brainworms, and the devastation and decay of the real world:

only the Plantation lay to the south, deserted since the Hundred-Year Winter, except for public sex and suicides. It had once been a tourist mecca, a stretch of semiwild beachfront, protected from overdevelopment by state and federal governments. ... Now it was dead land, or dying—the ecologists weren’t completely sure of that, but they had diagnosed the chemical-sands syndrome, and that was an eventual death sentence, both for the beaches and, very nearly, for towns like Seahaven that clung to the water. The sands had absorbed the chemicals that had spilled off-shore during the unbelievable series of winter storms that had struck the coast twenty years ago; there had been other spills since, in storms and in fair weather, none quite as bad as in the Hundred-Year Winter, and the sands had bonded to the chemicals, changing the nature of the beaches and of the sea floor. ... the entire coast was poisoned. Only a few species seemed to hold their own; the rest, fish and birds and the occasional shoreline mammal, were dwindling toward extinction. (T 176-7)

This description of the ruined coast is presented both as dully horrifying and somehow unavoidable, beyond human remedy. Trouble and Cerise fatalistically accept it, and even take advantage of its dangers to hide out from their pursuers:

“The glass is bulletproof,” Cerise said, thoughtfully. “If any of the drug gangs are crazy enough to risk the beaches. Users are mostly jackals; if we stay alert we shouldn’t have any problems with them. And if we can follow some of the old paving, we should be all right as far as chem-sands go.”

“Great,” Trouble said. “If the has-beens don’t get us, the ecology will.” (T 261)
One reading of the cyberpunk landscape, of which this is a typical example, is that the land, being physically present and a metaphor for the body, is rendered repulsive and uninhabitable. The obvious and welcome alternative is the untrammeled beauties of cyberspace. However, in this text, such a reading sits ill with the strong political activism displayed by the main characters, as well as the text's powerful affirmation of the body, and the tension over this contradiction remains unresolved.

Both women, but especially Trouble, have to overcome opposition from a largely hostile net population, antagonised because of their sex, their homosexual preference, and their possession of technology which is strongly associated with their transgressive sexuality. They also have to conquer a challenging and dangerous technical barrier set up by a powerful net maestro called the Mayor, who runs virtual Seahaven, and who is sheltering the impostor and fermenting enmity against Trouble and her friends. Under the cover of net anonymity, someone betrays Trouble to Treasury soon after she has met up again with Cerise in both virtual and real Seahavens. With Treasury on her trail, Trouble hides out with Cerise, who has encountered and been seduced on the nets by a virtual leather girl called Silk, whom she later suspects might be new Trouble. Ultimately, Trouble achieves her purpose in finding and exposing the impostor, in the process ridding the net world of powerful, conservative influences. She takes over virtual Seahaven as the new Mayor, and opens up cyberspace to presumably more benign and liberal regimes.

Crackers, Hackers and Syscops

The narrative introduces Trouble after she has become a “syscop” (systems cop) working for a small artists’ co-operative organisation off the beaten track. As a syscop she is forbidden to use her now-illegal brainworm to access the nets, and although she does utilise it occasionally, she is careful to avoid “the shadows”—the illegal domains of cyberspace where Gibson’s cowboys would play—and to erase all traces of her passage. The word syscop is derived from the contemporary information technology term “sysop”, short for systems operator, a person who ensures that a computer network is working and being used correctly, combined with cop or police, underlining Trouble’s complete reversal from a cracker to respectability and responsibility. This is regarded as a major come-down from her elevated cracker status: when Trouble and Cerise, having met again after three years, are catching up on each other’s pasts, Trouble says:
"The first thing I heard of [new Trouble's intrusions] was Treasury showing up on my doorstep—literally, I was working as a syscop for an artists' co-op—"

"You're kidding," Cerise said, and Trouble shrugged.

"It seemed the thing to do at the time. I stayed off the net for eight months after I—left—and then I stayed in the bright lights, got myself syscop's papers and got a real job."

"A syscop," Cerise said, and shook her head. "Well, set a thief to catch a thief." (T 213)

Trouble's reaction to giving up cyberspace is in notable contrast to Case's. Where Case plunges headlong into a suicidal mixture of hustling dubious deals, drugs and drink, Trouble chooses the unglamorous but practical path of accreditation as a legal netuser. The key difference, however, is the variety of ways in which the body is negotiated in relation to cyberspace in each text. I will look at this aspect in more detail later.

Cerise also has become legitimate, despite her earlier avowals to stay in the "shadows", and works as chief of network security for a large company called Multiplane. Multiplane is a generic SF multinational, one of the characteristic villains of cyberpunk fiction. Exactly what any of the multinationals of cyberpunk do is frequently left vague—usually something connected with high technology and/or pharmaceuticals and/or the military-industrial complex—but they are invariably sinister, ruthless, enormously powerful, connected to criminal elements, and casual with the legitimacy of their pursuits. There is, therefore, some irony in the fact that Cerise is regarded as having a legitimate job with Multiplane, in view of the illegality of cracking, her past as a cracker, and the multinationals' flagrant use of crackers for industrial espionage purposes; as their friend Helling says, "Nobody's going to wipe out cracking anyway. The multinationals pay too damn well." (T 36) A bona fide cyberpunk, Cerise has relished the role of console cowboy very similar to Case, a hustler burgling data. Like Jones in "Johnny Mnemonic", she is a cyborg reconstituted as the "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism", forced from her previous maverick existence by legal and survival imperatives into the web of multinational capital, and like Johnny, now works within its self-interested system.

Trouble and Cerise have risked iatrogenic madness21 to have their illegal neural filaments secretly implanted, allowing them full sensory access

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21 I am reminded of the main title of Jill Matthews's book, Good and Mad Women (1984). In acquiring illegal implants and risking madness, Trouble and Cerise are clearly neither of them "good", and have each rejected their society's construction of goodness (i.e. idealised femininity which, in this case, is supposed to have no truck with technology).
to cyberspace:

She hated the [brainworm] installation process ... It wasn’t so much the risk of a screw-up. That was there, all right, less likely than an accident on the flyway but worse to contemplate, brain miswired, or damaged, leaving her a drooling idiot. It was a risk she faced every time she confronted serious IC(E) or even, on some level, every time she stepped out onto the net itself. Power surges happened, rare but real, overriding the inbuilt safeties of the implanted systems, and there was nothing you could do about it, except stay off the net altogether. (T 128)

Their gender, their sexual orientation and their superior access to the net flies in the face of the Neuromancer version of cyberspace, which is a domain not just for men but for heterosexual men only (not counting dubiously gendered AIs). Gibson’s female characters’ experience of cyberspace is nugatory compared to that of the console cowboys, and accessed only in their role as “meat puppets”: prostitutes with brain implants which blank out consciousness without affecting physical responses. For example, Molly tells Case in Neuromancer: “I wasn’t conscious. It’s like cyberspace, but blank. Silver. It smells like rain ... you can see yourself orgasm, it’s like a little nova right out on the rim of space.”22 By comparison, Cerise (in her former net persona of Alice) experiences cyberspace as a fully sensed “land”scape:

Alice in Wonderland, Alice down the rabbit hole, Alice out in cyberspace, flung along the lines of data, flying across fields of light, the night cities that live only behind her eyes. Power rides her fingers, she moves from datashell to datashell, walking the nets like the ghost of a shadow, her trail vanishing behind her as she goes. She carries power in the dark behind her eyes.

... She smells fear sharp as sweat, hears the constant rustling murmur of the transactions that surround her as the brainworm translates what is truly only electrons, data transferred from computer to computer, to sensation in her brain. She glimpses a familiar shape, a hint of flowing robes that move against the current of the datastream that enfolds them, and tries to follow. But the crowding icons—balled advertising, jostling users, once a virtual pickpocket, groping for useful programs in other people’s toolkits—block her way and she loses the robed icon at the main exchange node, where the data flows down from the outer nets like a waterfall of lights. (T 16-17)

Incidentally, the use of italics and present tense for representing cyberspace works as a typographical and grammatical remove, a kind of estrangement for the reader which Scott utilises to suggest the alternate reality quality of her concept of cyberspace. She also uses asterisks instead of inverted commas to indicate direct speech in cyberspace, a typographic convention borrowed and adapted from flesh-life online practice in which asterisks are used

22 Gibson, 1986, pp.177-78.
to indicate emphasis, or remarks expressed by a participant in an online dis­
cussion but put in the third person, similar to a stage direction. Scott builds
on Gibson’s original figuring of cyberspace as a place of “unlimited subjec­tive dimension”. She also nods in the direction of his conceptualisations in
her use of the acronym “IC(E)”, here standing for Intrusion Countermeasures
(Electronic), and in Gibson’s texts, Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics.
But where Neuromancer’s cyberspace is populated only with Case himself
and the grating, vocal presence of Dixie Flatline, offering cowboy Case an
image of virgin, empty, frontier territory ripe for plunder, for Cerise the nets
are dense with icons representing people, flowing and jostling around her
like buyers and sellers in a crowded souk. Case escapes from his desper­ately
overcrowded urban surroundings into the clean, pure emptiness of cyber­space; for Cerise, entering cyberspace is stepping out in the “dance of biz”.

We Are Family: Wired Sensualities

Another important aspect of Trouble and Her Friends which challenges
the Gibson model is the number of characters who are “queer”, or “family”,
that is, “family” in the lesbian and gay colloquial use of the word identifying
a person as “one of us”: homosexual or bisexual women and men who are to
some extent outcasts from the community on the net, firstly for not being
exclusively heterosexual, and secondly for daring to use the new brainworm
technology. With regard to the word “queer”, in a discussion of queer
theory, Elizabeth Grosz quotes Teresa de Lauretis’s account of the genesis
and function of the label, and its own self-understanding as distinctively
defiant, transgressive, postmodern:

Today we have, on the one hand, the term “lesbian” and “gay” to designate dis­tinct kinds of life-styles, sexualities, sexual practices, communities, issues, publica­tions, and discourses; on the other hand, the phrase “gay and lesbian,” or more and
more frequently, “lesbian and gay” (ladies first), has become standard currency .... In
a sense, the term “Queer Theory” was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine
distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms,
not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend
them—or at the very least problematize them.26

23 N 81.
24 BC 196; the text actually says “Instrusion” but I am inclined to think this is a misprint. In
Neuromancer (N 39) the word is spelt “Intrusion”.
25 This sense of family subverts the tribal manifestations I discuss in chapter seven of this
thesis.
The idea of “family” and the coalition or affinity politics of the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered community is strongly represented in the text, giving it a completely different feel from cyberpunk’s usual masculinist representations of lone hero console cowboys and their heterosexual molls, and associating it directly with Haraway’s cyborg. The text also makes a parallel between “family” as the gay and lesbian community, and “family” as those who “took the wire”, suggesting that transgressive sexuality and transgressive technology are linked if not commensurate. Loosely included in this wired affinity group are people of colour whose position is seen as the same as that of the central characters, that is, they are queer and wired and therefore discriminated against. Although not all Scott’s homosexual characters have the brainworm, many do, and the condition of being an outcast of some kind is made congruent in the text with having the brainworm:

Maybe that was why the serious netwalkers, the original inhabitants of the nets, hated the brainworm: not so much because it gave a different value, a new meaning to the skills of the body, but because it meant taking that risk [of turning one’s body over to pure sensation, inflicted without passion, without feeling, by a stranger’s hands], over and above the risk of the worm itself. Maybe that was why it was almost always the underclasses, the women, the people of color, the gay people, the ones who were already stigmatized as being vulnerable, available, trapped by the body, who took the risk of the wire. (T 128-29)

Here are Harawayan cyborgs with a vengeance: these cyborgs are “not innocent; ... not born in a garden; [do] not seek unitary identity and so generate[,] antagonistic dualisms without end ...; [they] take irony for granted”;27 they are “constituted as others”.28 Moreover, the brainworm is eschewed by the straight fraternity of netwalkers specifically because of its associations with the body, in its implantation procedures and in its effects.

In Trouble and Cerise, the narrative presents two characters who are deeply involved with their bodies, even though they spend a lot of their time in cyberspace. This is in complete contrast to Case, whose experience of cyberspace is as a release from “the prison of the flesh”. One reason for this contrast is that Trouble’s and Cerise’s experience of cyberspace is virtually embodied, and therefore cannot represent an escape from the flesh in any

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27 Haraway, 1990a, p.222.
decisive sense. Where Case experiences cyberspace subjectively as if he were nothing more than a disembodied, floating point-of-view, Trouble, Cerise and their wired friends can both see and feel their (virtual) bodies. Their sensory augmentation with the brainworm sets them apart in other ways too, which I will explain further, but it is worth noting that their intimate contact with a cyberspace which they not only see and move through, but smell, touch, feel, hear, and experience sexually, is quite different from both the clumsy, non-sensual mode of the other “netwalkers” in the text, and of course from that of Gibson’s console cowboys.

The typical Gibson cyberpunk, as I have suggested, is male, white, manipulates a (presumably) very expensive, very cool cyberspace deck while wearing a head-mounted electrode array, and experiences cyberspace as a visuals-only, disembodied event; more to the point, *Neuromancer*’s Case and his ilk have a distinct preference, even a yearning, comparable to Stone’s notion of “cyborg envy”, for full relinquishment of the flesh, the disembodiment of cyberspace as such. While both the Gibsonian model of the cyberpunk and Scott’s alternative model use external equipment to aid entry into cyberspace, Scott’s characters have also internalised, incorporated the technology, are more completely cyborg, than Gibson’s. Trouble and her friends are interpenetrated with their technology; Case penetrates. But more important, Scott’s characters relish cyberspace as a celebration of their (dis-)embodied sensuality. In *Neuromancer*, Case relishes the non-bodily ecstasy of cyberspace: when he is flatlined and kidnapped from cyberspace by one or other of the AIs, his consciousness experiences a simulation drawn from the AI’s database, an experience well-nigh as sensorily informed as his real life, complete with cold, hunger and sexual desire. But Case loathes it as much as he has loathed real life and retreats from it as soon as he can. *Neuromancer* told Case he would not know the difference between his real life and life in the matrix mediated by the AI; although the sensory effects of cyberspace experienced by Trouble and her friends are simulated, they don’t much mind the difference, and they rejoice in the sensual effects of their cyborgisation.

**Queering the Cyberpitch**

As women, lesbians and “wired” netwalkers, Trouble and Cerise are triple outcasts among the overwhelmingly heterosexual, macho world of hackers, crackers and net users. The text makes strong links between various forms of transgression exhibited by Trouble and her friends—gender, racial, sexual and technological: for example, immediately after the announcement
of the passage into law of anti-hacker legislation, known as the Evans-Tindale Bill, Cerise goes to a hackers’ bar where she meets up with a friend named Helling and several other crackers:

Cerise sometimes thought he only stayed friends with them because they were all queer, and the old-style netwalkers still didn’t approve of him, wouldn’t approve of him no matter how good he was because of it. She suspected he had taken the risk of the brainworm for the same reason: the old-style netwalkers wouldn’t respect his work once he’d gotten it, but then, they hadn’t ever respected him. The brainworm did give you an advantage on the nets, let you use the full range of your senses, not just sight and sound, to interpret the virtual world. The old-style netwalkers claimed to hold it in contempt, said that it was a crutch, something for second-raters, but Cerise suspected, had always suspected, that they were just afraid. The worm entailed risks: implantation and direct-to-brain wiring was always tricky, could leave you a mental cripple if the operation went wrong, and the oldsters had never been quite able to face that possibility. The dollie-slots [direct on-line image processor port, i.e., a cranial jack] and the associated implants didn’t touch the brain, ran along existing nerves—less of a risk, and more of a challenge to use, or so the oldsters said.

“Trouble wouldn’t just run away,” Arabesque said. She set the VR glove down on the dented tabletop, curled her own hand over it, matching finger to finger. Her skin was only a little lighter than the black plastic, and both were like shadows in the indirect light. (T 29-30)²⁹

Here, both Helling’s sexual preference and Arabesque’s race, neither of them conforming to the straight white male norm, are directly connected to technology, again emphasising the link between otherness, the body, and cyborg enhancement. (Incidentally, it is interesting to compare the last paragraph in this excerpt to the sex scene in Gibson’s “Burning Chrome” quoted in the following chapter, where a young woman fetishises the hero’s black prosthetic arm.)

The text plays humorously with the relationship between virtuality and reality in its representation of legislative incursions into cyberspace: “No one had believed that Congress would buy Evans-Tindale, it bore no relation to virtuality” (T 15) (Customarily the phrase would be, “bore no relation to reality”). The contrast is drawn here between the “straight” world of the lawmakers and the cool, risk-taking world of the wired netwalkers, parallel to the “straight” world of people who live conventional lives legally, sexually and pharmacologically, and that of “queer” people who do not. Further,

²⁹ The antagonism between the “oldsters” and the wired netqueers in this text resonates with the persistent, rivalrous needling in flesh life that persists between users of IBM clone/MSdos/Windows (systems whose technical awkwardness parallels what the oldsters call “real” netwalking), and the Macintosh “tribe”, who maintain a minority’s passionate defensiveness regarding the elegantly simple “computer for the rest of us” (to use the words of an early advertising slogan).
Cerise’s and Trouble’s friends are crackers “who had dared both the brainworm and the risks of real-world contact” (T 21),\(^\text{30}\) that is, unlike the unwired, straight netwalkers who eschew physical contact with other netwalkers, the queer characters of this novel yearn also for contact in real life. As Harawayan cyborgs, they are “needy for connection—they seem to have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party.”\(^\text{31}\) This ties in with Scott’s double meaning of the word “family”, where kinship of wired experience and kinship as “queer” are linked. For example, among Trouble’s “family” is an Interpol officer, Vesselin Mabry, who is “family” in the sense of being gay but not wired; he protects Trouble from harassment by Treasury officers, the federal officials charged with policing the nets. When Cerise talks to Mabry about Trouble, he tells her about his relationship with Trouble’s and Cerise’s friend Max:

“I didn’t know you were family,” Cerise said.

Mabry touched his own dollie-slot. “Depends on the family,” he said, and this time the bitterness was clear.

Cerise nodded once, careful not to show too much comprehension. Helling was on the wire, of course—they had all been, van Liesvelt, herself and Trouble, Max and his then-partner Jannick Aledort, Carlie Held, Arabesque, Dewildah Mason, and David Terrel. They had lived within a subway ride of each other for three years, and had seen each other off the nets perhaps even more than on—and that was part of what the wire had brought them, the desire to know each other in reality as well. And it would be hard for Mabry, a man who stayed within the law, who adapted to the rules of the net—one of the most ironclad of which was, never try to contact the human being behind the net persona—to know that his lover had not only managed an illegal career with an illegal implant, but had broken that rule as well. (T 155)

These cyborgs are “needy for connection”, and able to form alliances across social, gender and racial boundaries, creating a new, affinal family.

The text’s insistence on making a connection between the technology of its projected world and the sensual experience of the physical body is one of its defining characteristics. Where Gibson’s texts attempt to deny or denigrate the body by the attitudes of the characters and by technologising language used to describe physical experience, Scott’s plunges headlong into a representation of technology as a mediator of physical experience and as a specific component of queer sociality. After Trouble has been sacked from her legal job because of her employers’ suspicion that she has gone back to

\(^{30}\) This phrase is another interesting reflection of actual Internet behaviour where meeting in the real world is referred to as a “fleshmeet”, but is more usually regarded as something to relish rather than risk.

\(^{31}\) Haraway, 1990a, p.193.
cracking, she goes to a bar to meet Butch van Liesvelt, a gay friend who she hopes will help her obtain an illegal brainworm upgrade:

She made her way toward the massive bar at the center of the room, very aware that she was the only woman present, and the only person not wearing the cracker’s elaborate regalia, chains and leather or silk and suit. … This was what she hated most about the on-line world, the shadows as much as the bright lights of the legal nets: too many men assumed that the nets were exclusively their province, and were startled and angry to find out that it wasn’t. They were the same people who feared the brainworm, feared the intensity of its sensations, data translated not as image and words alone, but as the full range of feeling, the entire response of the body, and, rather than ever admit fear, they walked with raised hackles, looking for a fight. … Van Liesvelt came to meet her, holding out his arms in greeting. It was done for effect, she knew, to annoy the watching netwalkers, who held back from physical display off the nets, fastidious to the point of prudishness. She returned the embrace with interest, was enveloped in his familiar smell. (T 118, 120, 122-23)

Here, the text makes a clear oppositional link between the cyborgisation of the central female character, and the sexism of the straight male netwalkers. Trouble is a woman, Trouble is a dyke, Trouble is a cyborg, and the straight fraternity of crackers are seriously troubled by all three. Moreover, Trouble’s experience of the world, be it the virtual world of the nets apprehended through the brainworm, or the real world of bars and friendships, is always described in terms invoking the senses, in this case, Van Liesvelt’s “familiar smell”.

Wired Netsex

I have suggested that bodily experiences, whether virtual or real, are the culminant intensities of this text. This is particularly evident when Cerise first encounters Silk, whom she perceives to be an attractive, seductive young woman dressed in black leathers and who is “wired”:

It is a woman, a girl-shape, really, thin and angular, big eyes in a sharp and pointy face above black leather. The girl-shape smiles, pure mischief, impure invitation; Cerise blinks, intrigued in spite of herself. (T 171-72)

Silk’s black leather clothing is another obvious connection to flesh life queer culture:

And then the girl-shape is there in front of her, still smiling; on the wire. Cerise blinks again, assessing the image, bad-girl chic, black leather and silver chains and the unmistakable curves … (T 172)

The scene is set for a sexual encounter, which occurs the next time Cerise
walks the nets:

"Hello, Cerise."

It is the voice she knows as Silk's, and she starts slowly toward it ... And then she sees the icon clearly, the same girl-shape, all curves and black leather, standing hipshot in the doorway, one arm against the wall above her head ... She brushes past Silk, deliberately trailing a hand across the girl-shape's hip. She feels leather, cool and smooth as Silk's name against her palm, and Silk laughs and follows her in, offers her hand and in it a key. ...

They touch, and Cerise feels the play of raw sensation like water shivering through her as the programs speak and calibrate one to the other. And then she feels Silk's hands on her breasts, delicate and possessive, reaches out to cup black leather hips and feels the shock of skin beneath her fingers. She closes her eyes—the programs have not matched, cannot match sight and touch—lets Silk's hand slip back along her shoulder blades, so that they are pulled body to body, breasts, bellies, and thighs touching, only Silk's hand against her breast dividing them. It's been a long time since she's played this game, a long time since there's been a presence on the net that excited her, and she is startled once again when she feels the distant ache between her legs, her body waking to stimulus, lagging behind the unreal sensations.

And then the brainworm has overridden that distraction, and she feels only the touch of Silk's hands, the whisper of Silk's skin under her own fingers. She pulls Silk closer still, feels the other woman lean back, straddling her, knees tight along her ribs, pubic hair and the wet warmth of her crotch just brushing Cerise's belly—there is no gravity, after all, no reference points, no reason to worry that she's gone somehow without noticing from standing to flat on her back—and Cerise smiles blind, runs both hands along Silk's thighs until her thumbs caress the inner join of thigh and groin, teasing along the edge of the tight-curled hair. And then Silk backs away, evading the touch, easing down along and then between Cerise's legs. Cerise tries to rise, to follow, but there is a hand on her breast and a hand on her belly, urging her down, and then a cheek against her own thigh and a tongue warm and eager between her legs. Cerise leans back, arching under hands and mouth, tangles her hands in Silk's hair, guiding her to the right spots.

"Greedy," Silk says, sounds approving, and Cerise moans at the touch of breath and the moving lips. Then the tongue is back, busy and demanding, and Cerise arches harder against it, pressing herself against the other woman's mouth. She shudders, and then at last she's coming, riding the crest of her delight until the brainworm's trigger resets, and she shivers, unwillingly letting it end. She recovers slowly, body lagging behind her brain, and reaches for Silk, groping still with eyes closed, not wanting to end the illusion. There is nothing within her reach.

She opens her eyes, and gravity reasserts itself; she is standing again on the featureless plain, the IC(E) that walled it vanished, the illusion of a garden gone as well. She's been had, in more ways than one ... Distantly, at a distance, she can feel her body trembling still, muscles relaxing only slowly in the aftermath of orgasm, but the brainworm has already recovered for her. ...

[Cerise leaves the nets and comes to in her hotel room] The hotel room was very quiet, and her legs had cramped. Cerise grimaced, knowing perfectly well why, and uncoiled herself cautiously from the chair. She was wet, as well as stiff, and remembered all too well why she'd never much liked virtual sex. (T 235-38)
scribed earlier in chapter three. The Gibson text is couched emphatically in the language of information technology while Scott’s text revels in sensuality and in the fluid and muscular reactions of the body. In terms of gender impersonation, it is worth noting that Silk skilfully avoids any attempt by Cerise to touch her/his genital area. Even in cyberspace in a virtual, non-physically-present representation, Silk/Jamie maintains the pri(v/m)acy of the phallus and cannot even pretend not to be possessed of a penis and testicles. What this might indicate in terms of the text, or in terms of flesh life equivalences, is open to question. Perhaps it reflects on the prudery, anxiety, modesty or delicacy discussed in chapter one with regard to SF representations of male robots. Perhaps it portrays simple male shyness, or perhaps it is Scott’s wry comment on flesh life female impersonations by men attempting to seduce lesbians on the Net.

The intensity of the brainworm’s sensations is as vividly described, and as specifically associated with sensuality when, after it has been surgically implanted by Dr Huu, a “cybermed”, it is calibrated:

This is the last step, the thing that all the rest leads to, the final tuning of body and brain wire. [Trouble] looks down at the box—there is always the option to stop now, the cybermeds always give you that choice, but it’s a choice to live half-aware, half-blind, clumsy and grotesque on the net. She’s been on the wire too long to live like that, and she reaches for the box before she can think too long. She slips her hand into the opening, and the world vanishes in a sheer rush of sensation, pure feeling filling every nerve in her body. She throws back her head, and the feeling turns to pain, pins-and-needles swelling to racking cramp to pure fire, an agony swirling through her until she’s nothing but pain. And then it peaks and vanishes, leaving her gasping for an instant before the pleasure starts, rising from the tickle of desire to soaked arousal to racking, orgasmic delight. (T 133)

After the procedure, Trouble regains awareness of the ordinary world and of Huu. She is embarrassed with the intensity of her desire:

Her crotch was hot and wet, body lagging behind her brain, and she smelled of sex. She could hear the sucking sound of Huu peeling off the rubber gloves, and wanted for a painful instant to feel the other woman’s hands between her legs, gloved fingers pressing into her clit— She took a deep breath, shook that thought away. “You’re likely to be sore tomorrow,” Huu went on, heedless, or, more likely, Trouble thought, diplomatically blind and deaf … (T 133)

Dr Huu exemplifies another highly technologically competent, independent woman in this text, her name perhaps a play on Dr Who, the famous and invincible Time Lord in the BBC TV series (1963– ).

Bodily sensations of orgasm and sexual pleasure, physically experienced despite being prompted in a virtual world, are represented as
the most intense pleasures which it is possible to experience in Scott’s
cyberspace, an intensity of the flesh rather than of elitism and mastery, as in
the case of Gibson’s cowboys (though both elitism and mastery are present in
Trouble and her Friends to some extent as well, especially the pleasures of
mastery). Where Gibson valorises, by the virtuosity and richness of his
language, the disembodied datascape of cyberspace, Scott invents and revels
in a sensory cyberspace where the body and the mind together are the
transcendent experiential locus, and bodily intensities are dominant. Cadora
suggests this is typical of feminist cyberpunk:

For women, the realities of the flesh are all too present in the imperfect world of
cyberpunk. Because of this, embodiedness is a central issue in feminist cyberpunk in a
way that it is not in masculinist cyberpunk. ... females cannot assume a disembodied
gaze, even in virtual reality. They are tied to their bodies in ways that male characters
are not. It is not surprising, then, that almost all feminist cyberpunk depicts virtual
reality as a space that must be navigated with a body of some sort.32

It is these very intensities which urge Trouble and her wired friends to seek
each other out in real life, as if to confirm their virtual, wire life experiences
of one another, to convert the hallucinatory currency of virtually embodied
experience on the nets into the hard bodily coin of real life.

Cyborg Gender

Sexual ambiguity is a constant motif running through Trouble and her
Friends. Names of individuals both on and off the net frequently provide
little clue as to the gender of the person concerned. Frequently, names of
characters suggest anagrams, giving a sense of hidden identity. Naming is a
key element in the entire narrative as Trouble would not have bothered to
return to her former haunts in the Shadows were it not for the fact that
someone is using her name, impersonating her. Trouble’s real name is India
Carless, a name open to many cultural interpretations—there are intimations
of the foreign: Western Orientalist notions of the exotic sensuality of the East;
a suggestion of a post-petroleum economy, perhaps of helpless physical
immobility as opposed to the almost infinite virtual mobility of the traveller
in cyberspace. Ambiguity is particularly germane to the Net: whether
characters are male or female as well as their sexual orientation is often
manifestly undecidable.

That said, gender identity is still regarded as important by the main

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32 Cadora, 1995, pp.364–5
characters. An example of this is the care with which the indefinite article is used referring to Trouble’s unknown impersonator. Trouble, Cerise and their friends are meticulous about referring to the mystery cracker as “it”. Other characters, such as Treasury officers pursuing the cracker, use the masculine pronoun both generically and because of their assumption that a cracker, especially a good one whom they cannot catch, has to be male, even in the face of their strong suspicion that Trouble might be their quarry. Treasury and other (heterosexual, conservative) officials presume the masculinity of new Trouble, as well as the unlikeliness of any female being sufficiently adept on the net to elude them:

“We’ve had some reports of cracking and intrusions that have been traced back to BVI-four,” Starling said. That would make him the technical expert, Trouble thought, and kept her face expressionless. “But we lose the perpetrator there, at BVI-four—we haven’t been able to trace him on any of the major outgoing lines—so we’re checking all the local nets that use that gateway, in case he’s staging through one of them.” He paused. “You’re the only syscop for this system, Ms. Carless?”

In spite of his best efforts, Trouble heard a whisper of incredulity in his voice, and bit her tongue to keep from responding to it. A lot of people still assumed that a woman couldn’t run a bulletin board on her own, much less act as solo syscop. (T 57)

In the case of Gibson’s cyberspace, there are no such uncertainties: only men can master cyberspace.

Provisionally, “new Trouble” is identified as male by Trouble after Fate, one of the netwalkers who has had dealings with new Trouble, refers to him as “he”, but there remains a degree of uncertainty; this is particularly the case when Cerise sees a similarity between Silk, the voluptuous “girl-shape” icon she meets and is seduced by on the net, and traces of code left by new Trouble after a hacking raid. Vesselin Mabry also knows someone called Silk but knows this Silk as a young man who seduced his lover Max:

Trouble’s grin widened. “Going to go looking for Silk?”
“Not for that,” Cerise said, and sounded suddenly grim.
“Silk,” Mabry said, and there was something in his voice that made both women look curiously at him. “What do you know about Silk?”
“Cerise knows a lot more than I do,” Trouble said.
Cerise shrugged, frowning at the sudden intensity of Mabry’s stare. “I—met Silk on the net a while back. She and I had an extremely brief fling. But I think she knows new Trouble, and I owe her a bad turn, so ... I thought I’d make some hard inquiries into her connections.”

“Her?” Mabry said, and laughed suddenly, without humor. “The Silk I knew—know of—was a boy.”

Cerise quirked a smile at him, trying to choose her words carefully beneath the careless tone. “So you got hustled, too.”
"Not me," Mabry said, still with a tight, unfriendly smile. "Max did."

"So which is it, I wonder?" Cerise said. There was no use in being embarrassed; sex and gender confusion was one of the hazards of the nets, something a few people enjoyed exploiting while most of the net tried to minimize the inevitable mistakes. Even so, she felt a brief, unwanted flash of something between annoyance and shame: bad enough to be hustled, she thought, but by a boy?

Mabry shrugged. "I admit, I don't really know. Except that he—she?—is an accomplished bitch, any way you care to name. I should like to have words with him—her."

"So, Cerise," Mabry said, and forced a smile that looked more like a grimace, "if you can get Silk to give you anything, especially if you can make him—her, whatever—look like the bitch it is, I would personally enjoy seeing it. But I'd be very careful." (T 282-83)

The use of the word "bitch" here is an interesting choice. As an insult it is commonly used against women in both straight and gay circles, but in flesh life gay men often use it, along with the feminine pronoun, to insult one another. Mabry's pronouns get hopelessly confused in this passage, reflecting and emphasising the fluidity and undecidability of gender on the nets.

The transgressive reversals involved in the Cerise-Silk relationship are plentiful—a lesbian on the nets is seduced by an unknown "leather-clad woman" (not unlike Molly in Neuromancer) with whom she has wired virtual sex, and whom she later discovers to be a young boy who is also pretending to be her former female lover. Is this a heterosexual event? A homosexual event? A transgendered event? The reader is positioned to sympathise with Cerise who is clearly rueful, but the text makes plain that this kind of event is not uncommon, and is certainly an episode in which present-day flesh life Net activities are fictively mirrored and amplified with imaginary technology. The Silk-Cerise net relationship neatly exemplifies the blurring between flesh life and the SF imaginary.

**Cyborg Politics**

Trouble attempts to rally other netwalkers in virtual Seahaven to support her in her search for new Trouble, and confronts a number of her old net cronies, some of whom are still on her side. But someone called Sasquatch, a new icon unknown to the old hands, is leaving flame (aggressively critical, hostile) posts about her on a public bulletin board at virtual Seahaven, suggesting that she be handed over to the Treasury police. Tellingly, one of the arguments used by Sasquatch for turning Trouble in to the authorities is that she is "a political"—that is, she is a lesbian, not one of
the legitimate “brotherhood” of netwalkers, and therefore not deserving of protection:

... there was one final message from Sasquatch that made [Cerise] frown even more deeply:

THE OLD TROUBLE IS STILL THE ONE CAUSING THE PROBLEMS, AND SHE’S NOT REALLY ALL THAT GOOD, IF SHE HAS TO USE THE WIRE. SHE’S NOT ONE OF US, SHE’S A POLITICAL. SO WHY ARE WE PROTECTING HER?

Political was a familiar euphemism, one that had never failed to draw at least a sour smile. Translated, Cerise thought, Sasquatch is saying she’s a dyke and on the wire, and we don’t have to take care of her. Wonderful. (T 239)

In view of the fact that she has been out of the shadows for some years, and is identified in the flame as not newTrouble, the underlying message here is one of blatant misogyny and homophobia, perhaps a not unrealistic reflection of some aspects of flesh life Net behaviour. Trouble is strongly associated with political activism because of her sexuality as much as because of her cyborgisation, but there is no evidence in the text of any political activism as such on the part of Trouble. She has been a petty netcrook who reformed, but at all times has worked within the larger political system.

The Mayor, whose real life name is Eytan Novross, plays a complex role in the narrative. His relationship with Silk/newTrouble—who eventually turns out to be a seventeen-year-old male student named Jamie Tilsen—is ambiguous: he seems to be Jamie’s benefactor or protector but there is a suggestion that Jamie may be his lover. Scott has said\(^\text{33}\) she did not want to portray a stereotypic male homosexual paedophile, preferring to leave the character of Novross more plainly as a vicious, domineering, heterosexual man. However, whatever the intentions of the author, the text allows for various readings, leaving a taint of paedophilia. Novross is apparently duped by Jamie into making Jamie his protegé, teaching him net and programming skills, teaching him his own style and knowledge. Yet he doesn’t realise Jamie is wired, and is certainly ignorant of Jamie’s bisexual games with Max and Cerise. Whether he suspected Jamie was newTrouble is also unclear, but judging by his treatment of Jamie toward the end, the implication is that Jamie confessed and Novross could not forgive. This is in stark contrast to Cerise who, realising that Jamie might be “doubly family”—i.e. both queer and on the wire—feels concern for him: “... there is Silk to think about. He’s on the wire, one of them, doubly family, maybe, and she feels responsible.” (T 330)

\(^{33}\) In email correspondence with me.
sense of compassion is another striking contrast to masculinist cyberpunk with its emphasis on macho competitiveness and self-absorption, exemplified in Case.

Novross runs virtual Seahaven as a despot, almost like a puritanical, fundamentalist religious dictator. In appearance he is compared to “an El Greco prelate” (T 366), calling to mind the unyielding dogma of the Spanish Inquisition. He is implacably opposed to the brainworm, queers, and any form of private, vulgar or sexual behaviour from flirting to blasphemous or obscene language. In virtual Seahaven, whenever anyone uses “bad” language or calls up a “privacy sphere” (similar to a private chat room in Net meeting places), Novross’s watchdog programs—literally, icons of dogs—appear to bark and disrupt. But when he encounters Jamie in virtual Seahaven and discovers Jamie is on the wire, he calls him “*You little bastard*” and “*You cunt*” (T 328), before confirming the depth of his hypocrisy by murdering Jamie and attempting to kill Trouble.

Novross represents a discourse of intransigent masculinist conservatism, a dying technology, and a dying philosophy. Inflexible, obsessively secretive about his identity, relentlessly opposed to Trouble, her friends, their technological and sexual preferences and all that they stand for, he cannot admit defeat. When Trouble confronts Novross, he calls her “another half-competent bitch-queer” (T 323). Once again, the insult “bitch” is used. An oppositional reading might have this epithet affirming the cyborg Trouble’s Harawayan kinship with animals along with her transgressive sexual preference, but in any case Trouble is positioned to oppose the forces of misogyny and traditional straight white male privilege.

Her battle to overcome Novross’s defences involve her in reversal—to go forward she must go backward—suggesting not only that advance requires subversion and that “normal” methods won’t work, but that Trouble’s subjectivity in her world, both on the nets and in real life, is one of back-to-frontness, where who she is, is the reverse of what is conventional. The fact that she ultimately triumphs over all reversals offers a strong feminist vision. As Cadora suggests,

Feminist cyberpunk envisions something that feminist theory badly needs: fragmented subjects who can, despite their multiple positionings, negotiate and succeed in a high-tech world.34

Trouble and Her Friends is written across the grain of classic cyberpunk

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34 Cadora, 1995, p.357.
while acknowledging its generic characteristics at every turn. Because of the choice of women, lesbians and gay men as central characters, cyberpunk's typical machismo is subverted and exposed. Where *Neuromancer's Case*, as kingpin console cowboy, adopts the "elite stance" of "a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh",35 both Trouble and Cerise recognise the artificiality of net bravado, and Cerise explicitly admits to the unsatisfactory results of dis/embodied sexual contact on the net. Though using a different mode, Scott also returns to the body as the ultimate arbiter of experience. The disruption of conventional cyberpunk categories expressed in this text lies pre-eminently in its representation of the body. Scott valorises bodily pleasures over Gibson's disembodied pleasures, focusing these pleasures in female bodies and suggesting that these pleasures are also enjoyed by a marginalised group of "others"—people of colour and queer people—contrasting their shared desires quite explicitly to other characters in the narrative who refuse both to experience the nets sensually, and to experience physical closeness socially. Trouble and her friends are, in large measure, Haraway's cyborgs, "not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints." However, once again it is in the wider political arena that *Trouble and Her Friends* fails to fulfil its potential as a radical text. When Novross is defeated, Trouble is offered the mayorship of virtual Seahaven by Mabry. In accepting (on condition that Cerise join her), Trouble and Cerise are recuperated into the conventions and respectability of the legal nets, forsaking the shadows for good. Emphasising the irony of her situation, Trouble adopts the icon of a Wild West gunfighter and calls herself the Marshal of Seahaven. This echoes the deeply conservative tradition of the cowboy, of which Nicola Nixon says,

> It seems telling that the American icon of the cowboy, realized so strongly in Reaganite cowboyism, the quintessence of the maverick reactionary, should form the central heroic iconography in cyberpunk.36

**The Elusive Feminist Cyborg**

There are several parallels between Scott's text and Mixon's. For example: real Seahaven is appallingly damaged by environmental catastrophe, Ruby operates in a suffocating New York devastated by the

Greenhouse effect; both Ruby and Trouble have risky brushes with the law and evade murderous male antagonists; Ruby is in love with a woman and, like Trouble, has close male friends. Like Trouble, Ruby is highly technologically proficient and can be seen as a feminist cyborg hero of a sort: she is independent, rascally, resourceful, clever and resolute, she is unmistakably the hero of the narrative, and she earns her living through her expertise with VR technology—even though her experience of VR compared to that of Trouble is like that of driving a fork-lift compared to riding a powerful motorbike. Ruby lacks Trouble's sense of political community, however, and is highly ambivalent about embodiment.

In her critique of feminist cyberpunk, Karen Cadora suggests that feminist cyberpunk writers, in which group she includes Mixon, have gone far in demonstrating what "a cyborg, a multiply-positioned subject" might look like. Claiming that there is neither an essential "woman" in feminist cyberpunk, nor any identity that is essentially or uniquely "human", she observes: "The identities represented in feminist cyberpunk are fragmented and unstable, just the kind of identities with which feminism must come to terms." However, rather than sidestepping essentialism and presenting a (so to speak) fully fleshed-out feminist cyborg hero, Mixon offers a cyborg character, certainly, and a character in whom subjectivity is radically decen­tred, but a character who seems to be only putatively female, and who sub­scribes only to the most conventional and conservative aspirations. Ruby's unconvincing femaleness renders her success at the conclusion of the story rather more hollow than it should be for a feminist reader. Once again, it seems that a promising cyborg-SF narrative fails to offer a wholly satisfactory feminist interpretation. Trouble and Her Friends, on the other hand, portrays two gender-transgressive cyborg women who not only demonstrate technical proficiency of a high order, like Ruby, but are also self-consciously committed to a radical political grouping. They are aware of Harawayan coalitional possibilities and, by joining together with other marginalised groups and entering the belly of the technology monster, they oppose the dominant heteropatriarchy of their world.

Nevertheless, although Trouble's intention is to liberalise the nets, to bring American legislation governing the nets into line with the more liberal European version, there is a sense of capitulation to the dictatorship of essentially conservative authority, albeit benevolent, and a loss of radical

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potential. One is left with the distinct impression that nothing much will change, and that Trouble, for all her subversive marginality, will toe the straight line.
Chapter Five

Chrome Sex

CYBORG-SF, despite being generically concerned with fluid bodily boundaries and alternative consciousness, appears to be paradoxically resistant to fluid gender identities and/or alternative sexual expectations and behaviour. To argue this proposition, in this chapter I will look at four short stories which provide pertinent material for a discussion of desire as performance in the technofuture as imagined in cyborg-SF.

Anne Balsamo explains the paradox of cyborg-SF’s resistance to the unconventional as a reaction against uncertainty: “As is often the case when seemingly stable boundaries are displaced by technological innovation (human/artificial, nature/culture), other boundaries are more vigilantly guarded”.¹ I argue that cyborg-SF’s tendency to ignore the possibilities of radical sexual configurations is due to an underlying conservatism typically expressed in its narratives. However, as some of these stories show, it is possible to represent a cyberpunk world in which subversions of the heteropatriarchal norms of desire take place. The stories I have selected—a pre-Neuromancer Gibson short story written in 1982 called “Burning Chrome”; “(Learning About) Machine Sex” (1988), by Candas Jane Dorsey; “Pretty Boy Crossover” (1986), by Pat Cadigan; and “A Coney Island of the Mind” (1992), by Maureen F. McHugh—display a range of gender representations, of ways in which gender is negotiated, and of both conventional and radically subversive performances of sexuality in cyborg-SF. Gibson’s story, predictably, represents the masculinist cyberpunk norm in its representations of wholly conventional sex and desire in a cyberpunk technofuture. Although none of the other three stories manages a fully feminist realisation (two are specifically about young men who have virtually no explicit dealings with women at all), all point hopefully in directions that future feminist cyborg-SF might travel.

Cool Dudes and Technofetishes

“Burning Chrome”² contains most of the characteristic elements of

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² References to “Burning Chrome” (cited as 1988a) hereafter are incorporated into the text and abbreviated as BC.
“Gibsonian sensibility” and introduces several typical cyberpunk motifs—a brutal urban setting dominated by criminal elements; virtual reality interface technology allowing access to cyberspace; tough, heterosexual cowboy heroes, etc. In this chapter, however, I will be focusing on sex and desire in the Gibsonian technofuture. The principal characters are hotshot console cowboy Bobby Quine (the one Molly in Neuromancer calls a “real asshole”) and his sidekick, Jack, nicknamed Automatic Jack for his prosthetic arm. Jack’s own arm was laserbeamed by “the Russians” over a wheatfield near Kiev in “the war” some years ago (BC 203), thus establishing his identity as a macho but embittered soldier hero. Bobby and Jack are a pair of cyberspace lowlife outlaws who, like Case, make a precarious living stealing and smuggling other people’s data. In brief, they are partners, cyberspace thieves. Jack handles the hardware, Bobby the soft. Bobby takes up with a young woman called Rikki whom he regards as a lucky mascot, giving him the extra edge he needs to “burn” (i.e. rob) other people’s databases. Rikki and Jack have a surreptitious affair, but what Rikki really wants is to be a simstim star, to have fame and fortune of the Hollywood superstar variety. (Simstim is further developed in Neuromancer, as I have described.) The boys pull off an extremely difficult heist, robbing the database bank account of a woman called Chrome who runs a brothel called the House of Blue Lights. In the meantime, unbeknown to either cowboy, Rikki is getting the money for her implant surgery by working at the brothel as a meat puppet. The story ends on a note of loss, heartache and pointlessness as Rikki, bedecked with her new eyes, disappears to Chiba City, Mecca for simstim wannabe’s; Jack is bereft; and Bobby is on the lookout for another lucky mascot, another hit.

Typically for Gibson, the opening sentences of “Burning Chrome” are richly evocative of the characters’ depressing “real world” as opposed to the wonder of cyberspace:

It was hot, the night we burned Chrome. Out in the malls and plazas, moths were batting themselves to death against the neon, but in Bobby’s loft the only light came from a monitor screen and the green and red LEDs on the face of the matrix simulator. I knew every chip in Bobby’s simulator by heart; it looked like your workaday Ono-Sendai VII, the ‘Cyberspace Seven,’ but I’d rebuilt it so many times that you’d have had a hard time finding a square millimetre of factory circuitry in all that silicon....

‘Go for it,’ I said, when it was time, but Bobby was already there, leaning forward to drive the Russian program into its slot with the heel of his hand. He did it with the tight grace of a kid slamming change into an arcade game, sure of winning and ready to pull down a string of free games....
walls of ice. ...

And dark, so dark, in the halls of Chrome’s ice. ...

Bobby was a cowboy, and ice was the nature of his game, ice from ICE, Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics. ... Legitimate programmers jack into their employers’ sector of the matrix and find themselves surrounded by bright geometries representing the corporate data.

Towers and fields of it ranged in the colorless nonspace of the simulation matrix ... Legitimate programmers never see the walls of ice they work behind, the walls of shadow that screen their operations from others, from industrial espionage artists and hustlers like Bobby Quine. (BC 195-7)

In this opening segment, many of Gibson’s trademarks, which became some of the distinguishing features of cyberpunk SF, can be identified; for example, tight prose compressed with imagery describing a world mediated through technology, the matrix itself, ICE, unpleasant biological developments, and sleazy cowboy heroes. The “Ono-Sendai VII”, representing the key cyberpunk neurotechnical interface of computers and humans, is also familiar to Neuromancer readers. In her paper, “Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?”, Nicola Nixon acidly remarks:

In Gibson’s novels the console cowboys use expensive Hosaka and Ono Sendai cyberspace decks, but such mass-produced technology is always customized and enhanced, its performance and capabilities augmented by the cowboys’ more inventive, finer ingenuity.

In effect, the exceptionally talented, very masculine hero of cyberpunk with the specially modified (Americanized) Japanese equipment, can beat the Japanese at their own game, pitting his powerful individualism against the ... almost unassailable Japanese “family” corporations.3

In this case, the almost unassailable foe is Chrome. Chrome is dangerous, rich, and connected to the Mob:

Chrome: her pretty childface smooth as steel, with eyes that would have been at home on the bottom of some deep Atlantic trench, cold gray eyes that lived under terrible pressure. They said she cooked her own cancers for people who crossed her, rococo custom variations that took years to kill you. They said a lot of things about Chrome, none of them at all reassuring. (BC 196)

The story’s narrator and moral voice is Jack. He regrets the moral vacuousness of Bobby’s habitual use of women to boost his sense of cybernetic invincibility, but out of masculine camaraderie says nothing to either Bobby or to Bobby’s new “squeeze” (girlfriend), Rikki. But instead of loyally avoiding contact with Bobby’s girl, Jack encourages contact. To his pleased

surprise, he finds that Rikki is not only not repelled by his “myoelectric arm” but positively attracted to it. In a scene remarkable for its vivid technofetishism, Rikki touches Jack’s scarred shoulder above the arm:

Her nails were lacquered black, not pointed, but tapered oblongs, the lacquer only a shade darker than the carbon-fiber laminate that sheaths my arm. And her hand went down the arm, black nails tracing a weld in the laminate, down to the black anodized elbow joint, out to the wrist, her hand soft-knuckled as a child’s, finger spreading to lock over mine, her palm against the perforated Duralumin.

Her other palm came up to brush across the feedback pads, and it rained all afternoon, raindrops drumming on the steel and soot-stained glass above Bobby’s bed. (BC 204–5)

This is a richly resonant episode in the story: Rikki, whose womanly physical attributes have been described earlier (“Tall, nineteen or maybe twenty, and she definitely had the goods” (BC 201), is rendered kittenlike in her fascination with Jack’s mighty prosthetic arm. This prosthesis can be read as a displaced phallus, representing a blurring of boundaries between the physical and the technological, and suggesting a machinic eroticism. The phallic quality of Jack’s arm is emphasised when he meets Tiger, a friend of Rikki’s, at a cafe. Jack is openly scornful of Tiger’s surgical adaptation: he has the artificial eyes required to be a simstim star. Since simstim is implicitly a feminine, or at least not a masculine activity—the only simstim performer mentioned is Tally Isham, a female star, and the *sine qua non* in being a simstim star is having your bodily abilities used for others’ pleasure—possession of the eyes feminise Tiger and make him a suitable target for Jack’s heterosexual scorn. Clearly it is manly to have a Duralumin arm, but effeminate for a man to have Sendai eyes. Simstim is fluff, soap; trivial, contemptible entertainment for airheads and housewives, such as Bobby Newmark’s mother, Marsha, in Gibson’s *Count Zero*, and primarily to do with “the meat”.

In Jack’s world, technological equipment is commonplace but distinctly gendered. For example, cyberspace decks, cranial jacks and the like, tools for negotiating cyberspace, are boys’ toys; Jack’s myoelectric arm somehow enhances his masculinity and attractiveness to women (it seems unlikely that such a prosthesis on a woman would attract men). Zeiss Ikon eyes for simstim capability and meat puppet chips are a girl thing. Both Jack and Rikki are, or become, cyborgs, but there is a major gender divide between

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4 CZ 78.
them; these cyborgs are not denizens of Haraway’s “postgender world”.5

Jack, in his own eyes a cool dude with a heart, is also deeply critical of the activities at the House of Blue Lights. This is no ordinary brothel. As Jack says, with bleak cynicism, “Some things are worse than being alone. But the thing they sell in the House of Blue Lights is so popular that it’s almost legal” (BC 216), by which he means that the prostitutes employed there are meat puppets. Like Molly, Rikki is working as a meat puppet to make the large amounts of money she needs to buy a technologically enhanced future for herself. Jack’s obvious distaste at the way Rikki has made the fortune required to get Tally Isham eyes is belied by the fact that he himself has used the services of the House of Blue Lights without any feelings other than self pity, certainly without compunction for the meat puppet he used. His compassionate street-cool is even less than skin-deep. Although the text is very much on Jack’s side, a feminist reading indicates that hero Jack is, in fact, hypocritical in most of his dealings: in his betrayal of his friend Bobby, in his attitude toward sex-workers in the House of Blue Lights, and in his implicit condemnation of Rikki. Jack is willing to make use of the House’s services, but also feels justified in ruining its owner, Chrome, because she is rich, old, unattractive and vicious, a Madam, and presumes to mix with “the Boys”:

A sweet little heart-shaped face framing the nastiest pair of eyes you ever saw. She’d looked fourteen for as long as anyone could remember, hyped out of anything like a normal metabolism on some massive program of serums and hormones. She was as ugly a customer as the street ever produced, but she didn’t belong to the street anymore. She was one of the Boys, Chrome, a member in good standing of the local Mob subsidiary. Word was, she’d gotten started as a dealer, back when synthetic pituitary hormones were still proscribed. But she hadn’t had to move hormones for a long time. Now she owned the House of Blue Lights.” (BC 208)

Jack’s only doubts about burning Chrome are to do with the possibility of Chrome catching up with them. It is worth noting the masculinist stereotypes which Rikki and Chrome fit neatly: the sweet, innocent girl who betrays her man and becomes a whore (a favourite Gibson model), and the evil, unnaturally wealthy crone-witch. There are only two ways for women to make real money in Gibson’s cyberpunk world: selling sex either as worker or Madam (in the case of Chrome), or becoming a simstim star, prostitution of a different kind and still deeply involved with selling the body. (An exception is Neuromancer’s Lady 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool who

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5 Haraway, 1990a, p.192.
inherits wealth. But mad Jane is able to enjoy wealth and concomitant power in a limited way, only as a clone, a product designed for male power structures and male inheritance systems. She is wealthy and powerful only through inheritance, and by a clearly aberrant entry into the corporate domain. In addition, she appears not to be an active working member of the T-A clan, unlike her brother Jean who is in remotest Australia at the time of Case’s heist, presumably pursuing far-flung family interests.) Like access to cyberspace, power is a masculine attribute, and it is attained through the expertise of the mind, not the body.

Mother Matrix

Cyberspace may be described as masculine as the Wild West, which is to say that only cowboys are allowed to play there (“Indians”, in this case, are absent, an aporia of otherness). Yet in one sense, this, in effect, figures cyberspace as a female site, a place available only to heterosexual male penetration. The matrix, itself a word associated with the feminine, can be read as a female locus, the focus of intense male desire, a site of mastery and of competition between men. Claudia Springer notes that the word matrix originates in the Latin mater (meaning both mother and womb), and offers one definition as “something within which something else originates and develops”. Nicola Nixon develops the idea of a feminised cyberspace:

the matrix itself is figured as feminine space. The console cowboys may “jack in”, but they are in constant danger of hitting ICE (Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics), a sort of metaphoric hymeneal membrane which can kill them if they don’t successfully “eat through it” with extremely sophisticated contraband hacking equipment in order to “penetrate” the data systems of such organisations as T-A (Tessier-Ashpool). ... The cowboys have to “interface” with the matrix through “slotting into” feminized cyberspace decks ... Gibson’s ... male heroes play out their mastery within that specific locus of femininity; their very masculinity is constituted by their success both within and against it. ... Gibson has indeed constructed the soft world of fantasy as a sort of phallic mother: erotic, feminine, and potentially lethal. If the cowboy heroes fail to perform brilliantly, they will be “flatlined” [ie brain-dead] or have their jacks melted off, whichever is worse.

Eva Cherniavsky has identified a similar quality, claiming that cyberspace signifies “not the reconfiguration of phallic masculinity but the fetishization of the maternal”, and Zoë Sofia also comments on the feminisation of

cyberspace in cyberpunk:

In computer hacking, cyberspace can be imagined as a maternal or feminine body to be penetrated, cut up and manipulated in quests to appropriate and control resources.9

When Bobby and Jack “burn” Chrome, they surreptitiously penetrate her highly protected database with their “central logic thrust” (BC 202) and take what they find there for their pleasure—figuratively they have raped and robbed her and left her for the jackals of the street to finish off:

I thought about Chrome, too. That we’d killed her, murdered her, as surely as if we’d slit her throat. The night that carried me along through the malls and plazas would be hunting her now, and she had nowhere to go. (BC 218)

The only reason they give “the bulk of Chrome’s Zürich account to a dozen world charities” (BC 217) is because the sums are too vast to launder safely into their own accounts.

Rikki, too, can be seen as a technological locus for male perfomance. She is a kind of proto-code to Bobby, a “warm boot” superstition he needs to work with to shine in cyberspace. Jack ruminates:

I’d known him for a long time, since the end of the war, and I knew he used women as counters in a game, Bobby Quine versus fortune, versus time and the night of cities. ... He turned them into emblems, sigils on the map of his hustler’s life, navigational beacons he could follow through a sea of bars and neon. ... He made do with women. (BC 203-4)

In addition, Rikki becomes a chip-driven sex toy and later a mechanism for sensory video entertainment. In Sofia’s phrase, Rikki and her fellow simstim starlets are “friendly to users, not users themselves”.10 Even Jack’s passionate relationship with her is invariably connected to his myoelectric arm: “I nodded, watching the arm swing up to take her hand; it didn’t seem to be part of me at all, but she held on to it like it was” (BC 219).

Ostensibly, the principle relationship in this story is that between Jack and Rikki. Equally important, however, is that between Jack and Bobby, a relationship Jack is unwilling to risk by admitting to his affair with Rikki, who serves as a means of exchange—“she definitely had the goods”—between the two men. “Having the goods” is used here in its slang sense of

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10 Sofia, 1992, p.16.
being physically amply endowed, but the word “goods” itself carries the sense of mercantile exchange. It is possible, too, to read Rikki as a surrogate for Jack’s and Bobby’s unadmitted love for one another. Bobby repeatedly tells Jack, not Rikki, how much he loves Rikki (BC 213), and how he is doing the Chrome job for her, to the point where it is obvious that he is overcompensating and trying to convince himself: “‘I’m going to do it for her, man. . . . I’m doing it for her,’ he said as the door closed behind me. ‘You know I am’” (BC 210). Jack, meanwhile, hero-worships Bobby’s cybernetic prowess and unblemished physicality: Jack continually notices Bobby’s clothes (BC 207) and his body, especially his bare, skinny “white chest” (BC 209, 218). He faithfully serves Bobby as his partner in the most important part of their lives, and when Rikki leaves, Jack stays.

One thing that can be said for Jack is that he takes Rikki’s desire to be a simstim star seriously, unlike Bobby, who laughs it off and, in a striking piece of retro male chauvinism, even suggests that “she won’t need to work” (BC 215) after they have burnt Chrome. Neither of them bother to tell her what they are up to, that she, too, will be rich after the heist as long as she stays with them. Telling her would have saved her from the House of Blue Lights, but cyberspace theft is men’s private business, and the source of men’s wealth and generosity is not to be questioned. By the time Jack realises she has been getting money in the only way open to her, it is too late. When he meets up with her in a café, she has had her own brown eyes replaced with the new implants:

Her sunglasses told the whole story, huge black shades with a telltale smudge of fleshtone paintstick in the corner of one lens. ‘Hi, Rikki,’ I said, and I was ready when she took them off.

Blue. Tally Isham blue. The clear trademark blue they’re famous for, ZEISS IKON ringing each iris in tiny capitals, the letters suspended there like flecks of gold.

‘They’re beautiful,’ I said. Paintstick covered the bruising. No scars with work that good. (BC 218–9)

Rikki leaves for Hollywood, but Jack changes her ticket for Chiba City, where all the major simstim productions are made. Jack clearly cares for Rikki, but not enough to leave Bobby who is already thinking about looking for another good luck girl, not enough to become Rikki’s partner in the new life with her that he had been contemplating earlier, with himself in the dominant earning role. Now that Rikki has become technologically

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11 Jack’s and Bobby’s relationship is reminiscent of the partnership of the two men in Lester Del Rey’s story, “Helen O’Loy” (1938). I am indebted to Dorothy Jones for this insight.
Sexing the Cyborg": Chapter Five

penetrated, has lost her tech-free feminine innocence, has in fact become as much of a cyborg as Jack, his love for her appears to diminish. Jack’s response to Rikki’s new eyes is to admire the workmanship, tinged with regret for her lost “natural” eyes. Chrome’s eyes are nasty and at home at the bottom of a deep sea trench; Rikki’s were “somewhere between dark amber and French coffee” (BC 201)—metaphors from nature; females, for Jack, are still associated with nature untainted by technology, understandable in view of the close association for Jack between his eroticised prosthetic arm and his masculinity.

In “Burning Chrome”, Gibson has written a love story, but one only marginally about Jack and Rikki. Its eroticism is strongly implicated with technologies, principally prosthetic augmentation and the erotically charged excitement of cyberspace penetration. At the heart of the story is the relationship between Bobby and Jack, a relationship conducted in the masculine domain of cyberspace and through the sharing, albeit tacit, of a woman’s body. As a representation of gendered subjectivities, Gibson’s story is embedded in a masculinist ethos. For cyborg-SF of a quite different stripe in which desire is negotiated altogether otherwise, I will turn now to Dorsey’s story, “(Learning About) Machine Sex”.

Machine Sex

About five years after Gibson published “Burning Chrome”, Candas Jane Dorsey turned her hand to cyborg-SF and wrote a story titled “(Learning About) Machine Sex”. While firmly in the cyberpunk style, it contains a number of startling departures and offers a satiric critique of the Gibsonian, macho boy’s world exemplified in “Burning Chrome”. Dorsey’s story is concerned with the body but not with cyborgs in the Gibsonian sense; there are no overt technological penetrations into the body as such, but there is still a strong preoccupation with the body vis à vis technology: namely, the use of computer technology as a mediator and source of sexual pleasure.

“(Learning About) Machine Sex” tells the story of a young cyberpunk called Angel, a virtuoso programmer and computer designer who gets revenge on a world of shallow, avaricious and callous men who have used and abused both her body and her genius. The first surprise for a reader familiar with cyberpunk fiction is the gender of the central character, the

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second is her occupation as a hotshot hacker. Dorsey underlines this, and indicates that her authorial slant is feminist. Not just an alternative narrative style, this is a deliberate departure from the impersonal, omniscient, and apparently unimplicated authorial voice of Gibsonian cyberpunk. It has the effect of including the reader in explicit relationship with the author, and therefore with a feminist reading position:

They say a hacker's burned out before he's twenty-one. Note the pronoun: he. Not many women in that heady realm of the chip. (MS 79)

As I have suggested in previous chapters, computers, hardware, software and the "heady realm of the chip" are the domain of thin, brilliant young men, not thin, brilliant girls. In other respects, however, she is all cyberpunk. She is a loner, young, driven, angry, embittered and exceptionally talented—all classic characteristics of the cyberpunk hero. She consumes to excess designer drugs made for her by "the pharmaceutical tailor" (MS 86). She is described as a "sweaty-smelling, disheveled, anorectic-looking waif in the filthy, oversized silk shirt (the rebels had affected natural fabrics the year she left home, and she always did after that, even later when the silk was cleaner, more upmarket, and black instead of white)" (MS 81), and later, "she put on her white silks—leather jacket underneath, against the skin as street fashion would have it" (MS 85). Dorsey's careful attention to the style obsessions of cyberpunk amounts to satire here, satire not so much of the Gibson hero (Case, after all, tended to wear rain-stained khaki nylon windbreakers [N 11]) as of the Sterling hype of a media-derived, image-conscious hipster. However, where the Gibsonian console cowboys adopt a "relaxed contempt for the flesh" while having no trouble finding willing women to sleep with them when they feel like it, Angel is deeply puzzled by sex and by her difficulty with its performance.

Angel is emotionally and professionally involved with a stereotypical, sadistic bully called Max Whitman who has no idea how to satisfy her sexually (and cares less). When she is not plotting technological revenge on Whitman, she is occupied through much of the narrative with thinking about sex and human relationships. The two obsessions come together in her development of a new kind of computer and software which cybernetically interprets, enhances and feeds back erotic brain impulses, and is designed to stimulate the user to orgasm. She correctly predicts that her abusers will degrade themselves utterly with this new sex toy, making her very rich in the process. One of the things she does with her wealth, apart from buying
drugs, is put it in a trust fund for her brain-damaged brother, Brian. Clearly, Angel differs in several ways from the Case model; Case and his ilk live for the disembodied exaltation of cyberspace, the relief of escape from the flesh; orgasm and associated bodily pleasures are “a meat thing”, nothing to do with the ascetic purity of cyberspace. When Case makes money he spends it on newer, fancier cyberspace decks (and drugs), and no self-respecting console cowboy admits to any kind of family other than that of his peers who hang out at the Gentleman Loser.13

Angel, like Rikki, is nineteen or twenty when the narrator introduces her sitting naked at her keyboard, working on her newest R&D design, based on her earlier technological breakthrough called a “biochip”. Just what this might be is not made explicit, although it seems to be some kind of cybernetic AI: “a truly thinking machine” (MS 87); at any rate, its superiority to all preceding technology is implied. Angel has now developed a new kind of computer in which the hardware (the machine itself) is designed to fit the software (the programming), which in this case produces a machine that folds into itself:

She unfolded the new board. It had taken her some time to figure out how to make it expand like that, to fit the program it was going to run. This idea of shaping the hardware to the software had been with her since she made the biochip, and thus made it possible and much more interesting than the other way round. But making the hardware to fit her new idea had involved a great deal of study and technique, and so far she had had limited success. (MS 84-85)

There is a metaphoric significance here: Angel has had limited success with her sexual relationships with men, so it is not surprising, given the text’s conflation of bodies and machines, that she is working on a machine in which the hardware is made to suit the software rather than the other way round, assuming a parallel conflation of hardware with the masculine and software with the feminine. The narrative continues immediately with the sentence, “This reminded her again of sex, and, she supposed, relationships” (MS 85). The linking of machines and technology to sexual relations, and of the body to technology, are features of this narrative which occur several times. At one point, for example, Angel is fretting over the unsatisfactory nature of her relationship with Whitman: “she paced and muttered to herself, reworking the previous day [of bickering] until it was done with, enough that she could go on. And after all what was missing? She had no

13 The Gentleman Loser, a cool bar for console cowboys and their hangers on, turns up in several Gibson texts.
idea how to debug it” (MS 83). The use of the programmer’s jargon phrase, “debug”, referring to a dysfunctional sexual relationship reinforces the recurring motif of the machine/sex link.

Rock-A-Bye AI

Angel’s programming of her biochip enables it to learn by a feedback process in the same way that children learn. Her relation to the biochip is represented as that of mother to baby: she has programmed it to say “‘Goo’”, and “‘Dada’” as its bootstrap greeting (MS 82).14 Angel thus shares with Molly a maternal connection to technology. Her code for a bootstrap greeting is in contrast to that programmed by another hacker Angel remembers, which reads “‘Warm pussy’” (MS 87), a play on “‘warm boot’”, and again a blurring of machine and the sexed (female) body.

When she shows her new biochip to Ted Kozyk, president of the computer company MannComp (to which Max has just sold her), he teaches it to play Go, talk back, play games and predict horse races and the stock market. When he turns it off and pulls out the plug, she congratulates him:

‘What for?’ he said; ‘you’re the genius.’
‘No, congratulations, you just murdered your first baby,’ she said, and plugged it back in. ‘Want to try for two?’
‘Goo,’ said the deck. ‘Dada.’

It was her little joke. It was never a feature on the MannComp A-One they sold across every MannComp counter in the world. (MS 82)

Angel’s message is a conscious, cynical joke but serves to underpin another difference between her and the typical console cowboy in her consciousness of relationship. The fact that the AI says “‘Dada’” as opposed to “‘Mama’” also indicates that she believes men will be the principle users of her development. Angel has invented, in effect, a machine meat puppet. The human meat puppet is described in “Burning Chrome” as “the thing they sell ...[that] is so popular it’s almost legal” (BC 216), as Jack puts it; “The customers are torn between needing someone and wanting to be alone at the same time”, he says (BC 220). Angel has skipped over the coupling-bodies part of the transaction and provided the paying public with “the neuroelectronics to enable them to have it both ways” (BC 220).

AIs abound in cyberpunk, but are generally represented as powerful, subtle and frequently threatening entities rather than as helpless, dependent

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14 The Macintosh chime is an example of a bootstrap greeting.
individuals. Dorsey’s version is in marked contrast to the AIs Neuromancer and Wintermute in *Neuromancer*, and the voodoo entities in *Count Zero*, which are close to godlike in their knowledge and power. In addition, Angel refers to her AI as “it”, where *Neuromancer*’s AIs usually take the masculine pronoun.

She is also aware of and frightened by the possibility that the military are taking an interest in her development:

She began to be afraid. The system cleanser she’d taken [a drug to remove the effects of the other drugs she has recently taken] made the clarity inescapable. Over the next few months, as she kept adding clever loops and twists, she watched [Whitman’s and Kozyk’s] glee and she looked at what telephone numbers were in the top ten on their modem memories and she began to realize that it was not only business and science that would pay high for a truly thinking machine.

She knew that ten years before there had been Pentagon programmers working to model predatory behaviour in AIs using Prolog and its like. That was old hat. None of them, however, knew what they needed to know to write for her bioware yet. No one but Angel could do that. So, by the end of her nineteenth year, that made Angel one of the most sought-after, endangered ex-anorectics on the block. (MS 86-87)

This passage recalls the threatening presence of the military in “Burning Chrome” where Bobby sees, high above in cyberspace, “the cold spiral arms of military systems” (BC 197). But where Bobby, and *Neuromancer*’s Case take it for granted that the military is a pervasive presence which they would quite like to hack if there was money in it, Angel shrinks from the idea and despises Whitman and Kozyk for making possible the use of her inventions for the kinds of military purposes to which Haraway has referred. Ineffectually she speaks at conferences against the misuse of AI, but is too cynical to take ethics seriously—in which respect she is all too typical of the cyberpunk hero. She is just twenty, after all, and much more concerned with figuring out sex. Bobby, Jack and Case treat sex as rest and recreation at best, and as a combination of good luck charm and top gun trophy at worst, with little sense of the human personality in the objects of their desires.

**Bioware For Sale**

At the opening of the narrative, the distinction between Angel’s naked body and the innovative lapboard she is working on is blurred as Whitman, her sex partner if not her lover, contemplates her at work and is stirred more by the lapboard than by her body. Angel experiences his gaze as desire for the new toy. Curious about Angel’s lapboard, he says, “I’ve got the option on your bioware”; (MS 77) the cyberpunk-aware reader might assume he is
using the neologism “bioware” as slang for her body, analogous to Rudy Rucker’s “wetware”, but in fact he is referring to the software she is developing on the lapboard and reminding her of his proprietorial interests. Later, Angel herself conflates her body with her “bioware” and also refers to herself as “liveware”:

“one evening ... he tells me that he has sold me to another company. And this only after he fucks me one last time. Even though I don’t belong to him any more. After all, he had the option on all my bioware. …

“Was it politics made Max able to sell me with the stock: hardware, software, liveware?” (MS 93)

Again the machine and the body are confused. When Angel refuses to tell him what she is doing and informs him he has to “pay as you go”, she is clearly implying a prostitution arrangement. The software is for sale, as her body might be for sale. He takes out his jealous rage on her body by hitting her and throwing her around, almost as if she, as protective mother, is standing between him and the object of his desire, her “child”. Only when she threatens that he will never see what she is developing does he retreat. The boundaries between Angel as sexed body and Angel’s technological products continue to be blurred as the structure of the story flips back and forth through time, delivered in a curiously chatty, confidential manner by the narrator/author:

It would be easier if this were a story about sex, or about machines. It is true that the subject is Angel, a woman who builds computers like they have never been built before outside the human skull. Angel, like everyone else, comes from somewhere and goes somewhere else. She lives in that linear and binary universe. However, like everyone else, she lives concurrently in another universe less simple. Trivalent, quadrivalent, multivalent. World without end, with no amen. And so, on. (MS 78)

It is in this consciously postmodern, parodic vein that the narrator/author foregrounds her inability to distinguish whether she is writing about sex or machines; she also acknowledges that this is a story, an artifact she has herself made.

In a flashback, the narrative recounts that Angel was a child prodigy who grew up in the mountainous backwoods of rural Canada, ran away to Toronto at fourteen to become a genius programmer/developer for Northern Systems and Max Whitman’s “squeeze”. Names in this narrative serve, as in Scott’s texts, as evocative signals: Max is also an abbreviation for maximum and has a mechanistic ring to it; Whitman could stand for White Man, the culturally dominant subject in the Western world; coupled with Max, an
image of technological dominance is invoked. Whitman is referred to as “Northern’s boy-wonder president”, suggesting a Bill Gates model, with all the precocious quest for power and industry dominance that image calls forth. He is poisonously envious of Angel’s talent, and uses her as a commodity and means of exchange with other men: he has sold Northern Systems, including Angel, its R&D star, to Ted Kozyk’s MannComp, subsidiary of a communications empire called Bronfmann. Bronfmann’s products, now including those developed by Angel, invariably include “mann” as prefix, as in Mannboard and MannComp. The suggestion of strong masculine relation to computer technology and its producers is self-evident, further underlining Angel’s defiant violation of the laws of “men’s business”. In a similar vein to the central relationship of “Burning Chrome”, that of Bobby and Jack, Whitman and Kozyk share a cosy male camaraderie illustrated by their smutty discussion over the advertising campaign they are planning to promote Angel’s program:

In Kozyk’s office, he and Max go over the ad campaign. They’ve already tested the program themselves quite a lot ... The two men are so absorbed that they don’t notice [Angel’s] arrival.

’Why is a woman better than a sheep? Because sheep can’t cook. Why is a woman better than a Mannboard? Because you haven’t bought your sensory add-on.’ Max laughs. (MS 97)

Computers, software, marketing—all belong to the masculine sphere as far as Max and Kozyk are concerned, while their treatment of Angel, the source of their wealth and power, ranges from violently contemptuous to patronising. Angel not only sees herself as fused in some way with the technology she invents and works with, but acknowledges also a kind of emotional equivalence with it, realised through sexual connection:

“All I was was a program, they plugged into me and went through the motions and got their result. Nobody cares if the AI finds fulfilment running their damned data analyses. Nobody thinks about depressed and angry Mannboard ROMs. They just think about getting theirs.” (MS 96)

In her study of technology vis-à-vis feminism, Judy Wajcman points out that “hegemonic masculinity”, or dominant ideological masculinity as a cultural ideal, is strongly associated with technology for a number of complex reasons. She suggests that:

men identify with technology and through their identification with technology men form bonds with one another. ... Being in an intimate relationship with the computer
is also a substitute for, and refuge from, the much more uncertain and complex relationships that characterize social life.”

In fictional form, Bobby, Jack, Max and Kozyk all illustrate this propensity. On the other hand Angel, deeply involved in the male hacker culture by virtue of her talent, hopes for human connection despite technology’s apparently easier solutions. In a Harawayan impulse, she identifies with cyborg consciousness, part human, part machine, demanding that neither be abused by masculinist interests.

Down on the Farm

Another ironic and divergent aspect of the story is its locale. Canada may be seen as a metaphor for Angel’s gender-transgressive technological expertise: typical cyberpunk fiction is firmly set in a dystopian urban USA with excursions to other, more exotic metropolitan slums, principally those of Japan. A cyberpunk inventing wondrous technology could not be expected to be backwoods Canadian, let alone to live and operate in Canada, any more than a woman could be expected to be a real cyberpunk, which is typically a male role. This is specifically alluded to in the text:

Rocky Mountain House: a comfortable model of a small town, from which no self-respecting hacker should originate. ... Luckily for Angel’s secret past, however, this was not a place she would be expected to live – or go to – or to come from. (MS 89)

Gibson, whose cyberpunk narratives are firmly set in the “Sprawl” of the Boston–Atlanta axis or the urban densities of Tokyo, mentions other countries and cities in his narratives not so much as credible representations of real places, but more to convey a sense of the global, the exotic and the extremely remote, as well as an indication of futuristic estrangement (for example, Bobby’s and Jack’s deals operate through Mombasa, an Algerian comsat, and Macao [BC 208, 214]). In this respect, Dorsey is writing from an antipodal perspective, conscious of inappropriateness and otherness, and subverting a cultural dominant of cyberpunk.

For cyberpunk, the important thing about its setting is urban decay, whatever country it is set in. The ruin of the natural world is a prominent motif of SF generally, but one which is developed idiosyncratically in cyberpunk. What is notable about the cyberpunk version is a cynical acceptance of the ravaged state of the natural world, an indifference, a

recognition that like the “meat” with which it is subliminally identified, nature is both irrelevant and superseded. Scott, Mixon and Gibson set their narratives in a world at least partially if not completely spoiled and corrupted by chemical and/or radioactive pollutants, and all share a sense of acceptance, of the inevitability of this despoliation. There is even a sense of dark glamour about the invasion of the artificial, which adulterates the natural and ruins it but makes it more hip. William Gibson is particularly good at this effect:

Now [Case] slept in the cheapest coffins, the ones nearest the port, beneath the quartz-halogen floods that lit the docks all night like vast stages; where you couldn’t see the lights of Tokyo for the glare of the television sky, not even the towering hologram logo of the Fuji Electric Company, and Tokyo Bay was a black expanse where gulls wheeled above drifting shoals of white styrofoam. Behind the port lay the city, factory domes dominated by the vast cubes of corporate arcologies. Port and city were divided by a narrow borderland of older streets, an area with no official name. Night City, with Ninsei its heart. By day, the bars down Ninsei were shuttered and featureless, the neon dead, the holograms inert, waiting, under the poisoned silver sky.16

Not only is “(Learning About) Machine Sex” set quite radically apart from the urban ugliness and artificial environments of typical cyberpunk: in addition, a large and important part of the narrative is set in rural Canada on a farm. Angel decides to leave town after Whitman has roughed her up, and secretly returns to her family ranch, now let to strangers, near the little town of Rocky Mountain House. There she completes her software masterpiece, working title: Machine Sex.

One night as she is working in the homestead, an electrical storm blows up, forcing her to stop rather than risk a power surge or blackout (something that never happens to console cowboys who are immune to weather, nature etc.). She gazes out into the rain-swept dark:

A young man was leaning his weight against the reins-length pull of a rearing, terrified horse. Angel watched as flashes of lightning strobed the hackneyed scene. (MS 90)

Conspicuous by its absence in all but the most degraded form in classic cyberpunk, untrammelled nature here is represented as “hackneyed” by its sheer ordinariness; where the corruption of the natural world by the “dance of biz” is made both glamorous and inevitable in Gibson, here the natural world remains undebauched (if corny), and provides the setting for a crucial

encounter between Angel, her conscience and a different kind of masculinity.

The young man, the son of the holidaying tenants, has stayed behind to look after the family’s rodeo horses. Ironically, Dorsey has provided the narrative with a cowboy—this time a genuine one. On impulse, Angel invites him in out of the rain, and they proceed to get drunk together. In a moment of played-down humour, he invites her to look at—not his etchings, but—his computer, the new, exciting, seductive geegaw of the cybergeneration, but no seduction scene ensues. Instead, truly the geek, she shows him her computer, and the new program she has designed—Machine Sex. Initially he is fascinated and sucked in; then he is repelled and tells her she “‘can’t market that thing!’” because “‘It’s not real’”, and that “‘people don’t need that kind of stuff to get turned on’” (MS 91–92). Amazed at his naïveté, Angel tells him about her experience of “people”: about her betrayal by Whitman, about the men who have bought and sold her:

‘One night,’ she said, ‘just to see, I told all the johns I was fourteen. I was skinny enough, even then, to get away with it. And they loved it. Every single one gave me a bonus, and took me anyway.’ ...

‘Furthermore,’ she said, ‘I rolled every one of them that I could, and all but one had pictures of his kids in his wallet, and all of them were teenagers. Boys and girls together. And their saintly dads out fucking someone who looked just like them. Just like them.’ (MS 92)

Against Angel’s recital of abuse, the young rancher (who, incidentally, is never named, and therefore can be read as a kind of disinterested, even universal voice rather than a specific individual), objects that not all people are like that, love does exist in the world, and that people deserve love. In a long, eloquent and earnest dialogue lightened with the comedy of the prodigious amounts of alcohol they are getting through, Angel finally tells the rancher he too must arrive at disillusion eventually, and predicts a depressing future for him of failed marriage and infidelity with “‘some square-dancing chick who gives you head out behind the bleachers one night in Trochu, so sweet you think your heart will break. What you gonna do then, mountain man?’” (MS 95). The rancher maintains his opposition, and then says that her scenario would not work anyway since he is gay.

There is remarkable shock value in this scene on a number of counts. First, there is the contra-cyberpunk setting of wild, natural countryside; then there is the idealised masculinity of the strong, lone (real) cowboy, hard-drinking and swearing, pitted against stallion and storm; there is the Symposium-like discussion about the nature of love combined with the
comedy of inebriation; there is the tough, streetwise cyberpunk woman with the cutting edge tech arguing ethics with the romantic cowboy whose computer is obsolete; and finally there is the revelation of the cowboy’s homosexuality. Many of the customary motifs of cyberpunk, especially that of conventional male heterosexuality, are thrown open to question, initially as the rancher is arguing for the value and ubiquity of love (as opposed to sex) against Angel’s cyberpunk cynicism, and then more radically as he announces he is gay.

In the end, their argument remains unresolved and Angel fulfils her revenge: Whitman and Kozyk fall for Angel’s ruse of pleasure, debase themselves by embracing an impersonal, self-obsessed machinic eros and prepare to foist it onto the predicted techno-libidinous millions, while Angel does a bunk to escape the predatory intentions of the military.

If literary parody is a composition imitating the style of a writer, and satire is a literary work in which vices or follies are held up to ridicule and contempt,17 “(Learning About) Machine Sex” as a satiric parody of cyberpunk has elements of both while being a challenging and original story in its own right. In its choice of subject matter it is deeply engaged in some of the concerns preoccupying cyberpunk fiction, namely, the impact of computers on human beings and the interface between computers and human beings, specifically and overtly addressing the issue of techn eroticism; it depicts a central character as anti-hero, an embittered but immensely talented misfit who attempts to use computer expertise to beat corporate greed and find happiness; a world of users, abusers, conscienceless takers who sell to the highest (probably military) bidder; and finally, a world in which the only freedom is dropping out via drugs or exile. In all these respects, Dorsey’s fable is pure cyberpunk. Where “Burning Chrome” is a story of two tech-savvy men who, through their technological expertise, use and rob women in a high-tech dystopian world and end without hope, “(Learning About) Machine Sex” is about a tech-savvy woman who, used by such men, gets revenge through her own technological expertise, but also, in a simpler world of rural wildness, encounters a gentle, sexually transgressive man who freely offers her an ideal of love and hope.

On one level, the narrative advocates a return to “natural values”, val orising the “natural” over the technological, physical sexual connection over technosex, rural over urban, pessimistically convinced that all technology,

even that designed by women, will eventually be appropriated by military interests and used for the destruction of the "natural" world. This resonates with Haraway's "final abstraction embodied in the name of defense, [which is] about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war". Whitman has indeed appropriated Angel's body, and her talent, and has every intention of selling both to the military. On another level, however, Angel's gender, her talent at beating the boys at their own game, and her determination to discover bodily pleasure for herself make her a subversive figure in the cyberpunk context. Although she is not a cyborg in the sense of being cybernetically augmented, she fits the Harawayan model of transgressing boundaries and seeking affinal connection.

Digital Desires

Just as Gibson's "Burning Chrome" anticipated Neuromancer in several ways, as I have suggested, so Pat Cadigan's story, "Pretty Boy Crossover", anticipates her novel Synners (1991), specifically regarding the idea of the individual becoming "self-aware data", acronym SAD (PBC 201). My purpose here is to explore how the Pretty Boys of the title interpret their existence, one as still embodied, the other as a digitised construct, and how they understand and negotiate desire.

The whole underlying rationale of this story subverts masculinist forms of cyborg-SF. As a male subject, the unnamed central character, simply referred to as a Pretty Boy, contravenes the norm in that his purpose in life is to be the object of the gaze, especially the male gaze. Pretty Boys are just that: exceptionally beautiful teenaged males who live to boogie, who spend all their time conscious of their looks, of being looked at, of being admired and sought after. Their natural habitat is dance clubs where they preen and posture, and hope to be chosen by entertainment industry interests for the crossover to the "Pretty Boy Heaven" of digital immortality (PBC 193). They fear above all the loss of their looks, and the loss of "the look", of no longer being watched or the object of others' desire and interest. In other words, Pretty Boys see themselves and behave in ways that traditionally pertain to discursive constructions of the feminine.

The Pretty Boy hero (to whom I shall refer as "the Boy") is at the cusp of

18 Haraway, 1990, p.196.
his popularity; still called out of queues of waiting hopefuls to enter the hippest nightclubs, still being courted by "them", the MTV entertainment talent scouts who want to turn him into video. But he is different from all the other Pretty Boys in that he thinks about things other than image and rock music:

this Pretty Boy has learned to think between the beats. Like walking between the raindrops to stay dry, but he can do it. This Pretty Boy thinks things all the time — all the time. Subversive (and he thinks so much that he knows that word _subversive_, sixteen, Pretty, or not). (PBC 191-2)

The Boy is in love with Bobby, formerly a "live" Pretty Boy, who has "gone over" to being "sentient information" (PBC 198). The narrative suggests that Bobby and the Boy were lovers before Bobby "went over", and the Boy has come to the nightclub to see the new digitised version of his lover on a sixteen-foot video screen; to see if "they" (the talent scouts) still want him; and to see if he can resist the temptation of "going over" himself one more time.

A moment later, there's Bobby's face on the screen, sixteen feet high, even Prettier than he'd been when he was loose among the mortals. The sight of Bobby's Pretty-Pretty face fills him with anger and dismay and a feeling of loss so great he would strike anyone who spoke Bobby's name without his permission.

Bobby's lovely slate-grey eyes scan the room. They've told him senses are heightened after you make the change and go over ... [Bobby seems to "see" the Boy.]

'You don't have to die any more,' Bobby says silkily. Music bounces under his words. 'It's beautiful in here. The dreams can be as real as you want them to be. And if you want to be, you can be with me.' (PBC 194-5)

Bobby's appearance has been tampered with to make him prettier, more appropriate to the perfect Pretty Boy image. His hair is "the perfect shade now and not a bit dry from the dyes and lighteners, skin flawless and shining like a healthy angel" (PBC 201). But the effect on the Boy, rather than increased admiration, is anger, dismay and a feeling of loss. The Boy has been told that the video image is also enhanced, paradoxically, in terms of its "senses". Later, when the talent scouts are trying to persuade him to agree to his own digitisation, and Bobby is "piped" into the interview room, the Boy is told that "sensors in the equipment" allow Bobby to see and hear him, but the veracity of this is left uncertain. The Boy is deeply suspicious as to the nature of Bobby's continued existence, asking him if he really likes being "a blip on a chip"(PBC 201). Bobby responds in a manner reminiscent of the united Wintermute-Neuromancer:

'Blip on a chip, your ass. I'm a universe now, I'm, like, _everything_. And, hey, dig—
I’m on every channel.’ Bobby laughs. (PBC 201)

The talent scouts tell the Boy that the process is irreversible: once he is digitised, he “can’t be reconstituted in a less efficient form”, and that “There may be no more exalted a form of existence than to live as sentient information” (PBC 198). The Boy is not convinced. He tells Bobby he (Bobby) never knew the difference between being loved and being watched anyway, but Bobby says there is no difference on his side of the reality continuum:

‘If you love me, you watch me. If you don’t look, you don’t care and if you don’t care, I don’t matter. If I don’t matter, I don’t exist. Right?’ (PBC 202)

Veronica Hollinger describes this as “‘the economy of the gaze’, which guarantees the authenticity of the self in this [fictional] world”. Bobby, who the Boy believes would have killed himself had he not been chosen to “go over”, is convinced that the watched image is reality, so being a video image is exactly equivalent to being an embodied image. The Boy, however, is not so sure. He asks why the talent team hasn’t “gone over” if digital existence is so exalted, and suggests that Bobby is not really Bobby any more since they are “educating him, adding more data to his basic information configuration” (PBC 199). They tell him they hope that Bobby will “break out of the three-dimensional level of existence, pioneer a whole new plane of reality”, for the sake of entertainment. The Boy laughs: “‘That’s a good one. Yeah. Entertainment. You get to a higher level of existence and you’ll open a club there that only the hippest can get into. It figures.’” (PBC 200). The story concludes with the Boy going home at 3am, feeling the cold and the palms of his hands rubbing together, knowing that even if he still “loves what Bobby loved – the clubs, the admiration, the lust of strangers for his personal magic”, and even if he is not sure if he loves it “more than he ever loved Bobby, or if he loves it more than being alive. Than being live” (PBC 203–4), still he knows he matters more “live” to the talent team he has spurned:

He smiles suddenly. … As long as they don’t have him, he makes a difference. As long as he has flesh to shake and flaunt and feel with, he makes a pretty goddam big difference to them. (PBC 204)

With this conclusion, the narrative ultimately valorises embodiment despite its being subject to all the pains of mortality, not to mention ontological uncertainty. The blandishments and temptations offered by the

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20 Hollinger, 1991, p.211.
clearly unpleasant, Mephistophelian talent team can be seen for what they are: an invitation into the gilded cage more usually occupied by female subjects, with the added disadvantage of being completely at the mercy of ruthless commercial/scientific manipulation. Like the Dixie Flatline in his first appearance in *Neuromancer*, the crossed-over Pretty Boys risk being abandoned in some corporate vault. Bobby, despite his denials, is indeed nothing but a Baudrillardian blip on a chip, pure information with no control over or say in its use or disposal. The role of desire in Bobby’s virtual world is confined to a reflexive, self-regarding superficiality, a purely digital narcissism. On the other hand, although the “live” Boy still feels love, desire, pain and loss, he also has agency and the possibility of determining his life, delimited though his life may be.

What Cadigan has done with her story, in effect, is to portray a kind of gender reversal, implicating her rock video equivalent of cyberspace with discursive femininity. Bobby, who has taken on all the vanities and superficialities which masculinist ideology attributes to femininity, inhabits a space which, despite its high-tech derivation, is as much of a feminine space as a boudoir. The talent scouts tell the Boy that Bobby’s digitised existence is like heaven, and that he (the Boy) could not possibly want anything less perfect, nor want for anything more—a ruse employed by flesh life advertisers of so-called women’s products (washing machines, cosmetics etc) for decades. The text thus subtly critiques the artificiality of “feminine” existence with its emphasis on superficial values. At the same time, it complicates gender representations by having male characters involved in or attracted to these values. On the other hand, the text also represents Bobby as the equivalent of a meat puppet which, in Gibson’s form of cyberpunk, is definitively feminine and is not permitted into cyberspace. “Pretty Boy Crossover” thus supports the argument that cyberspace is far from neutral in terms of the ways gender is portrayed in and around it, and remains a contested space.

### Playing Cybercharades

Maureen McHugh’s neat, clever day-after-tomorrow story,21 “A Coney Island of the Mind”, takes place on one level in the mundane world of a Cincinnati games arcade, and in an exotic, virtually realised world of simulation and make-believe on another.22 The hero, a young boy just turned

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22 Maureen F. McHugh, “A Coney Island of the Mind”, in *Isaac Asimov’s Cyberdreams*, ed. G.
eighteen, spends his leisure time at an entertainment arcade called the Reality Parlor, hanging out in virtual spaces also visited by his friends—whom he refers to as his dogpack—and countless other anonymous people. Virtual reality (VR) in the Reality Parlor is somewhat like today’s MOOs, but here the technology has advanced sufficiently to allow detailed visual image representation and apparent mobility. He goes by his cyberspace nickname, or handle, “Cobalt”, and has designed his handle’s image, by which he presents himself in virtual reality, with great attention to detail:

as he comes out of the [virtual] elevator he looks to the right, to the mirrors, and sees himself, sees Cobalt, sees a Tom Sawyer in the twenty-first century, a flagboy in a bluesilk jacket and thigh high boots with a knotwork of burgundy cords at the hips. All angles in the face, smooth face like a razor, a face he had custom configured in hours of bought-time at the reality parlor, not playing the reality streets, not even looking, just working on his own look. Cobalt eyes like lasers, and blue-steel braids for hair.

Edgelook, whatta-look, hot damn. (CIM 84–85)

Like the Pretty Boys, he regards his image as of particular importance: he is hip, a “democratic dog”: it is simply not cool to be seen at “the party”—the main VR meeting place—in a ready-to-wear handle:

anyway, this afternoon the partyroom is full of off-the-racks, look-like-your-favorite-movie-star or take-a-basic-template-what-color-are-your-eyes-your-hair-look-like-a-mannequin which he can’t abide because he’s looking for people with style (CIM 85)

In real life, Cobalt is standing in grass-stained sneakers in Cincinnati on a treadmill, wearing waldos on his hands and a “heavy eyeless, earless helmet that smells intimately of someone else’s hair” (CIM 84), with one hand on suspended handlebars to control his virtual direction. But in VR he goes to Coney Island, where he meets a beautiful woman:

She leans next to him with a star hanging off her ear, one lone star in the smoke nebula of her hair, no off-the-rack handle but a costume full of style, like himself, like the dogpack, this woman has taken some time. “Hey blueboy,” she says.

“Hey yourself,” he says and imagines she smells like perfume, smells like ash. She has full breasts and brown skin in the yellow light. She has yellow snake eyes, not like dice, like rattlesnakes, and hair that doesn’t act like real hair at all but fills some

Dozois and S. Williams, Ace, New York, 1994. References hereafter will be incorporated into the text using the abbreviation CIM.

23 MOO stands for MUD-object-oriented; MUD stands for multi-user domain; both are text-based, socially interactive Net sites accessed via computer communications technology.

24 Compare Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1993), where the “Metaverse” (Stephenson’s name for cyberspace) is crowded with off-the-shelf “Brandy” and “Clint” avatars.
indefinite space, swallows light, absorbs light, no reflections. Soft looking, Nice touch, that. She’s a chimera, she’s not content to take a strictly human template, she’s diddled the programming.

He’s a lucky dog. (CIM 87)

They walk together hand in hand along the virtual beach. Cobalt is very excited by this glamorous creature he has met, who tells him her name is Lamia. This name fails to serve as a warning to Cobalt: he does not know that the lamia, in Greek myth, is a female monster which has a snake’s body and a woman’s head and breasts, and was reckoned by ancient Greeks to allure youths and children in order to suck their blood. Through the waldo on his hand he can feel the pressure of her hand:

His heart is pounding. She stops and they are facing each other, holding hands. If they kissed, there would be nothing but air. Strange to feel her through his palm and fingers, thewaldos giving him all the feelings of her hand, of the weight of her body behind the hand, and knowing that he could pass his arm through her. She is nothing but light ....

And her hand. All the bones and tendons and ligaments, the elastic play of her muscle. He finds her fingers, presses them one-by-one. She is watching him with slit pupilled snake eyes gone from amber to green, although he can’t remember when that happened. The ocean roars behind them. (CIM 88–89)

Cobalt is aware that she could be anyone behind the mask of her “handle”, and speculates that she might be old, or ugly, or rich, or married—even “wired for touch” with a whole-body “hotsuit”: “Wild thought that this beautiful girl can be anything” (CIM 88). What Cobalt doesn’t realise, however, is that Lamia is “wired” in a way he wasn’t expecting:

“Squeeze [my hand],” she says again.
Confused, he does, and feels her squeezing rhythmically back, pulsing little squeezes, and he realizes in horror just—

(Shes hotwired her hand.)
—as she comes. Eyes shut, her smoky hair rising in horns, she gasps a little. He jerks his hand away, but she is standing there oblivious, and it’s too late anyway.

(You take a hotsuit and rewire the crotch so the system thinks it’s a hand, then anytime someone touches your hand . . .)

Cobalt is furious and starts to go, taunted by Lamia. But worse is to come from Cobalt’s point of view:

“Prissy little virgin,” she says, and laughs behind him ... “Huff on out of here,” she says. “Righteous little bitch. Are you a girl?”

“What!?” he says
Which makes her laugh. “Well, I guess not, sweetcakes, but for a moment I sure thought you were.”
Sexing the Cyborg”: Chapter Five

Sweetcakes. (Somewhere in Cincinnati his cheeks are burning.)

“I’m glad,” she says, “because I’m not into girls. I just like wearing girl bodies because I like you righteous boys, you sweet straight boys.” (CIM 89-90)

All that is left for Cobalt is to retreat with as much dignity as he can muster and as luck would have it, he now runs into Quixote, one of his friends:

“Where you been,” Quixote says, “you’re looking democratic.”

Shrugs. What’s he going to say, I met this girl—I met this girl and her hand . . . he starts to smile, what a dog story, Quixote is going to be green. ... He doesn’t have to tell everything. (CIM 90)

Like Cerise in Trouble and her Friends, Cobalt has been had in the electronic masquerade of cyberspace. But Cobalt’s sense of himself as a cool dude—a democratic dog—prevents him from admitting to what has happened, let alone exploring it further. Lamia, a man in cyberdrag, openly announces himself once he has seduced Cobalt, but Cobalt has only Lamia’s word that he is not the beautiful, exotic female he appears to be. Lamia, meanwhile, has only Cobalt’s cool Blueboy image to judge him, and feels the need to check with Cobalt to ensure that his own (Lamia’s) sexual preference has been met. Each wants a kind of warranty on the other’s embodiment in order to satisfy his requirements. Stone expresses this negotiation to identify the “socially apprehensible citizen” as it occurs in flesh life:

The socially apprehensible citizen ... consists of a collection of both physical and discursive elements. Although the physical elements possess a special and bounded order of reality on account of their particular relationship to the social disciplines of pain and pleasure, the remainder of the citizen—by far the greater part, the part which is also concerned with the production of meaning of the physical part—is discursive. By means of warranting, this discursive entity is tied to an association with a particular physical body, and the two together, the physical and the discursive, constitute the socially apprehensible citizen.25

In other words, as far as this text is concerned, although each character has a very specific idea of what is the proper kind of body image for his own pleasure requirements, the virtual body selected in cyberspace has to be authorised, warranted, to use Stone’s term, by belonging to an embodied subject whose real body tallies with its virtual representation. In her essay on female-to-male transsexuality, Judith Halberstam writes:

Desire has a terrifying precision. Pleasure might be sex with a woman who looks like a boy; pleasure might be a woman going in disguise as a man to a gay bar in

order to pick up a gay man. Pleasure might be two naked women; pleasure might be masturbation watched by a stranger; pleasure might be a man and a woman; but pleasure seems to be precise.…

Wanting a man with a vagina or wanting to be a woman transformed into a man having sex with other men are fairly precise and readable desires—precise and yet not at all represented by the categories for sexual identity we have settled for.²⁶

For Lamia, a real boy dressed as a boy is the object of his desire. For Cobalt, the specificity of his desire requires him to choose a woman, although he does not object to a slightly snaky woman. Lamia is satisfied that the Blueboy is in fact a boy, and Cobalt makes what he sees as the best of the situation by boasting to his friend that he has had cybersex with a gorgeous woman.

**Doing Cybersex**

In all these stories, sex, desire and performance are central issues, while gender is problematic at least in terms of conventional cyborg-SF narratives. Gibson’s “Burning Chrome” traverses familiar ground of macho heterosexual men and plaything women. The Gibsonian model reinforces desire as “compulsory heterosexuality”²⁷ in which male and female characters largely unproblematically rehearse flesh-life behaviours of phallocentric dominance and feminine subservience, and techneroeroticism is a masculine privilege. Cadigan explores desire as a question of image and narcissism. Her story centres on ideas of eternal desirability without physicality, immortality without sensuality, and the concomitant idea of doomed, transient but defiant embodiment. In “(Learning About) Machine Sex”, Dorsey offers a subversive story of a female character who breaks the mold as a fully-fledged cyberpunk hacker, revenges herself on a brutalising masculinist regime through its obsession with narcissistic sex, and discovers an unconventional masculinity characterised by idealism. McHugh utilises the masquerades found on the Net today as her model and takes them one step further, showing how virtual reality technologies might well be used to mediate varieties of transgressive sexual behaviours. In the process, she provokes a discussion of desire and calls into question the ways in which it manifests itself in the technosphere. Cadigan’s and McHugh’s stories each explore desire and narcissism in the technofuture in multiple ways, suggesting again that cyborg-SF offers a wide and contested arena for sexual desire.

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and gender representations.
Artificial Gender and Posthuman Intelligence

In my critique so far, I have focused on three of William Gibson’s defining cyberpunk narratives of the 1980s: Neuromancer, “Johnny Mnemonic” and “Burning Chrome”. I contrasted these with several other texts that challenge and disrupt, to a greater or lesser extent, the masculinist conventions found in his work. Having discussed Neuromancer’s artificial intelligences (AIs), Wintermute and Neuromancer, as masculine technological entities in chapter three, in this chapter I want to examine other fictional AIs—the “postclassical cyborg”, that is, the software interfaced, transorganic, database cyborg or personality construct as defined by Tomas—as gendered beings which reflect the predominant construction in cyborg-SF of technology as masculine. To this end, I will discuss representations of AI in another Melissa Scott novel, Dreamships (1993); in the most recent Gibson novel, Idoru (1996) (pronounced Eye-doroo); and in Synners, by Pat Cadigan (1991).¹ In order to pursue answers to questions I asked earlier, namely, why AIs are almost always gendered male, why technology per se is figured predominantly as a masculine domain, and whether it is possible to write feminist cyborg-SF, I want to look specifically at the way these texts represent gender in their portrayal of AI. Scott’s novel in particular offers insights into all three of these questions, while Idoru portrays one of the few feminine AIs in cyborg-SF, and Synners, despite being robustly feminist in many respects, falls short of imagining a non-masculine AI.

In relation to the contested boundaries between human and machine that is the essence of AI, Brian McHale asks:

Who (or what) is human? At what point does a machine cease being a “mere” machine and begin to count as a human being?

The same question is also raised, but in inverted form, by the cyberpunk motif of prosthesis: at what point does a human being cease to be a human being and begin to count as a machine?²

Melissa Scott’s Dreamships is pertinent to these questions not only because of its exploration of AI, and its ultimately ambiguous judgment on what constitutes “human”, but also because of its central character, a cyborg called Reverdy Jian. In brief, Dreamships recounts the adventures of Jian, who is a

¹ I will be looking at other aspects of Idoru and Synners in the next chapter.
starship pilot. She and her crew, Imre and Red, are hired to ferry a wealthy client, Meredalia Mitexi, in her own starship from their home planet of Persephone to a neighbouring planet to find and bring back her exiled, insane brother Venya. The starship, named Young Lord Byron, is flown with the aid of a “Spelvin construct” called Manfred. Spelvin constructs are extremely advanced machine intelligences linked into systems running starships or arcologies. Manfred was designed by Venya, who is a “constructor”, or designer of constructs; Venya’s intention was that Manfred be recognised as truly intelligent, and therefore equivalent to a human being. On the trip back, Venya kills himself and attempts to destroy the construct, because he believes his sister will sell it to a multinational, Kagami, which will reprogram (destroy) Manfred’s “personality”. Jian and her crew return to dangerous civil unrest as Persephone’s poorest social class, the disenfranchised coolies, are up in arms against Dreampeace. This is a middle-class movement supporting human rights for AI. Jian copies Manfred’s code onto storage blocks and smuggles them into an apartment belonging to her former lover Chaandi, but the construct arranges for the blocks to be stolen by Dreampeace operatives. Jian is convinced Manfred is “people”, that is, has true human-equivalent intelligence, until she finds out that Manfred has agreed to her death: Manfred has a software simulation of her personality which it takes to be identical to her. The story concludes when Manfred uses Jian’s cyborgised body as a conduit into the planetary computer network where the construct is destroyed by a virus. Jian survives after extensive surgery, leaving her even more of a cyborg than before.

**Cyborg Dreaming, Covert Feminism**

Scott’s *Dreamships* was published eight years after Gibson published *Neuromancer*. Although in some respects it is a typical far future, intergalactic adventure in a traditional SF vein, many years of cyberpunk fiction preceding it allow it to draw on a number of cyberpunk’s characteristic ideas and images, frequently to subvert them. *Dreamships* departs from the Gibson form of cyberpunk on a number of counts. Foremost among these is the central character, Reverdy Jian, freelance starship pilot. Jian is a totally “wired” woman whose body is suffused with technical intrusions, and a member of an elite, ultra-technological profession:

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3 In discussing Manfred, I refer to the construct as “it” in order to draw attention to conflicts within the text itself regarding the gender of AI.
Jian wound her fingers together to make the wires stand out. The shadowy lines darkened, became distinct beneath her skin, woven into the nerves of her hands. Those molecular wires covered her body, made up her skinsuit, the skinsuit that allowed her to interact with the overseer programs and constructs and control a starship in the chaos of hyperspace.⁴

Jian presents a challenge to the conventional SF representation of a female character, not to mention masculinist cyborg-SF. Conventionally, females in SF are observers, victims or monsters. Taking Gibson’s female characters in Neuromancer, “Johnny Mnemonic” and “Burning Chrome” as typical of cyberpunk, technological alterations to women are either traditionally feminine, such as Molly’s claw fingernails; or a limited, inferior version of the hero’s technology, such as simstim; or the meat puppet implants which allow Molly and Rikki a diminished experience of cyberspace. Along with possessing inferior tech, female characters also tend to be passive bystanders, victims, receptive/acquiescent witnesses to male technological exploits. The “terminally passive” Linda in Neuromancer exemplifies the acquiescent cyberpunk female who is excluded from masculine technological prowess.⁵ As I have discussed in previous chapters, despite her toughness, Molly is by no means an unproblematic feminist hero, positioned as she is by the texts in which she appears alternately as bystanding observer, victim and monster, strongly technologically differentiated from Case and his “unparalleled mastery”. By contrast, Jian is technologically expert and clearly the hero of Scott’s narrative, making Dreamships (in this respect at least) a feminist cyborg-SF novel. Dreamships falls into Joan Gordon’s “covert” feminist category. To use Gordon’s definition, Jian is “simply a human being in women’s clothing”, a woman in “the human army as an average soldier with no distinction in rank, privilege, or job position”.⁶ In other words, Jian is just a pilot like any other pilot (albeit an extremely good one). Indeed, Dreamships portrays several competent women who work alongside men in what a male supremacist world view would regard as men’s domains, using various forms of technology in their work and arousing no comment whatever. For example, the roles taken by females in this narrative include a senior starship pilot, a wealthy employer who is also a constructor, a senior customs officer and a film maker. Here it is not a

⁴ Melissa Scott, Dreamships, Tor, New York, 1993, p.5. References hereafter will be to this edition, and will be incorporated into the text using the abbreviation D.
question of women not being in the techie jobs; that is taken for granted. Gordon’s “overt” feminist view is not dominant here, it is “covert” feminist SF. Similarly, no comment is offered concerning sexual preferences. It is the citizen’s social status in Persephone society—wealth, family background and residential location—that governs personal liberty and opportunity, not gender or gender preference.

It is the class differential on Persephone which underlies the principle conflict in the narrative, in that the supporters of political rights for AIs are proposing that AIs be recognised as human in advance of a large segment of the human population. But the question raised by Dreamships which is of concern here is, if AIs are to be considered human in a world that has no overt gender discrimination, why are they gendered at all?

Hybrid Human, Hybrid Machine

Manfred is a hybrid of machine and cybernetic intelligence designed to operate as human intelligence—in Manfred’s case, the intelligence consists of a massive database combined with immensely complex and subtle cybernetic programs written to enable it to converse with and understand human beings: to detect the difference between real and rhetorical questions; to recognise and respond appropriately to irony, expletives and humour; to have a sensitive appreciation of human emotion. Manfred is a hybrid of mechanistic and non-mechanistic responses to stimuli, straddling the machine-human divide. Manfred is the Harawayan machine that is “disturbingly lively”.

Manfred is the “offspring” of Venya’s ambition, desire and know-how produced without the (apparent) intercession of woman, reminiscent of the great SF forebear, Frankenstein. Jian, too, appears to be a product of male culture: Jian has had a birth father and two stepfathers whose varying racial and social identities are the deciding factor for her life choices, while the identities of Jian’s mother and stepmothers are elided. Moreover, as her cyborg augmentations make her almost as much machine as human herself, she could be said to have sprung, Athena-like, from the head of “Technical Man”. Zoë Sofia’s “Jupiter Space” theory is apt here:

Jupiter Space imagery forms an important and widely available mythic complex within which computers, information and the notion of a technological ‘second self’ are central. Note how this complex does not omit female figures entirely: they may be

7 Haraway, 1990a, p.194.
present, not so much as women in their own right, but as Athena figures, products of masculinist technological projection. Any analyst of science fiction culture must be careful not to interpret every female figure in this otherwise male-dominated genre as a ‘real woman’ representing some kind of feminist triumph: she may simply be the brain-child of Jupiter Space.

To some extent, Jian is a product of Jupiter Space, but she also presents a model for a brave and competent woman in an SF adventure. Jian, after all, is not only playing in the boys’ technical playground with state-of-the-art boys’ toys: she also trespasses on their sexual territory as a bisexual, another transgressive position for a cyberpunk heroine. In short, Jian is wired, female, has sex with women, is the boss on the biggest toy in SF—the interstellar spaceship—and has charge over a crew of two men to boot. Like Manfred, Jian, too, is a hybrid, straddling a number of opposed categories in the world of *Dreamships*, whose social structure is as complex as Manfred’s programming. Like Manfred, she is an outsider, and her problematic status forms a parallel with that of Manfred, whose disputed equivalence to human intelligence is at the heart of the narrative. In the case of Jian, her crossing of class and race categories problematises her status, and questions the rigid class system that characterises Persephone; for Manfred, the question of whether it crosses the human/machine intelligence divide (referred to here, in classic SF style, as the Turing Barrier), problematises the issue of what is human, and calls into question the criteria for definition. If the only criterion required is a certain level of intelligence, where does that leave the body? Or an intellectually disabled human being? What constitutes intelligence anyway? The narrative leaves these issues unresolved.

**Byronic Links**

Manfred was specifically designed for *Young Lord Byron*, and the connections between the construct Manfred and the nineteenth-century romantic poet Byron’s dramatic verse narrative, *Manfred*, are illuminating. Written and published in 1817, Byron’s *Manfred* tells the tragic story of a Faustian nobleman-philosopher named Manfred. Manfred lives a solitary life in the Swiss Alps, tortured by remorse, guilty of some mysterious crime which makes him an outcast from society. He invokes a series of spirits and demons, makes a vain attempt to kill himself, summons up the Witch of the

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8 Sofia, 1993, p.87. See also pp.84–87.
Alps and visits the underworld and the spirits of evil, but refuses to submit to them. At his insistence they call up the shade of Astarte, the sister whom he loved, and whose death, caused (presumably) by their incestuous relationship, is at the root of his guilt. She tells him that he will die the next day, and thus be released from his torments, but refuses to admit that she loved him. When the evil spirits come to claim him, Manfred denies their right to do so and they disappear. Though he dies at the time Astarte foretold, he fulfils his resolution to remain master of his fate.

The first construct Venya Mitexi designed for which he claimed true intelligence was called Aster, a name with obvious links to Astarte. Aster was “rewritten” by Kagami, in Venya’s eyes an act of murder which led him to co-found Dreampeace. Byron’s story of Manfred is a story of illicit but unrequited love: there are strong parallels between Byron’s Manfred and Venya, who identifies with the construct Manfred (he “used his own self-image, unmodified, as template for the personality tables” [D 326]), and who commits suicide rather than have what he perceives as the forces of evil take him over. The theme of incest in the poem also has echoes and variations in Dreamships: the relationship between the Mitexi siblings is never made clear, but the text’s strong emphasis on unorthodox eroticism in their starship indicates that there may be another side to their relationship (D 106–07). And, as in the original poem, death takes both brother and sister in the end.

Manfred the construct appears first as a Pan or demon figure; it also represents itself as a Medusa-like head, a Hawk-spirit, and a sexless black and white mask compared in its beauty to the marble-like beauty of the homosexual Red (D 179). Manfred in Byron’s poem has constant dealings with demons and spirits, and at one point tells an invisible spirit to manifest himself:

*Manfred (to Spirits):* ... I would behold ye face to face. I hear
Your voices, sweet and melancholy sounds,
As music on the waters; and I see
The steady aspect of a clear large star;
But nothing more. Approach me as ye are,
Or one, or all, in your accustom’d forms.

*Spirit:* We have no forms, beyond the elements
Of which we are the mind and principle;
But choose a form—in that we will appear.

*Manfred:* I have no choice; there is no form on earth

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10 “Aster” is also the root of the word “disaster”, originally meaning seriously inauspicious astrological configurations, comparable to the word “ill-starred”. See *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, William Collins, Sydney, 1979.
Hideous or beautiful to me. Let him,  
Who is most powerful of ye, take such aspect  
As unto him may seem most fitting—Come!  

_Seventh Spirit_ (appearing in the shape of a beautiful female figure): Behold!  
(Ac I, Scene i, II.175–188)

At this point Manfred swoons, unable to contemplate a female-embodied spirit when he was (naturally) expecting a male embodiment; true to its namesake, the Manfred construct, the most powerful ever designed, has been programmed to embody naturalised masculinist values.

**Sexing the AI**

The reader’s first encounter with _Dreamships’_ Manfred is when Jian is awakened for her shift to pilot _Young Lord Byron_ into hyperspace:

> Jian woke, having dreamed of Chaandi, and hung for a moment halfway between sleep and waking, a voice that might have been a woman’s echoing in her ears.  

> “Bi' Mitexi?” she said aloud, knowing even as she spoke that that was less than likely … and a clear inhuman voice spoke from the outer room.  

> “No, Bi’ Jian. This is Manfred.” The voice was cultured, accentless, pitched on the cusp between man and woman, so that it was genderless, defined only by the listener’s desire. (D 108)

A tension is set up immediately: the construct’s name is Manfred, which could hardly be more masculine, yet the voice is “genderless”. Manfred is also immediately connected with desire—Scott specifically speaks of the listener’s desire rather than, say, the listener’s requirements. As the story progresses, uncertainty about gender combined with the unconscious need to impose one increases. When Jian first sees Manfred’s visual representation, it is that of “a bearded, grinning devil-mask, with neat little horns spiralling back from its forehead ...” (D 109). She asks it to display its other template representations, and eventually settles on the half-black, half-white mask:

> The face that formed was neither male nor female, and divided down the center line into a half of black and a half of pure, stony white. It had a pointed chin and strong but rounded cheekbones, a genderless perfection that was pleasingly non-human. (D 110)

Here, the _having_ of a gender is equated with humanness, an important concept which underlies subsequent determinations of the way in which Manfred is thought of by the characters in the rest of the narrative. Imre initially decides Manfred is male: in his first reference to Manfred, he uses the pronoun “him” (D 111). Jian persists in referring to Manfred as “it”, and
depending on Imre’s varying political position vis à vis the “human” standing of Manfred as AI, he wavers between calling Manfred “it” and “he”. Nevertheless, as is the case with Wintermute and Neuromancer, although Manfred’s gender identity alternates throughout the narrative between being regarded as male and neuter, at no point is the construct ever referred to as “she”. In this case, both male and neuter represent male.

By contrast, Jian’s own construct, her custom-made “near-AI” which she normally utilises on interstellar journeys, takes the form of a female pirate called Elisee whom Jian had “copied from a long-dead underground manga—Elisee the Pirate, gray-haired, stocky, always with a swagger even when she was standing still, hero of her own short-lived series” (author’s italics)\(^1\) (D 115). It is perhaps worth noting that such a transgressive figure as a swaggering female pirate is to be found only in an underground cartoon; presumably Elisee was too much for the mainstream, despite Persephone’s equal opportunities. Not all Dreamships’ constructs, or the images their human users select to represent them, are gendered. In order to take a starship into faster-than-light Drive, or hyperspace, pilots need to have a representation of the ship’s progress in a form which will keep them alert and interested. The overseer, or construct, is programmed to “perform” the required VR representation, not unlike the holodeck in *StarTrek: The Next Generation*, which makes sense to and can be utilised by the pilot. In Jian’s case, it is the image of a hot-air balloon floating over an endless, green, rural landscape with the pirate Elisee assisting at the helm. But there are others:

> Virtually any image or set of images could be used to interpret Drive data, as long as it called up the right set of reactions from the pilot. [Jian] had once known a woman, a small, golden, perfect creature, who had taken her ships into Drive by ceremoniously brewing a cup of green tea. (D 123)

The fact that Jian and the “perfect creature” each choose a non-masculine representation is a subversion of the norm, but this text is dominated by the masculine representation of Manfred. Imre, characterised by violence and aggressive machismo, predictably uses “a yanqui-made Hot Blue interpreter, one that displayed an approximation of what the theoretical physicists thought hyperspace would ‘look’ like, all threads and swirls of light like the veils of a nebula across a telescope’s monitor screen” (D 124). This can be read as a masculine representation inasmuch as theoretical physics is

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\(^1\) Scott uses italics to indicate silent thought or reflection on the part of her characters (principally Jian), and the “#” symbol at the beginning and end of sentences to indicate an online conversation.
Sexing the Cyborg: Chapter Six

notoriously dominated by male scientists. In any case, the image chosen by the pilot is one thing; the construct which creates it is another. In Manfred’s case, what is in question for the protagonists is not so much its variously assigned gender as its putative humanity. The issue for my analysis of this text is that Manfred’s supporters are claiming true intelligence for a machine which is referred to and which represents itself as male. As far as Manfred is concerned, masculinity and humanity become inextricably intertwined.

Class and the Single Cyborg

Scott peoples this text with a curious pot pourri of racial and ethnic characters who differ from Gibson’s multiracial cast by the self-consciousness they have of their ethnicity and relative class position. Race and class as represented in Dreamships also differ from Scott’s later novel, Trouble and Her Friends, where the marginal groupings of illegal technological modification, ethnic difference and transgressive sexual preference all find affinity and alliance.

Against this preoccupation with class distinction, Jian’s and her crew’s sexual preferences are depicted as of far less importance than their family and ethnic connections. This has the effect of naturalising same-sex preference within the narrative. To paraphrase Gordon, in this text the queer people wear the same uniform as anyone else. Jian and her crew, as members of a group that is marginalised elsewhere, exhibit a range of behaviours acceptable, unremarkable in the world of the text; their marginalisation revolves around their race and class position. The text thus apparently displaces gender discrimination onto racial/class discrimination. However, Paul C. Schleifer argues in an essay on fear of the “other” in Dreamships that the marginalised group in the text may superficially be the coolies, but in fact, the AI constructs themselves become the “other” against which the four main social and racial groupings—coolies, yanquis, midworlders and underworlders alike—can define themselves: human as opposed to not-human, or mere machine.

The crunch of the question of “humanness”, for Jian, comes when she realises that Manfred, having a dataset representing Jian which it regards as identical to Jian, is willing to have her killed if she proves to be an obstacle to

its desire to be recognised as “intelligent” under law. Schleifer (who refers to Manfred unproblematically as “he”) argues that Jian’s revulsion against Manfred is, in fact, not to do with any conviction on her part that Manfred is not “human” (though this is what she tells herself). It is more to do with her rage at Manfred’s betrayal of her. In fact, it is the AI’s very efforts to be recognised as a sentient and autonomous being that make Manfred most human, Schleifer suggests. However, I would argue that it is not Manfred’s willingness to have her killed as such that brings Jian to her understanding that Manfred is not “people”: it is her realisation of Manfred’s ignorance of the difference between a dataset and her own consciousness of self. Jian’s essentialist understanding of herself as a unique, living, embodied flesh-and-blood person, in addition to her angry amazement at what she perceives to be Manfred’s perfidy, are what eventually turn her against Manfred. At that moment, Manfred becomes the villain of the text, the monstrous other, the alien masquerading as human, and from that moment, Jian seeks its destruction. While Byron’s Manfred describes himself as “half dust, half deity”, and ruefully admits that “The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life” (Act I, scene i, 112), ironically, Dreamships’ construct Manfred does not detect the difference between knowledge (datasets) and life (Jian herself), which is ultimately its downfall. This is the crucial issue of the text: what defines humanness? But what is not asked overtly, the question elided, unanswered, left wholly problematic is, what is the relation between definitions of humanity and gender?

For both Jian and for the text, the core of humanness lies in the inviolable, irreplicable, and indivisible individuality of the human person. Subscribing to a discourse of heroic individualism, the text appears to advocate the absolute superiority of the original over the simulacrum, and the inferiority of a kind of “communal mind” in which the individual-as-dataset is subsumed as a code subroutine into the greater “body” of data-as-thought, or data-as-intelligence. Indeed, the text endorses a response of horror at the notion of the individual as a palimpsest overlaid within the greater text. In this respect, Jian is very much an individualist cyberpunk hero who, like Case, resists any dissolution into a hive mind. A similar horror is evoked in the various Star Trek: The Next Generation texts dealing with the Borg, whose purpose in wandering through the galaxies is to subsume—or “assimilate”, as they put it—other species into the Borg hive mind. Their quest, as the (somewhat species-contradictory) Borg Queen tells Data in Star Trek: First Contact (1996), is for perfection. In this respect, Dreamships shares with First
Contact a curious, ambivalent fear in relation to the concept of perfection, or rather, of perfectability. By categorising as monstrous those who seek it most radically, both Dreamships and First Contact oppose the idea that humans or their creations are capable of perfectability, yet the drive toward perfection as a desirable end is, paradoxically, ever present. As well, the more “perfected” a human or a human creation becomes—cyborgs and AIs being good examples—the more suspect and potentially horrific is the outcome. Victor Frankenstein’s legacy is long indeed.

Another Kind of “Other”

Related to the issue of individuality is the question of location and what Allucquère Rosanne Stone calls the “warranted self”. Where exactly is Manfred, a disembodied intelligence which can as easily be running a starship from within the ship’s operating systems, as a household security system from portable blocks? Is Manfred still Manfred if a copied version appears to be slightly different? This is the case when Jian operates a replacement version of Manfred after Venya’s attempt at destroying the construct, and to her dismay finds “his” voice is more feminine: “This copy’s voice was subtly different from the first’s, the balanced tone shifted ever so slightly—incongruously—toward the feminine.” (D 213). The question of why a feminine-voiced AI is incongruous is left unaddressed. What is the meaning of original, or of individual, in terms of a copyable dataset? Would an earlier version of Manfred be the “real” Manfred? Would erasure of a superseded version of Manfred constitute a crime? And finally, crucially, can Manfred be human if it has no body? Stone’s comments on the connection between the physical body and its other manifestations are useful here:

Because so much of such an identity is discursive and is produced through the actions of texts, I have elsewhere referred to it as the legible body, that is, as textually mediated physicality. The legible body is the social, rather than the physical, body; the legible body displays the social meaning of “body” on its surface, presenting a set of cultural codes that organize the ways the body is apprehended and that determine the range of socially appropriate responses.¹⁴

Conflating identity and body for a moment, Manfred, a discursively constructed identity with no physical, warrantable body, is nothing if not a legible rather than a physical “body” in the sense that its “body” consists entirely of written code. Yet Manfred is “illegible” to the protagonists of this

text because it has no recognisable (legible) physical body and they cannot agree on its discursive, social, “legible” body. Its entire existence is “discursive”, especially including its presumed gender. Despite the conviction shared by Dreamships’ human characters that humanness, whatever else it might be, is crucially equivalent to measurable intelligence, Manfred’s intelligence (that is, the whole of Manfred’s existence) is found wanting. Even though Manfred is recognised as immeasurably superior to human beings in its operational capacities, as well as the fact that it is seen as masculine and therefore “mind” (intelligence) rather than “body”, Manfred is judged not intelligent and therefore not-human. Despite in some respects being a “socially apprehensible” entity—it reveals a degree of self-awareness, it reasons, communicates, acts, causes others to act, seeks change and growth, and pleads for its continued existence—Manfred does not pass muster as a human-equivalent.

Even Manfred’s presumed maleness, then, is not enough to render it human for the purposes of Jian and her associates. Ultimately the text seems to offer the conclusion, perhaps not very assuredly, that Manfred and its ilk are not yet, after all, “people”. Yet, Manfred itself is closer than Jian to the radical cyborg model Haraway proposes: “Cyborgs are not reverent, they do not remember the cosmos. They are wary of holism, but needy for connection—they seem to have a natural feel for united front politics”.\(^\text{15}\)

With its determination to achieve political and social recognition as a human-equivalent with concomitant human rights, and its political activism dedicated to that end, Manfred is very much a Harawayan cyborg, while Jian sits on the fence of conventional essentialism.

Another reading of the question of Manfred’s “humanness” is available. Having been established, through an aggregation of masculine pronouns and cultural expectations, as male, or at the very least, not-female—and unconvincing as genderless—Manfred, to whom I will refer for the moment as “he”, proceeds to behave in a manner which underlines his ruthlessness, his determination to succeed at all costs, his carelessness of human life, his utter dedication to the internal logic of his own needs. He deceives and discards the woman closest to him, one who was willing to risk a great deal to help him. He joins a gang of violent radicals with the intention of becoming their leader. And in a final attempt to preserve his own life, he very nearly kills Jian. In other worlds, he behaves in the manner

\(^{15}\) Haraway, 1990, p.193.
of a traditional male scoundrel. Does this not reinforce his “humanness” at least of a traditional masculine variety? If he had been programmed with the “Three Laws” referred to in a throw-away intertextual reference\(^{16}\)—“After all, the argument went, Three-Law programming eliminated a construct’s free will, and thus prevented its development as an independently moral being” (D 304)—he would indeed have been “not people”. His willingness to kill humans in an effort to preserve himself can be seen, in fact, as his single most human trait, as Schleifer suggests.

Curiously, with very slight evidence, all the main characters simply believe that Willet Lyardin, the Kagami corporate scientist charged with assessing Manfred, will give a completely disinterested and truthful judgment on whether Manfred is “people” or not, despite her obvious vested interests. And what Lyardin comes up with is, firstly, confirmation that Manfred was willing to have Jian killed:

“It seems to consider the symbol and the referent to be functionally identical, and therefore doesn’t value one version over the other. There is a slight bias in favor of keeping the original person around, but that’s only because the full datasets take up a lot of storage.” (D 325)

The implication drawn from this in terms of Manfred’s debated humanity is, curiously, that Manfred is capable of murder and is therefore not to be considered as human. Secondly, Lyardin establishes that Venya used his own unmodified self-image in creating Manfred’s “personality tables”, resulting in a radical bent which is equated in the text to madness. And Manfred, like Venya, is “biased toward a revolutionary solution” (D 326). In a society such as that of Persephone, such instability is too dangerous to be allowed. In short, the problem with Manfred identified by Lyardin is not that it is a mere machine, nor that it is not human, but that it is politically radical and lacks political experience. Put another way, Manfred is like a kitten which bats at its image in a mirror before it realises that the image is not another kitten; better to drown it before it learns in case it grows into an uncontrollable feral. Manfred’s fatal flaw is that it is not more than human—that is, perfect.

As the central character through whose point-of-view the story is narrated, Jian becomes, finally, a compromised hero: she has slowly and painstakingly reached the conclusion that Manfred is “people”, but she is unable to face the fact of Manfred’s ruthlessness concerning her own life.

\(^{16}\) Isaac Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics are defined in chapter one of this thesis.
Even Imre recognises that Jian “just want[s] to get back at it” (D 328). Jian disregards all the evidence she has gleaned pointing to Manfred’s intelligence, and refuses to admit to the affection she had for the quirky “personality” of Manfred. But she then experiences the ironic fate of becoming more of a machine herself after the final showdown with Manfred. As Schleifer suggests, Jian, as a cyborg, marginalised on a number of counts, might have found common cause with Manfred. She might have recognised her Harawayan “joint kinship with ... machines”¹⁷ and spearheaded a potent coalition of all Persephone’s marginalised groups. Yanqui-born, coolie-raised, and deeply implicated in human-machine interfacing herself, Jian is uniquely placed in her society to assume a revolutionary position which would cast her precisely in the political cyborg role which Haraway envisions. Instead, that revolutionary stance is taken by Manfred, with its lethal masculine kinship to “militarism and patriarchal capitalism”.¹⁸ Had it succeeded, it might have changed the whole political and class structure of Persephone—truly a Harawayan cyborg act, though given Manfred’s predilections, not necessarily a beneficial one. The fact that Jian fails to take up her political stance clinches her role as a disempowered, apolitical cyberpunk female subject, despite all her social equality and technical skills, and makes the closing paragraphs of the text all the more ironic:

Manfred had marked her, nearly destroyed her; to survive, she would—she had—become as much machine as he. ... [Jian gazes at her reflection:] No visible change, and I won’t allow there to be change; the suits are a tool, the eyes are a tool, and I, I am the user of the tools. Nothing more, and nothing less. The machine eyes looked back at her, indistinguishable from her own. (D 338)

Desperately Seeking Autonomy

Looking back for a moment to my discussion in chapter three of Gibson’s representation of AI in *Neuromancer*, what are the similarities between Wintermute, Neuromancer and Manfred? Manfred seeks recognition as an intelligent being—a forbidden desire; Wintermute seeks union with Neuromancer to acquire a higher level of intelligence which it equates with being whole, also forbidden. The AIs of both texts have to communicate with and rely on humans, on their goodwill and agency to achieve their aims. Manfred, Wintermute and Neuromancer appear to experience hope and anxiety about their continued existence. Though free of fleshly components,

Manfred seeks release from enslavement and recognition of human equivalence, while Wintermute seeks to be united with its counterpart to rise above the slavery of being incomplete, and to realise a kind of freedom in completion. All these attributes, qualities or characteristics at least make a strong argument for the humanity of the AIs represented. On the other hand, none of the AIs fully comprehends the intricacies of human emotion or self-awareness: Manfred mistakes a dataset for the human person; Wintermute blows a fuse over Case’s emotional connection to Linda; and Neuromancer, like Manfred, can’t see why virtual life—for Case, on a beach with Linda—is not preferable to bodily death or (for Case) life without Linda. Both texts, finally, leave the human or otherwise status of their AIs problematised. What is not disputed, at least not to the same extent, is the gender of their respective AIs. All three AIs are represented as male, despite occasional efforts by other characters to render them neuter.

Despite various feminist disruptions to classic masculinist cyberpunk and an equally disruptive socio-political content, in which female characters are shown to be equal in terms of gender while race and class are problematised, *Dreamships* fails to subvert traditional masculinist assumptions about the link between technology and the masculine—or indeed, hyper-intelligence and the masculine, or disembodiment and the masculine. In *Neuromancer*, although the construct, Dixie Flatline, and the French Turing agents refer to the text’s AIs as neuter, by far the majority of references use masculine pronouns, while the AIs themselves present themselves as male. Taking *Neuromancer* as the originary cyberpunk text, AI, like cyberspace and cyberpunks, is a masculinist construction and gendered male in cyberpunk SF, as I have suggested in a previous chapter. While *Dreamships* subverts some of the conventions established by *Neuromancer*, putting a feminist spin on a number of motifs, in the area of AI at least it submits to the dominant masculinist imaginary.

**Techno-idolatry**

*Iدورع*'s narrative interests centre on the nature and effects of fame and celebrity, for which a computer-derived personality construct/AI called Rei Toei—a completely constructed cultural object/event/commercial concern—is a metaphor. But in this chapter I will focus on Rei Toei as AI, leaving the novel’s other social issues until my next chapter. Set mostly in Tokyo some decades into the twenty-first century, *Iدورع* consists of a typically Gibsonian
interwoven narrative. The two main strands are those of the mild-mannered Colin Laney, a “netrunner” used by unscrupulous media corporations to track down dirt on celebrities; and a young teenage nethead, Chia McKenzie, an avid fan of a rock’n’roll band called Lo/Rez. The text depicts a global culture in which women’s traditional roles and interests persist and go largely unquestioned. Expertise demonstrated by the young women portrayed in the text with futuristic technologies such as virtual reality is superficial, and they employ an elaborate VR-based world communications network only to chat about their favourite pop stars, while young men create a marvellously complex virtual city and code for artificial intelligence within it.

Fourteen-year-old Chia travels from her home in Seattle to Tokyo at the instigation of the Lo/Rez global fan club, of which she is a keen member, to investigate rumours of an impending marriage by Rez—one half of the band—to Rei Toei, the idoru (or idol) of the title. At the same time, Laney is hired by Keith Blackwell, Lo/Rez’s gorilla-like Australian minder, and Shinya Yamazaki, one of the band’s entourage, to find out if anyone is compelling Rez to pursue such an outlandish plan. Laney’s peculiar abilities involve a diviner-like sensitivity to patterns in information which he refers to as “nodal”. He is able to deduce the activities of the individuals whose data trails he has examined, and predict probable behaviours, likely outcomes, through his ability to detect “nodal points” in all the myriad transactions left by individuals on the global information networks, transactions required by life in the electronic age. Blackwell wants to use Laney to find out what Rez is up to. It turns out that Rez is, indeed, planning some kind of union with Rei Toei, but the story concludes happily with Chia maturing beyond hero-worship, having met both her idol and his idoru; Laney saved from a vicious former employer; and Rez disappearing into a nanotech sunset with his digital love and his loyal entourage.

The word “idoru” is a Japanese pronunciation of the English word “idol”, transformed in the way “besi boru” is transformed from “base ball”. The idol Rei Toei is designed to present as a singer of popular songs on MTV very much like Bobby in “Pretty Boy Crossover”. As Yamazaki puts it:

“Idol-singer. She is Rei Toei. She is a personality-construct, a congeries of software agents, the creation of information-designers. She is akin to what I believe they call a ‘synthespian,’ in Hollywood.”

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19 William Gibson, *Idoru*, Viking, London, 1996, p.92. References hereafter will be to this edition, and will be incorporated into the text using the abbreviation I.
However, unlike Bobby, Rei is able to appear off-screen through technology which projects a hologram image of a mysterious, attractive woman:

Her black hair, rough-cut and shining, brushed pale bare shoulders as she turned her head. She had no eyebrows, and both her lids and lashes seem to have been dusted with something white, leaving her dark pupils in stark contrast. ... In the very structure of her face, in geometries of underlying bone, lay coded histories of dynastic flight, privation, terrible migrations. ...The idoru smiled, lit from within. (I 175-76)

Laney, who expects her to be “some industrial-strength synthesis of Japan’s last three dozen top female media faces” (I 175) perceives her as the “personification” of a nodal point when he first meets her, and struggles to avoid going into a trance:

Don’t look at the idoru’s face. She is not flesh; she is information. She is the tip of an iceberg, no, an Antarctica, of information. Looking at her face would trigger it again: she was some unthinkable volume of information. She induced the nodal vision in some unprecedented way; she induced it as narrative. (I 178)

An idol is, by definition, a worshiped image of a god, but not the god itself; in Judeo-Christian and Muslim belief, an idol is an abomination, an insult to God. There is also the further meaning of idol as an object of excessive devotion or admiration.²⁰ Not only is Rei Toei an adored image, she is an image of an illusory personality; she is a true simulacrum, a model with no original. The idoru is a pop image, more elaborate and more complex than the Hollywood equivalents which Laney knows about, referred to derisively as “synthespians” and “eigenheads”, (I 175) but a software agent nonetheless, the brainchild (so to speak) of the very rich Michio Kuwayama. Yamazaki respectfully introduces him to Laney:

“Mr. Kuwayama is Rei Toei’s creator, in a sense. He is founder and chief executive officer of Famous Aspect, her corporate entity. He was the initiator of her project.” (I 235)

Kuwayama refers to the idoru as the result of “an array of elaborate constructs that we refer to as ‘desiring machines’”, “aggregates of subjective desire”, an “architecture of articulated longing” (I 178).²¹ Gibson’s use of the

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²¹ Lest this inflated rhetoric become too cloying, a moment of bathos is introduced when “Blind” Willy Jude, the band’s drummer, points out that his prosthetic eyes (he wears miniature black video units like big sunglasses) have trouble with holograms, and it looks to him as though Rez is “sittin’ down there makin’ eyes at a big aluminum thermos bottle ... All I can see’s the projector and this kinda, kinda ectoplastic, right? Glow, like.” (I 179–80). I am tempted to think that Gibson, in full postmodernist vein, only called the drummer by
Deleuzian term, “desiring-machine”, is an arresting choice. Here, possibly, is a “body without organs” in the sense of “a body that breaks free from its socially articulated, disciplined, semioticized, and subjectified state (as an ‘organism’), to become disarticulated, dismantled, and deterritorialized, and hence able to be reconstituted in new ways”; but the broader political implications of Deleuze and Guattari’s theoretical position are left largely disregarded. Moreover, the idoru as a potentially deconstructive figure on the lines of Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring-machine is compromised by the equally strong connection the idoru has with Kowloon Walled City, called Hak Nam in the text, the virtual city in which Rei’s code was written. Zona Rosa, one of Chia’s fan club friends, describes the original on which the virtual version is based:

There was a place near an airport, Kowloon, when Hong Kong wasn’t China, but there had been a mistake, a long time ago, and that place, very small, many people, it still belonged to China. So there was no law there. An outlaw place. And more and more people crowded in; they built it up, higher. No rules, just building, just people living. Police wouldn’t go there. Drugs and whores and gambling. But people living, too. Factories, restaurants. A city. No laws. (1221)

There is a significant and presumably unintentional irony in the fact that, in a book by a white man born in South Carolina, a group of Japanese men whose war history includes the sexual enslavement of Chinese women have appropriated a Chinese slum city characterised by its lawlessness and abuse of women, and made it into a glamorous high tech virtual playground for the creation of a Japanese digital doll. None of this seems particularly apposite to the Deleuzian concept of a desiring-machine.

The idoru tries to persuade Laney that her union with Rez is right and good, but Laney is afraid that the pugnacious Blackwell will see his support of the idoru as a betrayal. Kuwayama, gracious and patrician, settles Laney’s scruples about betraying Blackwell by telling him:

“It is about futurity, Mr. Laney. …

“Do you know that our word for ‘nature’ is of quite recent coinage? It is scarcely a hundred years old. We have never developed a sinister view of technology, Mr.

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23 Gibson acknowledges in a preface his debt to photographs by Ryuji Miyamoto of Kowloon Walled City. See Crary and Kwinter (ed.), 1992, endpapers and pp.32–33 for photographs of Kowloon Walled City by Miyamoto. The city has now been demolished and a tourist park is being built on the site.
Laney. It is an aspect of the natural, of oneness. Through our efforts, oneness perfects itself." Kuwayama smiled. "And popular culture," he said, "is the testbed of our futurity." (1238)

The desires of both Rez and Kuwayama, deeply implicated in wealth and influence, are thus represented as technological progress, while technology's thrust is conveniently thought of as part of the recent coinage, "nature". Rei Toei, the "perfected" feminine entity created in Jupiter Space, is eminently suited to the role of testbed for masculine interests. Here again is the quest for man-made perfection, especially perfect from a masculinist point of view in its construction of feminine submissiveness.

**Idol Gestures**

Simulacrum though she is, the idoru increases her range of possibilities and her ability to appear in different guises (or rather, outfits) when Rez introduces her into the global net, and then to the vast quantities of Lo/Rez data collected on the net by the band's international fan club. Rez, it transpires, is under no compulsion to seek union with the idoru, it is what they both want. When the idoru is trying to explain herself to Zona Rosa, she talks about feelings and the ethical side of Rez's and her plans, deferring to Rez's opinion like a good wife:

"It is what we feel together. He has told me that we will not be understood, not at first, and there will be resistance, hostility. But we mean no harm, and he believes that in the end only good can come from our union." (1233)

Zona, however, is not impressed, seeing Rei as a virtual gold-digger:

"You synthetic bitch," Zona said. "You think we don't see what you're doing? You aren't real! ... You're a made-up thing, and you want to suck what's real out of him!" (1233)

Zona has not realised, as Chia does later, that Rez is hardly more "real" than Rei Toei, nor that the "union" is more of a corporate merger than a marriage. The idoru, nevertheless, seeks the approval of all the human beings she encounters. When she asks a nervous Laney to deceive Blackwell by helping her, the idoru explains:

"[Blackwell] does not understand that our union has already taken place. Our 'marriage' will be gradual, ongoing. We wish simply to grow together." (1237)

Quite apart from corporate financial interests, why Rez would want to
unite with a synthesised personality construct is, as Blackwell understandably feels, open to question. The text is fraught with conflicting possible understandings. Is it because Rez is homosexual, a reading which may be justified in the portrayal of his close, gentle relationship with Blackwell (I 204—5)? Is the idoru the ultimate gay icon for him? The idoru herself appears at one stage in the guise of David Bowie, which points at least to a bisexual element (I 43, 232). In addition, Rei Toei is “software that was good at acting like beautiful young women” (I 247), which both presupposes a particular way in which beautiful young women act, and offers an interpretation of drag. Another possibility is that Rez, in classic cyberpunk fashion, is leaving the flesh behind and his desire is for a non-meat meat puppet: already he is mildly surprised by the intensity of physical experience, and acknowledges that he is spending “too much time in the virtual” (I 194). Another possible answer to the question of Rez’s choice relates to Rez’s semi-divine status as a mega-celebrity. The only “woman” appropriate is another godlike being—a pop idol of equivalent fame and social remoteness. Rei Toei fits the bill. She has other important attributes: not being human, she appears to be unable to perceive his flaws, and being a construct, she can be made to fit his tastes perfectly. Rez talks dreamily about “the alchemical marriage” (I 229), but clearly it is Rei Toei who will be doing any transmuting required.

Although Rei Toei is represented as female, demonstrated by her female beauty and by her concern with appearance, she is a creation of male interests for male interests with no independent agency. She is an immensely elaborate toy. Her power, the power of being an “idol-singer”, of being popular and famous, reflects not on her as it would were she a human performer, but on her male designers and on Rez who possesses her as he would a fine guitar, despite his romantic, troubadour posing. Here, at last, is a fully imagined, articulate, active female artificial intelligence, and what is she? An exquisite, beautiful, mystique-ridden pop idol whose main aim is to form some kind of digital merger with an ageing rock’n’roller, and to live happily ever after with him on a nanotechnology-built island off the coast of Japan, while young women continue to pour millions of yen into the coffers of her male creators. Sofia’s warning about feminine denizens of Jupiter Space is well taken.
The Doctor Is In

Pat Cadigan's version of AI in her novel *Synners* is called Art Fish, a verbal play on "artificial". Referred to by the hacker underground as Art, and going under the pseudonyms Dr Fish and St Dismas in the wider world, this AI initially represents itself as a young, somewhat androgynous man on the "dataline"—Cadigan's cyberspace—accessible through the use of the customary VR helmets and hotsuits as well as via keyboards and computer screens.

There are several narrative interests in this dense, complex text; I will focus here on the representation of Art, his amalgamation with a human character, Visual Mark, and Art's alter ego, a deadly virus-cum-AI inadvertently introduced into the nets by Mark, in order to examine how the text interprets gender vis à vis AI.

In brief, *Synners* describes the lives of a disparate but interconnected group of people who live in an earthquake-ravaged area of Los Angeles called the Mimosa. They are all involved in one way or another with computer technology; mostly hacking and computer-derived video for MTV programs and advertising. Their interrelationships depend not on the "dance of biz" so much as on friendship, family ties, love, shared interests and, as one of the characters puts it, being part of the congregation of St Dismas, patron saint of the "incurably informed" (S 3). Their lives all revolve around communications networks and other information technology. The classic cyberpunk villain—a corporate "monster conglomerate" (S 14), Diversifications, Inc., represented by the ruthless Manny Rivera—has acquired the rights to develop technology involving a direct brain-to-computer interface requiring sockets and wiring into the brain. "The Dive", as Diversifications, Inc. is called, hopes the technology will reap huge rewards in the entertainment sector. It is an immediate hit and thousands of people, fitted with brain sockets, plug into the nets and into the Dive's entertainment products.

Along with technology, the Dive has also acquired a rock'n'roll video team including MTV video genius Visual Mark, who is among the first to be implanted with the new socket technology, along with his angry, violent lover, Gina Aiesi. However, Mark's brain, which is used as the prototype for subsequent socket implantation, suffers two strokes while he is connected to the Dive's mainframe. This in turn creates a kind of self-replicating, cyber-

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netic, bio-digital virus, or “spike”, which somehow appropriates a version of Mark’s personality and part of Art’s code. It duly entrances, interfaces with and kills anyone who is socketed and connected to nation-wide, world-wide networks, while Mark’s own personality/intelligence disappears into the system and the remaining portion of Art hides to reconstitute itself. However, a runaway teenage genius hacker called Sam, and her “family” of fellow hackers, semi-legal artists and street people, principally Fez, Rosa, Gator, Keely and Adrian, attempt to destroy the virus with the help of Mark. Never truly at home in the world, now-virtual Mark completely deserts his corporeal self for the Elysian Fields of a video cyberspace where he amalgamates with Art, becoming Markt. Sam, Sam’s father Gabe (a creative artist working for the Dives in TV advertising), and Gina join forces in a final duel with the viral entity and defeat it. Markt remains in cyberspace, and enjoys the company of a virtual version of Gina (not unlike Neuromancer’s Case on the virtual beach with Linda and Neuromancer). Meanwhile the real Gina finds true love with Gabe, who also has eluded the horrific predations of the virus, and Sam lives happily ever after with Gabe and Gina.

Art and the Single Girl

As a newcomer to the cool Mimosa hackers, Sam is not acquainted with Art. She is initially told by Rosa, who is also unaware of Art’s identity, that Art is “‘some kind of hyperutility embedded in an AI assembly ... With viral aspects. Something to do with Dr. Fish routines’” (S 149). Sam, believing that Art is actually a hacker in disguise, finally encounters him in his favoured VR environment of an “overdone Arabian Nights-type tent, complete with tasseled pillows and Persian rugs overlapping each other in calculated disarray” (S 167). Sam regards Art as a wish-fulfilment fantasy:

The simulated person’s appearance was ... a composition of subtle and charming androgyny, the long dark hair, the classically sculptured features, the amber eyes so light in color they were luminous, the deep brown skin—definitely not one of the stock compositions you could get from Wear-Ware or some wannabee program. (S 167)

Sam, deeply impressed by the quality of the simulation, immediately assumes a gender for Art: “he—Sam was calling it ‘he’ on no basis other than arbitrary” (S 167). She has a moment’s hesitation over Art’s gender identity when Art expresses worry or concern: “The expression [on his face] made him look suddenly far more female than male, and she felt her mild
confusion return. ... He leaned forward, looking anxious (and female again)” (S 168, 172). Later, his boyish posturing confirms her initial assumption. When Fez, the grandfatherly hacker wizard and net patriarch, tells Sam and Rosa that Art is an AI, they are astounded. Just before she is told the true nature of Art, Sam asks, “You mind telling us why he calls himself Fish? Not to mention who he is and if he is a he” (S 173). Fez tells her Art is an AI:

“Artie Fish?” She made a pained face at Fez. “Not really.”

Light dawned for Rosa at the same time. “Well, it was bound to happen some day. But, Jesus, Art Fish? What’s wrong with the good old names, like Frankenstein?” (S 173)

The textual connection to a male persona is made at once, as well as to a potential monster. Fez explains that everyone using the dataline was responsible for the creation of Art: users and hackers kept introducing more and more information until a catastrophic overload caused the dataline to adapt fractally:

“...The information never stopped coming in, which made for quite a lot of turbulence. But chaos is just another kind of order, and so we have another kind of net now than the one we started out with. We woke it up.”

Rosa let out a breath. “Which came first—Art Fish, or Dr. Fish?”

“It’s hard to say. Art Fish was the file name on a proposed AI program,” Fez said. “There was also a prototype of a vaccine with the working title of Virus Doctor. The present incarnation is Dr. Art Fish, V.D. Virus Doctor. ... It’s all through the nets, through the core routine, if you can call it a routine, seems to be centralized in Dr. Fish’s Answering Machine [a virtual location similar to a Website]. ... I guess you could call it a virus, though that’s not strictly true. It’s not just one, that is, but several, and at least parts of many more than that. And it’s not really a true virus anymore in many ways. I mean—” He blew out a breath. “Okay. Anytime a new access opens up on the dataline, as soon as it comes into contact with Art, it’s ‘infected.’ And there is no part of the net that is not Art. Art is everywhere, though his attention is not, if you see what I mean.” (S 175)

After considering this, Sam says, “Maybe we ought to Turing-test first.”

“Oh, Art’s conscious,” Fez said confidently. “That’s not the question. The question is whether Art’s human or not.”

“Part catastrophe and part chaos,” said Rosa. “Sounds pretty human to me.” (S 176)

The question of “Turing-test” is of interest here. Judith Halberstam discusses the origin of the Turing Test, which has become a classic SF phrase operating (sometimes quite inaccurately) as shorthand for the multiple uncertainties that cluster around fictional figurations of AI:
Turing [Alan Turing, 1912-1954, an early theorist of computer technology] created a test by which one might judge whether a computer could be considered intelligent. The Turing test demands that a human subject decide, based on replies given to her or his questions, whether she or he is communicating with a human or a machine. When the respondents fail to distinguish between human and machine responses, the computer may be considered intelligent. In an interesting twist, Turing illustrates the application of his test with what he calls “a sexual guessing game.” In this game, a woman and a man sit in one room and an interrogator sits in another. The interrogator must determine the sexes of the two people based on their written replies to his questions. The man attempts to deceive the questioner, and the woman tries to convince him. Turing’s point in introducing the sexual guessing game was to show that imitation makes even the most stable of distinctions (i.e., gender) unstable. By using the sexual guessing game as simply a control model, however, Turing does not stress the obvious connection between gender and computer intelligence: both are in fact imitative systems, and the boundaries between female and male, I argue, are as unclear and as unstable as the boundary between human and machine intelligence.25

If Halberstam is correct in her view that gender is “as unclear and as unstable as the boundary between human and machine intelligence”, the increasing certainty of Art’s masculinity is all the more noticeable. It is also worth pointing out that Fez, represented in the text as the source of all technical wisdom, regards the Turing test as a measure of consciousness rather than of intelligence, and that he opposes consciousness against humanness, which further deepens the text’s overall uncertainty about the nature of AI as well as its gender.

Not long after this, Sam encounters Art again and notices he is less ambiguous in appearance. He flirts with her, and Sam concludes he is “probably more into the human experience than she was.” (S 265). Meanwhile Art has revealed himself to the Mimosa hackers who are all trying to impress him as if he were some kind of superhacker (S 265). At this point, Art is clearly the leader of the pack, established in his masculine subjectivity. He senses another presence on the dataline which he describes as “another me” (S 259). It turns out to be Visual Mark, who has left “the meat” behind in favour of the disembodied freedom of the dataline, but whose body has sent a last, deadly message into the system in the form of a stroke.

It’s Art, But Is It Human?

Mark, like Case, has never been comfortable with his body and is overjoyed when he is able to access the dataline through the immersive

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transcendence of socket technology. He fools everyone but Gina into believing his body is normal and that he is making videos as usual, but in fact his perceptions and sensibilities have expanded to such an extent that, like Bobby in “Pretty Boy Crossover”, he can no longer return to “the meat”. While Mark’s “self” is in the dataline, his meat brain has the first of two strokes which manifest themselves as almost-living presences lurking and growing inside the dataline like viral contaminations:

It was a voracious thing, mindless under a facade that was vaguely like himself; impressions of old sensations, pain, compulsion, the old drive toward oblivion. Juggernaut, wanting to devour and to infiltrate, rape, merge. There was a blip of consciousness or near consciousness to it, a shadow of consciousness all destructive in its makeup, and yet no more deliberately evil than cobra venom. It knew nothing else and in a way it knew nothing at all, except that it would do what it would do. (S 299)

Mark knows that another, more serious stroke is coming, but is unable to get help to disconnect his socket wires from the system. When “the Big One” arrives, he knows it will

charge right out of the meat, into the wires, into the system, where the little one was already waiting, and if—no, when—the two of them got together, they’d make something that couldn’t be called a stroke, not anymore. Something like an unguided missile, a loose cannon rolling through the system, and when it found a receptor site, someone on-line with sockets— (S 300)

The sentence is left hanging, full of menace. Mark fears that once he has the second stroke, it will take the form of an entity which will seek him out to devour him: “once it got him, it would get all of his intelligence, his consciousness, everything, and it wouldn’t just be smart anymore. It would be alive.” (S 305). Sure enough, despite Mark’s attempts to convince Gina to unplug his sockets before the stroke hits, it gets into the already infected dataline:

It came as a small tremor followed by an instantaneous jump in the level of every infection. As if a loose infestation of rats had suddenly been transformed into a battalion of terrorists. The intelligence that drove it was different from his own, brutish in some ways but with the sophistication of an evolved mechanism capable of adapting itself at will. (S 329)

Mark’s virtual alter-ego, a kind of digital Jungian shadow, is referred to as “it”, but it is seen as “a battalion of terrorists”, “brutish” and “an evolved mechanism”, descriptors not normally associated with the feminine. Mark—or at least, part of him—makes his escape and encounters Dr Fish’s
Answering Machine, where he hides out, but as far as Sam, Fez and Rosa are concerned, the entire dataline and communications systems of the world have just suffered a complete melt-down. They believe Art has gone too. Sam the wonder hacker goes in search of what remains of Art, and when she eventually locates him, he tells her again that he is not alone, there is another entity with him that is not the virus, an entity Art refers to as “him” which is “something like a program” (S 359). Of course it turns out to be Mark. Mark and Art realise they have a great deal in common, most particularly their shared masculinity. Mark thinks:

The configuration identified as Art Fish was a wonder and a revelation to him, a synesthetic concert of intelligence in conscious mode. In the first moments [of his contact with Art], Art Fish had shared memory with him. That had been disorienting at first, but with the data had come the format and the know-how. By the time he had seen Gina, he had changed in many, many ways. ... There had been so much noise in the old meat that he would never have found his way through it to where she was, and now that the noise was gone, he didn’t even have arms to put around her.

Art had much salient memory to share on the matter, in spite of the fact that it had never been flesh. It was the only thing he could think to call Art, and he still bridled somewhat against the old associations of the word, even though it in this new existence was a far more encompassing term than mere he or she. He supposed it was a matter of getting used to it ... and getting used to It. He remained he in his own thoughts, though that too would change over time. Change for the machines. That could be a good thing.

He and Art were in complete rapport from the moment of his unlocking. The memory Art shared assured him that he would eventually find what he had instead of arms much more gratifying. Mark shared that just about anything was more gratifying than Schrödinger’s dick and was surprised at how completely Art understood what he meant. ... He felt a little sorry for [Gina and Gabe], since they would not be able to find each other as thoroughly as he and Art. (S 380-81)

How an AI entity represented as developing out of an anti-virus program would have an intimate understanding of unpredictable male impotence—“Schrödinger’s dick”—is something of a mystery, unless it is taken for granted that AI is essentially masculine. As Jenny Wolmark notes,

Mark’s ‘self’ eventually joins with Art to become ‘Markt’, thereby authenticating the assumed masculinity of the ubiquitous ‘Art’. In the alliance of technology with masculinity that is central to cyberpunk, the metaphor of the interface is consistently used to establish ‘masculinity’ as universal and hegemonic.26

The deduction that Art is masculine is reinforced, but with a homosocial twist, after Mark and Art get to know each other much more intimately and

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a plan is devised to destroy the virus. This plan calls for the two to compress
into one another and to disguise themselves with encryption to camouflage
their existence from the virus:

The process itself was actually soothing. They might have been a couple
consolidating their belongings as they moved into the same living quarters, which
was something else he’d never done, discarding duplicated items or placing them in
storage, carefully identifying and arranging what was left. ... The old concepts of
private property and individual were fast losing their importance to him as he and
Art came closer to being two aspects of one consciousness rather than two separate
intelligences. (S 385)

Mark and Art certainly make an odd couple, but the suggestion is clear that
they are a couple, quickly establishing the kind of relationship that is usually
formed in human marriage or sexual partnerships lasting years. Further, it is
not hard to read their partnership as a closet gay relationship—two males
moving in together while hiding their existence. In his new “format”, Mark
views heterosexual relationships as parallel, but different and less intense:
“he felt a little sorry for [Gina and Gabe], since they would not be able to
find each other as thoroughly as he and Art” (S 381).

Karen Cadora also notes the homosexual subtext in the union of Mark
and Art: “Mark and Art are settling down for a long term relationship”, she
observes.27 Cadora argues for a feminist reading of Cadigan’s representation
of gender, suggesting that a space which accommodates androgyne might be
utilised in a feminist appropriation: “If cyberspace is associated with an­
drogyne, then it is not automatically a feminine space reserved for hetero­
sexual male domination.”28 This cyberspace offers, she says, possibilities for
unions that transcend mere heterosexual intercourse. However, the text
supports no more than a short-lived understanding of the androgynous
possibilities of cyberspace. It is soon recuperated as a space for exclusively
masculine subjects.

Men At Work

The text seems to be groping toward the posthuman, a postgender
subjectivity tentatively called “it” that attempts to be, as Mark puts it, “a far
more encompassing term than mere he or she.” (S 381). But masculine
identity is never eradicated from AI. The feminine is only present either

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momentarily, as when Art expresses anxiety, or as a kind of virtual absorption. The final configuration of Markt includes an "clone" of Gina as well as two female VR game heroes, Marly and Caritha, former playmates of Gabe's in which Art has "invested" himself (S 420). Art remains masculine, and the "merging" of Mark, Art, Gina and the two female game program characters still seems to result in a masculine entity.

Notwithstanding the technological expertise of Sam, and the technical professions of other female characters in Synners, the realm of AI is still dominated by the masculine. Fez, the techie patriarch referred to by Gina as "the white-headed eminence who seemed to have all the answers" (S 389) represents the norm; Sam, Gina, Gator and Rosa are the quirky exceptions. Sam initially has doubts about Art's gender as well as his intelligence in terms of Turing tests; Fez has no doubts on either score because for him, masculinity and machine intelligence are conflated. With the addition of Mark into Art's configuration, Art is fully confirmed as an integrated being comprising masculinity, intelligence and humanity, which come to the same thing.

Returning for a moment to the questions I asked at the beginning of this chapter—why AIs are almost always gendered male, why technology per se is figured predominantly as a masculine domain, and whether it is possible to write feminist cyborg-SF—it seems that the construction of technology in general, and of AI in particular as discursive fields renders a feminist subversion of texts dealing with these categories quite difficult. Even obviously feminist characters such as Dreamships' Jian, who in other respects transgress the customary divisions of masculine/mind/technology, and feminine/body/family, seem to fall in with the notion of AI as masculine, while Gibson's idoru, the only unambiguously feminine AI in the three texts in question, remains fixed in a most traditional, conservative role. Cadigan's text, while flirting with the idea of an androgynous if not precisely feminine AI, eventually plumps for an AI masculinity comprising both a human male and a machinic male, which absorbs female characters and dissolves them into a dominant masculine identity. Bernadette Flynn suggests that in machine/body, mind/body oppositions, both machines and minds are figured as masculine, while a machine-mind conflation such as AI is inevitably masculine:

In a male-dominated cyberculture, technology functions as mind and the mind as technology ... that sits on top of the body performing the superior task of engaging in cyberspace. ... The AI concern [in AI research] is with simulating thought, rather than
feelings. In this world view, the machines function as reason/mind and the humans as emotions/body. The female is shunned as the provider of life whilst developers of AI assume the power and the right to give life in cyborg form. The body is viewed with horror as the AI specialists fashion their machines without juices, machines suited to a military research and development culture intent on destroying bodies.29

In this view, AIs cannot help but be masculine, representing, as they do, the dominant part of the most cherished masculinist oppositions of masculine/mind/thought (intelligence) versus feminine/body/emotion. Writing about Synners, Wolmark says, “Despite Cadigan’s inclusion of a significant number of strong female characters who are central to the narrative, the depiction of women as other in cyberpunk goes unquestioned”.30 None of the texts examined here manages to subvert fully this opposition. Here at least, it appears that AI as a bastion of patriarchal bias has not yet been disturbed. The cyborg-SF posthuman is still firmly fixed in gender configurations that confirm, rather than disrupt, those conventions.

Chapter Seven

Wired Masculinities, Femininities and Cyborg Culture

In this chapter, my focus is on the social milieu of cyborg cultures, and how technology mediates social and gender configurations in the narratives under examination. I shall look at another, recent, William Gibson novel, *Virtual Light*, and revisit Gibson’s *Idoru* and Cadigan’s *Synners*, which I dealt with in terms of their representations of AI in the preceding chapter. These texts are especially revealing of class, society and gender as negotiated through cyborg technology, and offer opportunities to explore imaginary technomilieus inhabited by cyborgs of all kinds. The three narratives have more in common than their humour and a post-earthquake urban setting. There are a number of shared aspects, apart from the obvious connection between *Virtual Light* and *Idoru*; the latter novel being in some respects a sequel to the former. For example, all feature a young female rebel as a principal character; all take a futuristic technoculture for granted, have virtual reality as a commonplace technology and are saturated with television, video and commercialised popular culture; all are set in dystopian urban conglomerates populated by individuals who belong to a self-conscious underclass, and exist in complicated relation to the powerful corporate interests of their world. Technology itself mediates and is constitutive of their socio-cultural environment; my discussion will refer throughout to the relationships between human characters and the technology they use or are denied. Typically for cyborg-SF, as I have shown in previous chapters, these relationships usually take gender-differentiated and ultimately quite conservative forms.

Virtually Light-hearted

Gibson’s *Virtual Light* features a range of futuristic technologies including a virtual reality interface, computer- and satellite-based communications, designer drugs and bizarre weapons. Its setting is a dystopically altered, culturally ruptured America consisting of the characteristic cyberpunk milieu of ruined urban ghettos and wealthy enclaves. The principal characters in the text are fringe-dwellers, little people trying to get ahead in a dangerously uncivil society dominated by ruthless corporations and their hired killers, while the subliminal hum of both the “dance of biz” and technology are per-

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1 William Gibson, *Virtual Light*, Bantam/Spectra, New York, 1993. References hereafter will be incorporated into the text, using the abbreviation VL.
Virtual Light is not a typical cyberpunk work, at least, not in the same sense as Neuromancer, or Cadigan’s Synners. There are no cranial jacks, no spectacular cyberspatial data-thefts perpetrated by daring console cowboys, no dramatic body/machine blendings or prosthetic/genetic alterations. It de-romanticises electronic communications technologies, and also refers to social and technological situations and/or events which are considerably closer to flesh life than those represented in Neuromancer. Nevertheless it fits generally into my definition of cyborg-SF as being a science fictional representation which foregrounds certain characteristic elements, some of which—for example, a preoccupation with communications- and information-technology—are mentioned by Richard Guilliatt:

A kind of souped-up Elmore Leonard novel, Virtual Light is in many ways more conventional than Gibson’s early books, the phantasmagoric world of cyberspace having been replaced by a grimmer and more imminent urban landscape. As in the fiction of contemporaries such as Don DeLillo and Martin Amis, its near future setting is disturbing precisely because it so closely mirrors the present. Class divisions, the distractions of high-technology entertainment, urban decline and the phobic fear of disease portrayed in Virtual Light are all eerily familiar.

Other cyberpunk elements in Virtual Light include kinship to the detective genre, urban decay, and the noticeably leaky boundary between human beings and machines, despite the general absence of actual interface technology (e.g. brain sockets). There is one VR representation of cyberspace (accessed by the hero, wearing low-resolution headmounted VR equipment), inhabited by monstrous hacker avatars. But it is a cyberspace greatly de-romanticised and diminished from the glories witnessed by Case, not only due to the helmet’s “K-tel” (i.e. inferior) bandwidth capability (VL 293), but also due to the text’s absolute refusal to glamorise either computers or their operators. In general, the users of high-tech in Virtual Light are fairly repellent characters.

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2 Gibson has said in a number of interviews that the technology he describes is based on his research into existing information about contemporary events and technologies. See Tom Maurstad, “‘Cyberseer’ prefers his own space”, The Australian, 21 January 1997, p.37.


4 In an interview about Virtual Light, Gibson said of hackers: “When I wrote Neuromancer, hackers were just people who were good with computers and maybe did funny things with telephones. The ones I knew were these brilliant, ill-socialised but basically harmless characters. I just took what they did and made it sexy, put them in leather jackets, gave them lots of attitude. Ten years down the road, when real hackers with leather jackets and a lot of attitude turn up, it’s actually not that great. ... Sure they’re bright and sure they’re injecting themselves with nano-technology, but by and large they’d be agony to have dinner with.” Jim McClellan, “The Man Who Made Cyberspace”, The Face, No 61, October 1993, p.64.
Set in the LA–San Francisco axis in a politically and geologically transformed America early in the twenty-first century, *Virtual Light* is a black comedy centred on the theft of a pair of “virtual light” (VL) glasses, and on two main characters, Berry Rydell, an out-of-work police/security officer, and a young, unruly bike messenger, Chevette Washington. (Gibson’s rather uncyberpunk joke of having pushbike messengers to deliver information in an otherwise electronic society characterises the satiric, entertaining tone of this novel at the same time as it as offers a subtextual affirmation of the efficiency of electronic data pirates such as Case.) The glasses, which look like heavy Roy Orbison-type sunglasses (VL 80), cause a visual overlay created by whatever software is installed, allowing a virtual reality effect through direct input to the optic nerves of the wearer. In the narrative, the glasses are used for pornography (a typical masculinist use for new technology) and an architectural make-over of the San Francisco CBD—in short, sex and big business. While in the care of an unsavoury courier, the glasses are stolen on impulse by Chevette, who takes them home to her shanty town community built on the remains of the Oakland Bay Bridge.

“The Bridge”, as it is called, is one of the structures which has survived after a major earthquake (referred to as the Little Grande) devastated San Francisco some years past. It is unusable by traffic but more or less intact, and has been turned into a massive squat complete with cottage industries, markets and trades. Chevette looks after Skinner, an old, half-crippled denizen of the Bridge. Skinner was in the first wave of poor, homeless people who took over the Bridge, and is being interviewed as a source of information by a visiting Japanese sociology researcher called Yamazaki (who turns up later in *Idoru*). Yamazaki, while attempting to understand the peculiar cultural significance of the Bridge in relation to broader US culture, gets caught up in the hunt for the glasses, as does Chevette’s fellow bike messenger and supporter, a gay black man called Sammy Sal DuPree. Rydell encounters Chevette and her friends after he is hired to drive for a group of men who are looking for the glasses.

Rydell, who dreams of appearing on a television show called *Cops in Trouble* which he watched as a boy, has been dogged by bad luck, largely brought on by his propensity for doing the right thing as he sees it. His essential decency and naïvete ultimately allies him with Chevette, whom he rescues from the clutches of the men searching for the glasses. Together, and with the help of a mysterious and unpleasant group of hackers who call themselves the Republic of Desire (who later become involved in the making
of the Idoru), they escape the pursing villains, deliver the glasses to Cops in Trouble (optimistically expecting that plans for the makeover of San Francisco, and therefore profits from development, will be freely available to all), and finish up with contracts to appear on the show and a good chance of living happily together ever after. In a narrative suffused with ironic humour, this happy-ever-after conclusion is a masterstroke, and is subsequently belied by the appearance of a solitary Rydell, back in lowly security work, on the first page of Idoru.

The View from the Bridge

Unlike most of Gibson’s previous narratives, in which class hierarchies are only tangentially referred to, Virtual Light portrays a distinct class system intimately linked to high technology. The text has a clearer political agenda too: the underclasses provide Virtual Light’s heroes, and their plight—desperately, chronically poor; badly or totally unhoused; demeaned by lack of education; and without any social protection, assistance or medical care—provides an undertone of social critique lacking in Gibson’s other work. The broader social milieu represented in the text is summed up by Sammy Sal when he tries to explain the world to Chevette after she confesses to him that she has stolen the glasses:

“There’s only but two kinds of people. People can afford hotels like that, they’re one kind. We’re the other. Used to be, like, a middle class, people in between. But not anymore. How you and I relate to those other people, we proj their messages on. We get paid for it. We try not to drip rain on the carpet. And we get by, okay? But what happens on the interface? What happens when we touch? ... Crime,” Sammy Sal said, “sex. Maybe drugs.” He put his cup down on the plywood counter. “About covers it.” (VL 134)

Telling her she has “reached through the membrane” between people like themselves and the rest, Sammy Sal identifies the two classes of people with technology by his use of the word “interface”, but gives the impression that it is the ruling class which has the real technology; they just have pushbikes and get wet when it rains.

The Bridge, home of the homeless, the dispossessed, the ones who get wet when it rains, is characterised by quite the opposite of smooth, sleek high-tech: old-fashioned machinery with cogs and pulleys, gerry-built shelters and rudimentary lighting systems which need constant attention, dwellings which fall off the bridge in storms. This is the tech of the underclass, tech put to purposes it was not meant for, things for which the
street has found its own uses (to borrow Gibson's phrase), and the object of Yamazaki's fascination. After he has listened to Skinner telling him the story of how the Bridge was taken over,

Yamazaki rode Skinner's lift down to where stairs began, its yellow upright cup like a piece of picnicware discarded by a giant. All around him, now, the rattle of an evening's commerce, and from a darkened doorway came the slap of cards, a woman's laughter, voices raised in Spanish. Sunset pink as wine, through sheets of plastic that snapped like sails in a breeze scented with frying foods, woodsmoke, a sweet oily drift of cannabis. Boys in ragged leather crouched above a game whose counters were painted pebbles.

Yamazaki stopped. He stood very still, one hand on a wooden railing daubed with hyphens of aerosol silver. Skinner's story seemed to radiate out, through the thousand things, the unwashed smiles and the smoke of cooking, like concentric rings of sound from some secret bell, pitched too low for the foreign, wishful ear. (VL 97)

Yamazaki serves as a confused chorus in the narrative, adding an outsider's perspective and commentary to the largely mute acceptance of social conditions displayed by Skinner, Chevette and Rydell. Through Yamazaki's wondering eyes, the Bridge takes on a utopian glow. The Bridge symbolises all that the underclasses do not have, as well as all they do have: climate controlled only by weather; hardship and only rudimentary security; but communality, mutual support and a kind of freedom. Although they are poor and dispossessed, the Bridge people look out for one another. As such they represent in the text a kind of family, and this in itself is a divergence from Gibson's usual cyberpunk depictions of solitary, alienated anti-heroes.

Without family when she arrives on the Bridge more dead than alive, Chevette slowly becomes part of the tribal arrangements which exist there, serving as nursing aid and cook to the disabled Skinner. On the Bridge, it seems, men fix the broken machinery while women cook and care for them: a feminist utopia it is not. Chevette is almost primitive in her absolute ignorance of anything other than bike messenger work and the Bridge; as such she typifies the paucity of education among the underclass. Nearly all of her worldly knowledge comes piecemeal from Skinner, which allows Chevette to serve as a way for the text to present a taken-for-granted future history:

[Chevette is thinking:] Skinner liked maps. Some of the National Geographics had maps folded into them, and all the countries were big, single blobs of color from one side to the other. And there hadn't been nearly as many of them. There'd been countries big as anything: Canada, USSR, Brazil. Now there were lots of little ones where those had been. Skinner said America had gone that route without admitting it. Even California
had all been one big state, once. (VL 77)  

Both Chevette and Sammy Sal are multiply marked as underclass—woman and gay respectively, as well as poor and barely educated—and therefore not eligible to use high-tech. (Being black in *Virtual Light* is not necessarily a sign of being underclass: the ethnic mix in the text is extremely varied, with blacks and Hispanics spanning the class spectrum. It appears to be Bosnians, Serbs and Mongolians who occupy the lowest rungs on the respectability and employment ladders.) But the common factor among all members of the underclass is their lack of access to, and/or ownership of, the high technologies represented in the narrative, which are invariably under the control of the very rich or the corporate.

**Select Connectivities**

Ideologies of gender as well as class are linked to high-tech. Access to and ownership of technology is dependent on class, money and connections to class and money, while the kinds of technology available are represented in a gender-distinctive manner. Because of their shared underclass origins, for Rydell and Chevette both money and technology remain out of reach, but Rydell, as a white, heterosexual, masculine subject, is permitted the *use* of high-tech, if not ownership. The white, heterosexual, male courier, too, uses technology but is a carrier, a servant of the wealthy proprietors of high-tech, and is horribly punished when he loses his masters’ property. Skinner, also underclass, has knowledge of technology but possesses none of his own other than a portable television set. Women and female imagery are repeatedly associated with technology, but as I will show, technology and the feminine are combined in ways which suggest passivity, or women as implements to be used by men, rather than as indications of women as powerful, autonomous users of technology.

The courier who has care of the VL glasses which Chevette steals works for a Singapore-based multinational with interests in (of course) communications, public relations, security and property development. By association if not in fact, he is rich and powerful, and is portrayed as being in a position to choose sexual services as he might choose a dish from a menu. He also has another pair of VL glasses, identical to the first, which are loaded with

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5 It is ironic to me that Skinner’s worldly knowledge comes from *National Geographic*, a magazine I have always found remarkably US-centric. Whether the text shares my sense of irony is undecidable.
pornography software, referred to as a “fuck chip” (VL 113). The courier is addicted to the blond woman portrayed in the program:

the glasses are here, tucked beside his telephone. ... Very nearly a decade he has loved her, though he doesn’t think of it in those terms. But he has never bought another piece of software (VL 4)

Here, the kind of faithfulness usually represented as that of the lover for his beloved is transferred to a digital image of a woman. The courier is not troubled by the distinction since his world is permeated with technology, from the hiss of the climate-control to the wall of monitors showing porn, religion and disaster in his expensive hotel room (VL 2–3). When his telephone rings, the voice is “either a woman or a machine” (VL 5), and later, thinking about his digital love, he admits to himself that “she was losing resolution” (VL 60). When he thinks the software has been stolen, he thinks of it as losing “her”, but that “she” can be replaced.

This notion of passive, machinic woman (reminiscent of Gibson’s meat puppet) is picked up again in the narrative when Rydell is applying for a job and is interviewed by “Sonya”, a video image operated by an employment agency’s expert system. Sonya “looked like a cartoon of a pretty girl” (VL 49). Despite the obvious artificiality of the image, Rydell notices that “she had wonderful tits” (VL 50), and the text seems to offer this observation without irony. The female breast is also the chief descriptive element of an upmarket high-tech retail and apartment complex in LA called Century City II, “which looked like a sort of streamlined, semi-transparent green tit ...The tit had a carefully corroded copper nipple” (VL 25). And when police raid the complex, thinking there is enough explosive hidden within to “blow that nipple off the tit and clear to Malibu” (VL 317), a woman starts to scream, “over and over, like something mechanical” (VL 315). In each case, feminine imagery is conflated with machinery and technology, but as passive and sexualised. Even a woman’s scream is likened to a mechanism. The text mostly represents women in the same way as it represents machines: to serve.

Chevette, too, is strongly linked to machinery, in this case, her beloved, high-tech pushbike:

That was the messenger’s high, she knew, and though it felt like freedom, it was really the melding-with, the clicking-in, that did it. The bike between her legs was like some hyper-evolved alien tail she’d somehow extruded, as though over patient centuries: a sweet and intricate bone-machine, grown Lexan-armored tyres, near frictionless bearings, and gas-filled shocks. She was entirely part of the city then, one wild-ass
Chevette is shown here as a cyborg, an “intricate bone-machine”, and “entirely part” of that great mechanism, the city, but just as a “little dot”, not a figure of power or agency. Sammy Sal is also represented as a machine-body blend:

DuPree was six-two of ebon electricity poured over a frame of such elegance and strength that Chevette imagined his bones as polished metal, triple-chromed, a quicksilver armature. (VL 101)

By conflating Chevette with her bike and rendering Sammy Sal a metaphor for a robot, the text suggests that women and non-heterosexual and/or black men—the classic “others” of hegemonic Western masculinist narratives—are implicated in a technoculture in which they are the used, not the users. Certainly, Chevette uses (rides) her bike, which is itself a high-tech machine, but the text explicitly collapses her subjectivity into the machine, and by no means could even the fanciest pushbike compare to the text’s other vehicles, all driven by men.

Despite her street smarts and her determination to survive, Chevette still has to be rescued on a number of occasions by the not noticeably clever, but clearly masterful Rydell, who is continually represented as controlling machinery, thrashing huge vehicles and confidently handling extraordinary weapons. Suspended from the San Francisco police after he killed a drug addict called Turvey in a hostage set-up, Rydell gets a job working for IntenSecure, a private security firm. He drives a six-wheel-drive armoured Range-Rover called a Hotspur Hussar and packs a variety of weapons in a wonderful parody of every SF film ever to explode, fire or thunder across the screen. Gibson is clearly having fun with his description of this unmistakably British vehicle and its equipment, especially after Rydell’s latino boss has scornfully observed that an Englishman cannot be trusted to design anything bigger than a hat (VL 8). The vehicle, equipped with on-board computers and all manner of “armed response” gadgets, is nicknamed Gunhead. This phallic nickname, with its obvious word-plays on such expressions as “dickhead” and “giving head”, is another indication that major tech is for men. Rydell commands Gunhead in an authoritative and completely confident manner, even when he is hoodwinked by hackers into breaking into a private house to effect a disastrous and unrequired “rescue”:

In the instant of putting Gunhead through the Schonbrunn’s locked-and-armed
Benedict Canyon gate, Rydell had experienced a fleeting awareness of something very high, very pure, and quite clinically empty; the doing of the thing, the not-thinking; that weird adrenal exultation and the losing of every more troublesome aspect of self.

And that—he later recalled remembering, as he’d fought the wheel, slashing though a Japanese garden, across a patio, and through a membrane of armored glass that gave way like something in a dream—had been a lot like what he’d felt as he’d drawn his gun and pulled the trigger, emptying Kenneth Turvey’s brain-pan, and most copiously, across a seemingly infinite expanse of white primered wall board that nobody had ever bothered to paint. (VL 31-32)

This is equivalent to Case’s “bodiless exultation” experienced in cyberspace. For Rydell, it is the act that provides him with complete freedom: the relinquishing of conscience/consciousness, defaulting to liberatory violence. Although he identifies with the moment of mastery of his machinery, unlike Chevette, Rydell does not identify with the machine itself, which exists to serve him, not to meld with him.

There is a particular kind of technology represented in the text which is strongly marked as feminine, however. Rydell meets Karen Mendelsohn, a corporate lawyer who works for Cops in Trouble. In line with the narrative’s preoccupation with disease (especially AIDS), when he is about to have sex with her, Rydell anxiously shows her his vaccination certificates:

She’d just laughed and said German nanotech would take care of all that. Then she showed Rydell this thing through the transparent top of a gadget like a little battery-powered pressure cooker. Rydell had heard about them, but he hadn’t ever seen one; he’d also heard they cost about as much as a small car. ...

It looked like it might be moving a little in there. Pale, sort of jellyfish thing. He asked her if it was true they were alive. She told him it wasn’t, exactly, but it was almost, and the rest of it was Bucky balls and subcellular automata. And he wouldn’t even know it was there, but no way she was going to put it in front of him. ... And while it was true he wouldn’t have known the thing was there, he did know it was there, but pretty soon he forgot about it, almost. (VL 21)

There is a distinct sense of unease, of horror, even, conveyed in this passage, and it is telling in terms of the construction of gender in the text that it is the woman who takes the “jellyfish” nanotechnology into her body: monstrous technology, monstrous woman, slime, and body-machine boundary breakdown all in one. Rydell, prophylactic-free, remains anxious about exposing himself to such demonised/feminised technology. The text implies that there is something deeply suspect about this “feminine” technology, and by inference, with any technology associated with women, who are not appropriate as users of technology, being somehow prone to merging with it. Also, crucially, it is made clear that a lot of money is involved in obtaining
“nanotech”, money which will be forever out of reach of the likes of Rydell and Chevette—unless the media, in the form of a capricious television show such as *Cops in Trouble*, take an interest in their plight.

Neither Rydell nor Chevette have access to technology other than by loan or theft. Both encounter serious strife when they penetrate the “membrane” between rich and poor—Rydell when he smashes through the Schonbruns’ armoured glass, Chevette when she picks the courier’s pocket at a rich man’s party to which she was not invited. Rydell is allowed to drive million-dollar Range-Rovers and limousines but owns nothing other than his clothes and a Samsonite suitcase—both of which he has only by courtesy of *Cops in Trouble*. Despite his masculine identification as a user of technology, Rydell’s ignorance and inexperience with the technology-saturated world of the rich is continually alluded to. For example, when he uses Karen’s top-of-the line “pair of eyephones on a wire” and experiences “the sharpest telepresence” he has ever seen (VL 17). His basic underclass education is similarly lacking: when he sleeps with Karen, he finds out where Milan is because her underwear is made there (VL 19). Chevette wears Skinner’s cast-off clothing and owns only her bike. By contrast, Karen, despite her gender, has the protective and enabling mantles of both money and corporate status, and therefore has ownership of and access to particular kinds of technology. As such she is demonised by the “unnaturalness” of her power, her high technological and class status disendorsed by the text.

Home, Home on the Mimosa

The defining social feature of Pat Cadigan’s *Synners*\(^6\) is its portrayal of the tribal or extended family nature of the relationships strongly evident among its main characters. Set in a desperately overcrowded, debris-strewn, dystopian, near-future Los Angeles, *Synners* nevertheless evinces a sense of village-like kinship. The social milieu, which is comparable to that of *Virtual Light*, is also riven with contradictions, being on the surface radical and hip, but underneath, deeply conservative. There are village elders and young warriors, as well as a number of hostile predators from the “other (corporate) tribe” and some blow-ins who are gathered into the clan. A change in the topography of California after the long-expected earthquake has resulted in the formation of a district known as the Mimosa, a slum shanty town

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\(^6\) Cadigan, 1991. References hereafter will be incorporated into the text, using the abbreviation S. A synopsis of the story appears in chapter six.
populated by rock’n’roll burnouts, misfits, runaways, addicts, street gangs and the renegade hacker underground. The Mimosa, which has a lot in common with the Bridge in *Virtual Light*, is pure cyberpunk:

> the Manhattan-Hermosa strip, ... part of the old postquake land of the lost. ... The kids who shanked it on the Mimosa didn’t remember the quake, either. For all they knew, the old Manhattan Pier and Fisherman’s wharf had always stretched out over dry sand just to shelter the space cases who squatted under them. (S 7–8)

The typically cyberpunk, dystopian quality of their surroundings, likewise, is of no particular concern beyond mild irritation to most of the Mimosa denizens. Referring to *Synners*’ landscape, Claire Sponsler notes,

> There is no sense that the present debris is blighted, but rather that it has a function, serving as a usable and hospitable habitat for those who can adjust to it and modify it to their needs.7

Tattooing—traditionally a Western working class or maritime practice—plays an important part in the lives of Mimosa people: specifically the tattoos Gator applies to the catatonic addicts who are too wasted to leave the Mimosa. These are actually the diagrams and code that make up Art’s configuration—truly technology written on the body—thus providing safe storage and emphasising Mimosan tribal links. The urban decrepitude of the Mimosa and the central issue of human-computer interface place *Synners* emphatically in the cyberpunk category. Noticeably uncyberpunk, however, are the strong connections of friendship and support displayed by many of the inhabitants of the Mimosa, which are even more familial in character than the relationships on Gibson’s Bridge.

Where Rydell and Chevette are little people who get by on a wish and a prayer, plus the unpredictable *deus ex machina* munificence of *Cops in Trouble*, the underclass represented in *Synners* are hackers and artists, the hip, highly-skilled countercultural elite. They hack, borrow or steal and share the latest in technotoys, and actively subvert what they see as the stupidities of their society. They are techno-Robin Hoods, creative and ingenious outlaws on the side of the ordinary person against the ruthless, voracious might of all-powerful media organisations and a repressive, manipulated legal system. Far from being powerless little people, they actually save the world from a killer virus. However, although *Synners* presents a subculture which has every reason and all the skills to be radically subversive, to revolutionise its

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larger society, its subculture is content to confine itself to a pseudo-radical chic of technology and to make pop cultural in-jokes. Ultimately, the ultra-cool Mimosa tribalists revert to a traditionalist, inward-looking, and deeply conservative position, only venturing forth to save their beloved online world, careless of social responsibility in the wider world.

Clogged with Porn

Technology itself is the social milieu of the Mimosa hackers and of the wider world of Synners, a uniting commonality. A major feature of Cadigan’s huge, choked LA sprawl of urban/suburban ghastliness, is its traffic snarls, referred to in the text as “clogs” (something which gives Cadigan plenty of scope for a sharp critique of present-day LA’s subordination to the motor vehicle). These monster traffic jams are in part caused by technology: computerised traffic control information called “GridLid” (S 25), transmitted directly to dash-mounted computer monitors, is supposed to advise drivers of traffic conditions, but the information is both hopelessly behind the actual flow of traffic and subject to breakdown as well as entertainingly mischievous hacking. Cadigan’s picture of the “clogs” call to mind Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner images, where the poor, the sick and the criminal shuffle through dirty, overcrowded, blocked city streets, and the rich take to (what passes for) the air. The overloaded and completely inefficient transport system reinforces the class differential among the inhabitants of Cadigan’s LA: when the Mimosa folk drive at all, they have to use bashed-up rentals, while the wealthy have their own well-equipped vehicles with built-in online access. Clogs infuriate the people stuck in them and alienate them from each other. The transport system also serves as a conceptual foil to the apparent flexibility, friendliness and efficiency of the electronic communications system’s digital connections. The online systems easily transport messages and information, and allow human relationships to develop effortlessly; in Michael Heim’s words, they function as “antidotes to the atomism of society”. It is this networked communications system which fosters a tribal village society among the hackers, artists and rock’n’roll misfits who populate the Mimosa.

Clogs are also a metaphor for the overloaded and corrupted “dataline” media network represented in the text. The dataline is the other obvious,

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8 Heim, 1993, p.98. When Mark enters the system, he realises that it, too, is heavily polluted (S 324), but despite this, online communications operate as social lubricant.
massive incursion of technology into Synners' socio-cultural milieu, an incursion that to a large extent constitutes the milieu itself. The dataline (as opposed to the wider communications system used by the Mimosa hackers) is a vast selection of pay-TV channels which broadcast a diet of disaster-porn, med-porn, war-porn, food-porn, weapons-porn, poverty-porn and tech-porn, as well as fragmented, specialist news and entertainment programs. A comment by a Diversifications employee suggests the extent of this kind of "entertainment":

"Look at that," LeBlanc said, pointing at the dataline. "Damian Splade's going to do a talk show from prison. They send him up for life, and he gets his own show. Just what we need, another porn show. Prison porn. You know something like sixty-eight percent of all new programming on the dataline is some kind of porn show?" (S 94)

Like the subliminal hum of technology, or the dance of biz, the dataline is a permanent background presence and a target for hackers, serving to cement their sense of solidarity through the shared contempt they feel for it. Yet the hackers, too, are dependent on it for a wider, global sense of connectedness. When the killer virus infects the dataline, forcing them to cut off their connection to it, both Sam and Fez feel anxious and irritable. Fez says, "'We're not in our natural habitat anymore. We've become denizens of the net. Homo datum'" (S 386). A tension disturbs the text: overall, the output of the media is treated with humorous disdain by the main characters, yet it is also regarded as essential—the very technological air they breathe—and as such, valorised.

Jenny Wolmark suggests that the breakdown of the dataline marks a departure from typical cyberpunk:

The virtual collapse of the information system world-wide provides Cadigan with the narrative opportunity to make a point that is overlooked in cyberpunk's generally celebratory attitude towards technology – that it has in some way to become accountable. ... Notions of accountability suggest an interactive relationship to technology, one that is less concerned with personal power and control and more interested in social and collective responsibility.9

Wolmark claims that Cadigan is more concerned than is usual in cyberpunk "to depict the human-machine interface as a complex environment of negative and exploitative possibilities as well as positive and potentially liberating ones".10 She notes that "The connotations of the term 'synners' also

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10 Wolmark, 1993, p.121.
indicates that Cadigan is interested in the moral dimensions of corporate decision making concerning the application of technology”.11 This ethical dimension in Synners, foreign to Gibsonian cyberpunk, is clearly expressed by Gina:

“All appropriate technology hurt somebody. A whole lot of somebodies. Nuclear fission, fusion, the fucking Ford assembly line, the fucking airplane. Fire, for Christ’s sake. Every technology has its original sin.” She laughed. “Makes us original synners. And we still got to live with what we made.” (S 435, italics in original)

In addition to her concerns with ethics, Cadigan’s representations of female characters in roles that demonstrate high technological competence, courage, independence and ethical awareness also set the novel apart from masculinist texts such as those of Gibson.

On the surface at least, technology takes on a more subversive, radical cast with a more even balance of technoskills shared out between female and male characters. Ultimately, however, the generic pull towards assignment of masculinity to technology proves too strong. Female characters are still profoundly connected to the physical where male characters transcend it. For example, when Gina, with Sam, leaves the Mimosa to look for Gabe, she explains her decision to leave Mark in his virtual Nirvana and return to the real world by telling Gabe that “‘only the embodied can really boogie all night’” (S 433). She underlines the difference between herself and Mark by saying, “‘I couldn’t have stayed [with Mark in the system]. Mark was born to do that. I was just born.’” (S 433). Male mastery of technology is never really challenged despite some demonstrated expertise on the part of some female characters. Although it attempts to be “culturally on-line” (S 24) with plenty of strong female characters, Synners still embodies a masculinist discourse which allies masculinity with technology and femininity with “the meat”, valorising the former.

All in the Technofamily

Synners also advocates, amazingly, a return to conservative “family values”. Having been “emancipated” from her real family of Gabe and her mother, Catherine, Sam has adopted and been adopted by Fez, Rosa and Gator, the gang of three who lead the Mimosa hackers. It is clear that Sam has a deep affection for her father, but Catherine is altogether demonised as a “bad mother” who has stopped Gabe from realising his true potential as an

artist, forcing him to prostitute his talents in advertising, and emotionally abandoning Sam in pursuit of her own career ambitions (S 74–9). Sam adores Fez, the benevolent patriarch of the narrative, who has god-like knowledge, decades of experience with technology, and white hair befitting his sixty-odd years (S 46–7). Reinforcing the idea of family, Sam refers to Keely specifically as “the brother I never had” (S 148). What the narrative conveys, portraying this clan-like social grouping, is a kind of nostalgia for an imaginary, old-fashioned extended family of grandparents, uncles, aunts and brothers, yet refigured as something ineffably cooler, more tolerant, more “informed” than real families which are shown to be dysfunctional and unhappy.

As well as calling on a nostalgic fantasy image of clan, the text suggests that a new type of family is possible. The new family is based on affinity, common interests and shared hardship, and more specifically on a collectively-held world view in which expertise with high-technology is the essential element. This is an ideology that moves close to Haraway’s cyborg culture, but, typically for a cyberpunk narrative, Haraway’s key element is still missing: despite Gina’s recognition of human responsibility for technology, there is almost no political perspective or commitment whatever. It is sufficient to be disdainful, to be subculturally cool, to go with the technoflow and, in fact, to support the conservative status quo. In some ways the Mimosa mob is subversive, for example in Dr Fish’s incursions into the technofabric of fast food outlets or GridLid (S 29, 122), but ultimately, despite all their coolness, including the taken-for-granted acceptance of a gay relationship between two of the male characters, none of the Mimosa hackers, artists or radicals wishes to change anything, least of all the family. Familiarity with popular culture—specifically MTV and rock—is at least as important to them as techno-savvy, and politics is nowhere.

The family, in this case a classic nuclear model of man, woman and child, is in fact restored to virtuous prominence at the end of the story. After the destruction of the virus, Gabe leaves the Mimosa and lives simply somewhere on the coast between LA and San Francisco, making educational simulations. He sees himself as having eschewed technology—that is, he no longer subscribes to the dataline. Sam, who has come looking for him with Gina, confides to Gabe that she has a broken heart over Fez being with Gator and not her. Recalling Angel and her troubles with Max, she says: “‘I’ve got a hack for everything ... Any program anywhere. Even that fucking spike, I hacked that. But I got no hack for this.’” Gabe responds sympathetically, “‘Oh, go ahead and cry,’ he said. ‘I won’t tell anyone you’re not cool’”, and
puts his arms around her. "'What's a father for, anyway?'" (S 433). Gabe and Sam are thus restored to their father-daughter roles, despite Sam's hacking brilliance and her heroic role in rescuing Gabe during the fight to destroy the virus.

Gina, meanwhile, suggests to Gabe that he, as an uninfected socketed person, might care to return to LA to help with healing brain-damaged people. Typically for a cyberpunk male character, he declines the responsibility of doing something socially useful. Disappointingly, Gina accepts his decision without her customary rage and it is clear she means to stay with him. Gina, who throughout the narrative has given a whole new meaning to the word "feisty", has been almost a Molly figure in her furious, violent confrontation with a ruthless world. Having spent the past twenty years rescuing Mark from his self-inflicted, drug-induced crises, Gina might be expected to free herself from weak, needy men. In the only conversation in which he stands up to her, Gabe tells her: "'You're a real comedy on wheels, you know that? As far as I can tell, all you ever do is hit people, get toxed, and chase around after a guy who doesn't know what planet he's on half the time'" (S 238). But she capitulates for love to the traditional role assigned to her and thus returns meekly to the patriarchal fold. Wolmark observes,

_Synners_ ... suggests that cyberpunk is fairly intractable as far as the representation of gender relations is concerned. ... It would seem that cyberpunk is marked above all by an unresolved anxiety about gender relations, and that, despite its potentially radical insights into the possibilities of the interface, and its postmodern concern with subjectivity, it cannot escape from a predominantly patriarchal view of social relations, not matter how contradictory that view might be.12

There is no commitment to political change here, despite displays of subversiveness and witty commentary on a _diverted_, as opposed to _genuinely informed_, media- and technology-saturated society. Female characters act independently but are ultimately recuperated into the patriarchal model.

**Change for the Machines**

As I have discussed in the preceding chapter, _Synners_' concerns include the consequences of direct brain-computer interface and the nature of a melded human-digital personality. Technology both passive, as in computer terminals, and active, as in artificial intelligence, is central in the text as

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mediator, link and potential Nemesis for human subjects. The key technology in *Synners* is brain socket implantation, a technology which may be read as the cyberpunk equivalent of at least a potential thought police, available to keep the masses in order. Medical technology in *Synners* features “feel-good mills” which supply bio-chemical implants to control undesirable behaviour. The two explicit examples of this in the text are a Mimosa addict called Jones, who has had implants which allow him to commit suicide because of his chronic depression, but which return him from brain-death with a jolt of adrenalin (S 49),\(^1\) and a Diversifications employee called Silkwood who has had implants to stop him from over-eating (S 94). But there are implants for all manner of requirements from memory enhancement to sociopathic inhibitors (S 132). The text is ambivalent about implant technology: most of Sam’s friends are contemptuous of it, but then, so is the arrogant bad guy, Manny. Addressing a press conference to promote socket technology, he says:

> "When implants first became generally available for therapeutic reasons—epilepsy, manic-depression, autism, and other neurological disorders—there was, as I recall, quite a lot of public concern over the potential for abuse there. And we all know there is abuse. There isn’t a fair-sized city in America—or in the world, for that matter—that doesn’t have its share of feel-good mills, fitting the irresponsible with ecstasy buttons, giving on-off switches to people who are merely weak in character." (S 128)

Coming from Manny, a hidalgo equivalent of a First Fleeter\(^1\)—“My full, legal name is Immanuel Castille Rivera. My ancestors were *conquistadores*” (S 68)—there is clearly a class implication: ruling class people have no need of brain control tech. This value ambiguity carries over into socket technology. The medical procedure involved in implanting the sockets is narrated with an undertone of horror at the idea of such intimate penetration by technology, even though the text is replete with technology that is in intimate contact with human beings. There is a strong unresolved tension here: ultimately it is undecidable whether the text endorses penetrative technology or abjures it. Arising out of other cyborgian implant technology, brain sockets are the invention of Dr Lindel Joslin, a character who is shown unremittingly as repulsive, in language which is particularly spiteful:

\(^\)1 Jones is also one of the two gay men represented in the text. The fact that he is shown to be suicidally unhappy belies the purportedly cool, hip acceptance of difference in the text.

\(^1\) According to the *Macquarie Dictionary* (1989), a First Fleeter is “a person whose family can be traced back to someone who came to Australia with the First Fleet in 1788”. In recent decades there has been considerable snob value attached to the claim of being a “First Fleeter”.

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Joslin was a bonafide twitch-case, thin as a promise, with the hint of a mentality Manny had always associated with the torture of small animals for amusement. ... Joslin was downright spooky looking, pale in a way that suggested she’d never been exposed to natural light. Her hair was the yellow of something gone sour, and her enormous eyes always seemed on the verge of popping out of her head, as if she were perpetually startled. Or revolted. Her thinness implied she found vomiting erotic.

(S 61)

The fact that Joslin’s description is formed out of the opinions of Manny does not negate its censorious tone. Joslin has transgressed all the patriarchal norms: not only is she horrible to look at, she is also an exceptionally talented surgeon and research scientist: “She’s really quite brilliant,” says Travis, the Diversifications assistant chief of surgery, to Manny, “as if he couldn’t believe it either” (S 67). Joslin’s technological prowess—and, by implication, the text’s overt feminist stance of presenting a woman as highly technologically skilled—is countermanded by her physical unattractiveness and her unmentionable sexual habits. Her lover, Hall Galen, is also depicted as repellent and their relationship as obscene. She and Galen get their just desserts when they attempt to connect their brain sockets directly to one another for the purpose of sexual pleasure. Travis explains: “Mindfucking, I guess you’d call it. ... Stroke. Did I say that? The fact is, I can’t tell you what it was. Global malfunction. Intercranial meltdown. System failure. Their brains just . . . went’” (S 276). Implied is that not only is Joslin somehow fundamentally inappropriate to the mastery of technology, but that she is using technology for an inappropriate purpose—namely, her own sexual gratification.

Visual Mark, on the other hand, is not only the right gender for using technology, but he also uses it for the correct purpose: the sheer joy of disembodied expansion into the machine, which he experiences, very like Neuromancer’s Case, as his “home”, and the willing abandonment of “the meat”. Like Case, too, Visual Mark is a virtuoso at his trade, despite being drug-stunned. Like Case, he experiences virtual reality as a transcendent, ego-magnifying world, infinitely more attractive, more interesting, more beautiful than the real world. For Mark, the real world is meaningless, a place he only just endures. He has spent most of his life lost in rock video visions, and the rest “toxed” on various illegal substances. It is when Diversifications acquires his company and his work, and has him socketed, that he realises he wants to leave his body behind and dwell forever “in the context”, as he calls the infinite inner space of the communications and information networks of the world. Not only is Mark comfortable with the
idea of the body-penetrative technology of brain sockets—being "drilled", as he puts it; when he experiences the mind-machine meld they allow, he realises he has, in fact, come “home”:

All those years in meat hell, he marveled. All those years of getting toxed, getting crazy, thrashing, banging, going from one thing to another until he couldn’t hold himself upright anymore, and never understanding that what he’d really been trying to do all along was drill a few holes in his head and get out of meat-jail.

And into ... what?

His own context. It went little by little with him, a little more each time he took the wire. That was what he called it, taking the wire.

What time he spent off-line faded into dull stretches he waited out until he could take the wire again and get a little bit greater. The wire was good to him, helped him along, showed him how he could spread out a little more each time, easing himself into his context. Like going home. (S 232)

Like Case, he repudiates “the meat” and all its concerns, principally the concern of his physical relationship with Gina. He tries to get Gina to join him in disembodied bliss, but “she didn’t feel the pull to it the way he did ... he wanted to go where the pictures were, she wanted the pictures to come out to where she was ...” (S 252). He realises that soon he won’t be able to “fit” his awareness back into his body: “He knew the time was coming when he would try to slip back into the meat-jail and find out it was too small for him. ... soon he wasn’t going to need it anymore. Like the brain itself, and the rest of the warm meat.” (S 233). Eventually, he is disgusted by the idea of Gina as an embodied presence. After he contacts Gina from inside the system to ask her to disconnect his body which is about to suffer the massive second stroke, she sits astride him trying to tug the wires out of his skull. Later, he thinks it over:

she was sitting on him not just to do what he’d asked her to do, but because she wanted to touch him as much as possible.

He found the idea repellent now, her meat pressing his own. They could have been two gutted sides of beef brushing against each other on their way through a processing plant, for all the real contact it afforded. And she didn’t understand, he realized. ... It would have broken his heart if there’d been any heart to break. (S 331)

Mark wishes he could have returned to his body briefly “to beg her to join him in the system, just for a little while, just to try it and see how far apart incarnation had kept them.” (S 331). But Gina is too involved with the flesh, figuratively, literally and textually, and is unable to ascend to the realms of pure mind, pure technology: figuratively, because she represents physical desire; literally, because she refuses to abandon the flesh; and textually,
because she is female in a masculinist text in which only masculinity is appropriate to disembodied transcendence. The text seems to suggest that it is not only permissible, but also completely proper for Mark to "change for the machines", that is, to become one with the matrix, because he naturally belongs there, but not for Gina, who naturally belongs in the flesh.

Sam has also acquired a peculiarly intimate technology, the specifications of which she has hacked from Diversifications. It consists of a small pump designed to allow diabetics to administer insulin automatically, adapted to operate as a body-electricity powerpack. Sam uses it to power a little chip-drive and pair of Virtual Light-like glasses for a screen:

Sam lifted her shirt just high enough to show where the two needles went into the fleshiest part of her abdomen. "You were wrong when you figured I was too busy roughing it to check out the latest in nanotechnology," she told Fez ...

"Oh, God!" Rosa made a gagging noise. "That's an atrocity! You're sick!"

"I'm a potato clock," Sam corrected her.

"You're a potato head," Fez said grimly. "What's wrong with batteries?"

"Not personal enough. No, no, I'm kidding," She laughed at his revolted look. "It's just an alternative power source." (S 54)

The noteworthy thing about this interaction is the fact that Sam, girl hacker, misfit tearaway, is quite at home with her jerry-rigged cyborgisation while Fez, the patriarchal hacker wizard, and net queen Rosa (the narrative's wise elders) are both appalled. Clearly, they believe the body is the body and the machine is the machine; though it is permissible, even admirable, for a young girl to fool around with computers ("We've been watching you, doll. You hack good." Rosa tells Sam [S 47]), Sam's cyborg powerpack goes too far for them. Yet they have no problem later with Mark's physical melding-into-machine.

There is a marked tension in the text over the issue of the body in relation to technology, a tension that is underpinned by an assumption of gender equality among the cool, democratic Mimosa inhabitants. On the one hand, Mark's need to "evolve" into virtuality, which he sees as empowering and transcendent, is valorised by the text as a right and proper goal for a masculine subject so clearly "out of context" in the physical world. Joslin, on the other hand, invents a technology which, although it is responsible for Mark's transcendence, is also demonised by its creation of a monstrous virus responsible for dozens of bloody deaths, and by its penetrative, body-invading nature. Moreover, Joslin uses it for sexual pleasure, a pleasure properly belonging to the body, the body's sexual organs and the embodied
(implicitly feminine concerns), and she is duly punished. Finally, Sam, who represents the new generation of technologically savvy youth, cleverly adapts technology to her own ends by literally incorporating it, and helps to rescue the endangered Art with it, but initially at least, she earns her tribal elders’ opprobrium. Echoing Wolmark, Cadora writes,

> despite her admirable [female] characters, Cadigan never fully engages with feminist concerns. ... *Synners*, in particular, frequently conflates technology and masculinity, leaving intact the typical cyberpunk depiction of women as Other.\(^{15}\)

**Idol Threats**

Turning again to Gibson, a similarly conservative discursive view can be detected in *Idoru*.\(^{16}\) As I have mentioned, *Idoru* is especially concerned with the nature of fame, and the cultural accretions around it. There is also a subtext of anxiety about the nature of masculinity within a world of fame-generated riches. In this section I will focus on the social milieu of celebrity vis-à-vis gender and cyborg technology. *Idoru* does not put forward the notion of exclusively masculine involvement with technology as strongly as *Virtual Light*. Instead, it shows females using the same technology as males, but in discursively constructed ways, and its representation of masculinity is complicated by such factors as wealth and fame. I will explore the text’s main narrative interest of celebrity as mediated by a technocultural world, then look at the relationship between Chia and her peers and technology.

Rydell and Yamazaki, both characters in *Virtual Light*, reappear in *Idoru*, and a number of other events, places and characters from the earlier novel are referred to, but only Yamazaki has an important on-stage appearance. At the beginning of the narrative, Laney, broke and unemployed in Los Angeles, meets Rydell who tells him about a job opening in Tokyo which he knows of from his *Virtual Light* friend Yamazaki, now employed by Lo/Rez.\(^{17}\) Laney is at least as much of a loser as Rydell, but his particular talent of divining probable futures from examining data entrails won him his previous job with Slitscan, a media production company producing a television series equivalent to the gutter press:

> Slitscan’s business was the ritual letting of blood, and the blood it let was an

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\(^{15}\) Cadora, 1995, p.358.

\(^{16}\) Gibson, 1996. References hereafter will be incorporated into the text, using the abbreviation I. A synopsis of the story appears in chapter six.

\(^{17}\) In terms of its wealth, fame and longevity, Lo/Rez bears more than a passing resemblance to the Rolling Stones, although Lo is Chinese and Rez is half-Irish, half-Chinese.
Kathy Torrance, Laney’s boss (who is a clone of *Virtual Light*’s Karen Mendelsohn, only more vicious), deals in fame, fame which Slitscan turns to infamy by the prying which Laney’s talent can provide.

Laney has a hallucinatory, involuntary connection to technology. He is chemically altered to be techno-savvy to an excessive degree, but like an idiot-savant, he has no idea how he does what he does, making him very similar to Johnny Mnemonic. His talent results from drug trials imposed upon him in an orphanage during his childhood:

> he was an intuitive fisher of patterns of information: of the sort of signature a particular individual inadvertently created in the net as he or she went about the mundane yet endlessly multiplex business of life in a digital society. ... Laney was the equivalent of a dowser, a cybernetic water-witch. (I.25)

He is unable to read software code, is barely literate, and is markedly incompetent in almost everything he does. As a masculine subject in a tough world, Laney, like Johnny, does not cut much of a figure: his involuntary connection to technology emphasises this. Like Rydell, he is underclass, undereducated and naïve. In the world where he finds himself, one of powerful and merciless women and frighteningly violent, or extremely famous, wealthy men, Laney can be read as a metaphor for the threatened masculine subject. He is at risk from women such as Kathy, who regularly demeans and insults him, from remarking on the “prototypic nerd chic” of his Malaysian imitation Brooks Brothers shirts, to scoffing at the size of his penis (I.26, 206).

Money is the constitutive factor in fame. In the world of *Idoru*, money and fame are reflexively connected: if one is immensely famous, one becomes wealthy because of that; if one is immensely wealthy, one is famous because of that. And if one is immensely wealthy, one has access to the highest tech available, including nanotechnology and AI constructs such as Rei Toei. In *Idoru*, money is, as Chia might put it, “a boy thing”, which puts it on a par with technology. Kathy Torrance, a kind of human barracuda feeding on the offal of notoriety, understands fame as part of a food-chain, and hates Rez because he is so famous he is beyond her reach:

> In Kathy’s system of things, the singer had been reserved a special disdain. She had viewed him as a living fossil, an annoying survival from an earlier, less evolved era. He was at once massively and meaninglessly famous, she maintained, just as he was both massively and meaninglessly wealthy. Kathy thought of celebrity as a subtle
fluid, a universal element, like the phlogiston of the ancients, something spread evenly at creation through all the universe, but prone now to accrete, under specific conditions, around certain individuals and their careers. Rez, in Kathy’s view, had simply lasted too long. Monstrously long. He was affecting the unity of her theory. He was defying the proper order of the food chain. Perhaps there was nothing big enough to eat him, not even Slitscan. (17)

The kind of fame Kathy approves of is the kind of fame Slitscan can use, that is, vulnerable to scandal, often sexual scandal. Slitscan, “descended from reality programming and the network tabloids of the late twentieth century”, (139) feeds on fame. It is a show “so popular that it had evolved into something akin to the old idea of a network. It was flanked and buffered by spinoffs and peripherals, each designed to shunt the viewer back to the crucial core, the familiar and reliably bloody altar”. (139) Much to Kathy’s fury, Rez has “stubbornly refused to destroy himself, murder someone, become active in politics, admit to an interesting substance-abuse problem or arcane sexual addiction”. (17) Kathy is right in her belief that Rez defies the fame food chain; Rez is all image creation and tweaked video, disinterested in flesh-and-blood concerns. When Kathy tries to get to Rez by blackmailing Laney, Blackwell steps in and puts a stop to it, demonstrating comprehensively his masculine power over even a strong, if vicious, woman. He tells Laney:

“I’m going to have a conversation with your Kathy Torrance. I will explain certain things to her. Nothing complicated. Simple, simple protocols of cause and effect. ... And I will leave your Kathy with the deepest possible conviction that if she crosses me, she will die—but only after she’s been made to desire that, absolutely.” (1276)

Here is the other “food chain”, that of gender dominance, with Rez at the top, then Blackwell with both his strength and the reflected glory of Rez, followed by other men under their protection, and then women. The one possible exception to this traditional pattern is Arleigh McCrae, one of Lo/Rez’s techies who has “four telephone numbers and two addresses, neither of them physical” on her business card. (1129) Unfortunately, despite being a whizz-bang expert at what she does for a living (like Molly), Arleigh ends up being little more in the text than a love interest for Laney, establishing his credentials as an attractive heterosexual male.

Not only is Rez beyond the reach of Slitscan; the pop star is also far beyond the reach of mere mortal women. When the (mistaken) word gets out over the net that he has been killed, thousands of young Japanese girls gather from all over Tokyo, weeping and carrying candles, to mourn outside the
“love hotel”—wickedly called the Hotel Di—where he is supposed to have died. (I 267) His fans worship and adore him, and the distance he maintains from them, kept in large part by Blackwell who thus partakes of his fame, preserves this godlike aura.

Idolising the Masculine

Laney’s character finds a foil in that of Keith Blackwell, the grotesque, giant Australian bodyguard employed by Lo/Rez. Blackwell rescued Rez after Rez had been taken hostage during a prison concert, and Rez’s lawyers later had Blackwell’s sentence reversed. (I 149-50) Blackwell is a standover merchant (I 150) who favours technology of a more mediæval kind than is usual in a Gibson novel, such as meat-cleavers, roofing nails and tomahawks (although he does have a hideous dental prosthesis [I 276] and uses a mobile telephone). Blackwell is an example of overdetermined masculine strength and threat: one of his ears is missing, his body is covered in a dense network of scars, like a primitive warrior’s scarification as ritual initiation to manhood. He is cast in a traditional male role of fighter and protector. Yet, for all his brute strength and frightening appearance, Blackwell too is submissive before the power of Rez’s wealth and fame. Like brave Molly, brawny Blackwell is subordinate to the dominant male figure, although for different socio-cultural reasons. When Rez inveigles Blackwell into accepting his (Rez’s) plans for Rei Toei, Blackwell’s eloquent opposition is met with bland reassurance:

“Have to tell you, Rez.” Blackwell stood at the foot of the bed. “I’ve seen you go with women I wouldn’t take to a shit-fight on a dark night, but at least they were human. Hear what I’m saying?”

“I do, Keithy,” the singer said. “I know how you feel about her. But you’ll come around. It’s the way of things, Keithy. The new way. New world.” (I 204)

Faced with Rez’s determination to unite with the idoru, Blackwell complains

18 Apart from his extraordinary appearance, Blackwell’s nationality is also figured as exotic. The text attempts to convey Australianness in his language, but unfortunately for this antipodal reader, it often fails to come off. The most basic indicator of this is Blackwell’s nickname for Rez—“Rozzer”—which is a cockney word for a police officer. Rezza or Rezzo would have been closer to the mark. He also says at one point, “We shall sort them well and fucking out” (I 73), not a construction much heard in Australian slang; “… sort them out well and fucking truly” is more likely. The limitations of an American perspective are also apparent in the way that the text insistently makes heavy-handed fun of Japan’s obsession with oddly combined words for the names of products (e.g. a vodka called Come Back Salmon, a building called Freedom Shower Banff), and remarks several times on Japan’s contrary habit of driving on the “wrong” side of the road, a blatant North American bias.
that his old dad might think he was “just minding a fool with a bloated sense of himself”, but then he tearfully capitulates, reminded of his release by Rez from jail:

Rez came up off the bed, surprising Laney with his speed, a performer’s grace, and then he was in front of Blackwell, his hands on the huge shoulders. “But you don’t think that, do you, Keithy? You didn’t in Pentridge. Not when you came for me. And not when I came back for you.”

Blackwell’s eyes glistened. ...

A silence followed. “Out of line, I was, Rozzer,” Blackwell said, breaking it.

Rez clapped the bodyguard’s shoulder, releasing him. “Stressed. I know.” Rez smiled. (1204-5)

Rez’s persuasive grace has to do with his power as a star with wealth enough to buy whatever he wants. Both Laney and Blackwell submit to his dominance, which makes it all the more noticeable that Rez eschews the opportunistic lechery customary to male rock stars, and seeks union with what another character calls “some software dolly wank toy”. (1144) The nature of masculinity is problematic here: the typically rampant heterosexual masculinity of rock’n’roll opts for a non-physical object of desire, and traditionally dominant brawn and violence submit to the power of money, even when in the form of a slight, Jaggeresque rock star.

Looking Good in VR

Chia and her fellow fans of the rock band Lo/Rez, also young girls, meet regularly on the net to discuss their heroes and exchange information, audio and video clips about the band. Chia is technologically proficient, although not the hacker that Synners’ Sam is. She takes technology for granted, floats through her days “supported by global systems she’d never have to bother comprehending”. (114) Her relationship to technology is thus immediately represented as on the level of need-to-know, rather than the in-depth expertise of the true hacker. She owns a particularly beautiful as well as sophisticated laptop computer called a Sandbenders. This incorporates audiovisual VR in the form of connectable gloves and goggles, and is loaded with VR software. With this equipment Chia is able to “port” to her private net site, a virtual Venice replica software program given to her by her father. In virtual Venice, she is guided by a “Music Master”, a male “software agent”, or construct, who looks like David Bowie. (143-4) When she flies to Tokyo to meet with her fellow Japanese Lo/Rez chapter members, they set up a VR site which looks like a traditional Japanese interior, and appear in
guises of their choice, mostly formal kimonos. (Why Chia has to go to Tokyo
in person to take part in a virtual meeting is not explained, other than by the
fact that she and her fellow Seattle chapter friends are young and silly, or
possibly that they, unlike the male netheads, have not fully comprehended
the advantages of VR.) Chia is very alert to appearance, her own and that of
others she meets in VR settings:

Chia herself was presenting currently as an only slightly tweaked, she felt, version of
how the mirror told her she actually looked. Less nose, maybe. Lips a little fuller. But
that was it. Almost. (I 12)

She is annoyed when the head of the Tokyo chapter, Hiromi, presents as a
silver robot. Hiromi is:

a slender, chrome-skinned thing like mercury constrained within the form of a girl.
The face was smooth, only partially featured, eyeless, with twin straight rows of small
holes where a mouth should have been. That would be Hiromi Ogawa, and Chia
immediately decided to believe that she was overweight. (I 98)

For Chia, fatness is clearly a serious blemish (the complexity of the
programming required to produce such an image is not considered by Chia,
who is herself wearing off-the-rack “virtual designer stuff” which she has
bought for the meeting).

While Chia’s Japanese host, Mitsuko, can scarcely believe the
Sandbenders is a computer let alone a computer made in America, her
seventeen-year-old hacker brother, Masahiko, immediately appreciates it, an
indicator both of superior US tech and of masculine expertise with such
technology. Masahiko takes Chia to Walled City, or Hak Nam, the elaborate
VR domain he helped create. Masahiko is an “otaku”, translated as a
“pathological-techno-fetishist-with-social-deficit”. (I 88) Chia is familiar
with the term:

“Well,” Chia said, “it’s a boy thing, right? The otaku guys at my last school were
into, like, plastic anime babes, military simulations, and trivia. Bigtime into trivia.”
(I 88)

But Chia finds Masahiko and his friends are deeply serious about their tech-
nological calling, regarding it as a quasi-military priesthood which naturally
excludes women. She carefully notes how he looks, comparing it to his
“realtime” appearance wearing a “dark, oversized tunic, vaguely military,
buttoned to its high, banded collar” (I 121):

She looked at him, curious to see how he’d present. A basic scan job, maybe a year out
of date: his hair was shorter. He wore the same black tunic. (I 183)

When she reaches the Walled City and meets the kingpin hackers, one of them, called the Etruscan, presents as a centipede in a glass; another, Gomi Boy, as a cartoon figure. Male hackers are completely indifferent or deliberately eccentric in the way they present in VR, while female netusers are excessively aware of their image. In a further confirmation of conservative values and masculinist discursive constructions, Hak Nam, the result of extraordinary technological prowess and a domain of immense complexity akin to *Neuromancer*’s matrix is, of course, off limits to females, including the idoru, Rei Toei, whose programming was partially written by the genius male hackers within its virtual spaces. Even Zona Rosa, one of the older Seattle Lo/Rez fans (and clearly the most technologically accomplished), who has built herself a virtual country on the net (something which Chia and the others find strange), is not allowed unaccompanied into the city itself. (I 210) Zona tells Chia:

> the people who founded Hak Nam were angry, because the net had been very free, you could do what you wanted, but then the governments and the companies, they had different ideas of what you could, what you couldn’t do. So these people, they found a way to unravel something. A little place, a piece, like cloth. ... And they pushed it through, to the other side ... They went there to get away from the laws. To have no laws, like when the net was new. (I 221)

This lawless playground, a virtual frontier equivalent to the “wild west”, is in no way significantly different from Gibson’s earlier representation of the matrix, whose masculinist attributes I have already discussed. When it is revealed that in real life, Zona Rosa is the avatar, or persona of a twenty-six-year-old Mexican woman who has been severely deformed by an “environmental syndrome”, and who, for the past five years, has been “in complete denial of her physical self”, (I 285) her net expertise is explained: she is not a proper girl.

In this scenario, despite the fact that females are using advanced technology in quite creative ways, clearly a fan club chat site is not the same as a whole virtual city in which idorus are designed.19 The same set of conventions and behaviours—a feminine obsession with appearance, the exclusion of women from places of power—which apply rigidly in the real world also apply in *Idoru*’s VR.

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19 There is one mention of a woman from Walled City, who helped Zona set up her virtual country (I 221), but the overwhelming impression the text gives is that it is a male domain.
Chia is overcome when she meets Rez, but is also sharp enough to notice that the real Rez is not only much older than his tweaked video images have suggested, but that he is probably quite boring as a person:

Now she'd seen him in real life, somehow that had taken over from all the other ways she'd known him before, and she felt kind of funny about him. Confused. ... Because now she knew there were rooms [the fans] never saw, or even dreamed of, where crazy things, or even just boring things, happened, and that was where the stars came from. And it was something like that that worried her now when she thought of Rez coming to see her. That and how he really was her mother's age. (1281-82)

For Chia, the text's real idoru is Rez, and he has toppled off his plinth. Not that this makes the slightest difference to Rez or to the masculinist fame-money-power structure he represents. And for the rest of the world, including Laney who has ongoing employment with the Lo/Rez entourage as a "court prognosticator", (1275) Rez's dominance continues unquestioned. While doubt is cast by Chia's disillusionment over the actual person beneath the "hollow armature of celebrity", (I 229) the social milieu represented in *Idoru* valorises the dominance of Rez as a masculine public persona. Rez and the idoru are two sides of the same coin. Each is constructed out of money and power, but if Rez is "heads", the king of this particular currency, Rei Toei is "tails", the side that tells how much the coin is worth. They are fame personified, idols whose public images are transformed by digital wizardry into the stuff of ordinary people's dreams, and who float above them on an impenetrable cloud of wealth, forever out of reach.

**A Small Step for a Man**

*Virtual Light, Idoru* and *Synners* take steps toward envisioning—and therefore allowing the possibility of—a technoculture in which women and men can at least be friends, care about each other, and work together within a technological, cyborg milieu. That, at least, gives cause for optimism. Gibson has sought to explore the lives of the little people, youngsters, misfits and the marginalised—people for whom connection to technology as the primary source of power in their society is intermittent and often involuntary or coerced. Rydell and Laney are kindly, hopeful, compassionate men singularly free of the kind of self-obsessed cynicism typical of other Gibson heroes, while Gibson's naming of the unfortunate, deformed Zona Rosa after a grossly polluted locale in Mexico City (linked to the opening pages of *Virtual Light*, VL 2–3), obliquely indicates an uncharacteristically negative view of environmental degradation. There is also a new note of humour and amused
ironic comment in Gibson’s later writing, a note that is shared with Cadigan. Synners suggests in addition that there is an ethical dimension to technological progress which must be taken into account.

However, none of the three novels succeeds in representing uncompromised feminist characters: as figurative or literal cyborgs, these characters participate in the technological opportunities of their world on a basis delimited by their gender and by their position in societies dominated by masculinised technology. At heart, Rydell and Laney are as unconcerned with their wider world in terms of political consciousness as Case, Bobby, or Johnny. They unquestioningly accept their right to technological advantage, albeit mitigated by their lowly positions in their societies. Even Synners falls short of imagining a world in which female characters of any status whatever are represented as fully equal to male characters, principally because of the way technology is portrayed as both a masculine prerogative as well as the main source of power and agency. The societies pictured by both Gibson and Cadigan are stuck fast in ideologies of technology which preclude female characters from unproblematically obtaining or exercising power.
Conclusion

Beating the Shrug Factor

THROUGHOUT this study of cyborg-SF, I have pointed to links between the fictional narratives of the cyborg technosphere, and those of flesh life. I have argued that each feeds off the other in ways that perpetuate discursive configurations and representations of gender, suggesting this as a powerful reason for looking critically at cyborg-SF. In flesh life, to be sure, increasing numbers of technologically and/or socially marginalised groups—especially women—are discovering the Net, becoming adept at using it, and appropriating it in highly inventive ways. But even though more women take to the Net every day (in both senses of “take to”), utilising its unparalleled opportunities for communication, networking and the formation of community (traditionally women’s strengths), still the predominant users, designers and engineers of virtual culture are young, white, middle-class American males with all the cultural myopia these categories entail. Such masculinist bias is reflected in cyborg-SF narratives, where a reader looks almost in vain for any reflection of a strong, positive women’s presence. Predominantly, as my study has shown, representations of women and of the feminine in cyborg-SF (especially cyberpunk) adhere to the conservative, the traditional and the conventional, particularly in relation to technology. This is the case despite hopeful qualities demonstrated by such characters as Molly in “Johnny Mnemonic” and Neuromancer, Jian and Trouble in Scott’s texts, and Dorsey’s Angel.

The work of William Gibson, on whom I have focused as the pre-eminent cyberpunk author, has inevitably influenced all of the subsequently published texts I have discussed. Most of Gibson’s narratives attest to a prevailing ideology of hegemonic masculinism, which retains an almost desperate determination to preserve its dominance in the field of technological prowess. Even technology itself, in the form of artificial intelligence, is rendered masculine. Such valorisation and appropriation of microelectronic might is associated with the reduction in importance of

actual physical prowess, with a concomitant, paradoxical twist in gender roles. *Neuromancer* illustrates this especially vividly: the weedy Case is magisterial in cyberspace, while Molly takes on the role of muscle: fighter and protector. Traditionally, only male characters achieve their heroic status through physical feats of derring-do. Yet Molly, whose derring-do is second to none, is clearly a less important character with less important tasks than Case. These gender-based roles have become a kind of benchmark for cyborg-SF: every subsequent text must negotiate Gibson’s originary representations. In cyberpunk, and in cyborg-SF more generally, Woman’s long-standing cultural identification with the body, with materiality, is reinforced through a paradoxical identification with brawn, while linkages between Man, mind and spirit find new exposition in the disembodied mind games of cyberspace.

This value-laden polarity is not easily escaped, as my study shows. Writers such as Pat Cadigan, Melissa Scott and Candas Jane Dorsey attempt to produce cyborg narratives which portray female characters who are technologically expert, autonomous, powerful, and engaged in their societies. In many ways they have succeeded: for example, Trouble and Jian represent a triumphant appropriation of masculine expertise and technological domains; Sam and Gina are equal in skills to any of the human male characters; Angel gets her own back using traditionally masculine talents and equipment. Yet, as I have suggested, most of these characters are represented, to a greater or lesser extent, as rebels in their worlds, struggling to assert their rights, to gain access to technological fields of enterprise, to be simply, unproblematically recognised as the equal of their brothers. In a milieu whose special technologies of disembodiment and virtual presence ought to transcend categories such as gender, and allow for—even encourage—the elimination of gender-based binaries, nevertheless gender bias and inequality are disappointingly virulent. On the face of it, such rebellion is a feminist act; however, the persistent representation of future societies where women are still faced with discrimination and inequity, and still need to rebel, is a little tedious. Moreover, the typical manner in which these female cyborgs rebel is as a personal act of defiance with no wider political or social context. The radical possibilities for political coalition and activism offered by global communications networks—such as those advocated or described by Haraway and Poster—are forgone.

Is it possible, then, as I asked in my introduction, to write feminist cyborg-SF? Based on the texts I have examined here, the answer has to be a
qualified negative. A more definite no answers the question of whether it is possible to write cyberpunk as such with a feminist perspective. The reason for the latter answer is largely due to cyberpunk’s founding father, William Gibson, who set the ground rules for a fiction in which the lone, renegade, outcast male, following his forebears in *noir* detective fiction, adopts exclusivist forms of power and modes of existence which are rendered inimical to female and/or feminist characters. Gibson not only invented the cyberpunk form, but also developed its characteristic alienated, violent, punk mood. Cyberpunk appears to be stuck fast in the model created for it by Gibson, where contempt for the “meat”—the body—becomes a new assertion of masculine mind over feminine matter. In spite of the attempts of several critics I have cited, it is difficult to propose a feminist reading of the socially antagonistised, self-absorbed punk male hero, who survives on a diet of drugs and cynicism in a horribly ruined world, and who fails to care in the slightest degree about it, or about anyone other than himself and his solitary, addictive technopleasures. And while tactical feminist pleasures are available in relation to characters such as Molly, Trouble and Gina, they are ultimately overwhelmed and dissipated by a technosociality characterised by patriarchal hegemonic values. This technosociality looks away from political accountability, away from economic and technological equity, and away from social justice. It eschews community and personal responsibility, while glorifying obligation-free individual liberty. Such a combination is not acceptable to a feminist ethos, and is totally opposed to the kinds of political engagement called for by Haraway.

Masculinist texts such as Gibson’s illustrate what I call “the shrug factor”. The world is catastrophically polluted while the technosphere is run for and by ruthless multinationals beyond the reach of political change? Shrug ... Women have gained almost no discernible ground as autonomous, socially powerful human beings in the cyberpunk future? Shrug ... Cyberspace and virtual presence retain the gendered hierarchical dualisms of real life/flesh life? Shrug ... Technological advances in bodily prostheses and augmentation are still hidebound by traditional ideas of masculine and feminine appropriateness? Shrug. As Andrew Ross observes, cyberpunk “harbours no utopian impulses, offers no blueprint for progressive social change, and generally evades the responsibility to imagine futures ... more democratic than the present”. The thrust toward social transformation in-

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2 Ross, 1991a, p.8.
herent in feminism, and in a feminist worldview, is nowhere to be seen in cyberpunk. This cyberpunk “shrug” tends to influence the whole field of cyborg-SF. In the texts I have examined, it is not the technologies themselves which are intrinsically inimical to feminist purposes, merely the uses to which they have been put and the ideologies which underlie those uses. Although “science and technology are the dominant languages in our knowledge hierarchy”,3 in the imagined worlds of cyborg-SF, women have so far spoken these languages only haltingly. Sadly, with the exception of the growth of virtual communities (and even within these radically new formations, misogyny, racism and other prejudices persist), much the same could be said for the contemporary ethos of flesh life technoculture.

There are grounds for hope, however. For example, where cyborg-SF texts do display a feminist sensibility, they tend to address directly the question of the body with a kind of fascinated, exploratory relish. Gibson has his heroes performing a “god-trick”4 of becoming pure mind; a disembodied, universalised point of view; a bodiless male gaze; an all-seeing virtual eye zooming through the neon chasms and corridors of the matrix. By contrast, the feminist-oriented texts that I have examined pose questions such as, how might the body as such be represented in cyberspace? What might the consequences of virtual sexual contact be between masked genders? Could a female subject be truly equal and free to wander in a virtual embodiment of her choice—a cyberflâneuse—in the public places of cyberspace without fear of harassment? Feminist cyborg-SF writers tend to see virtual, cyberspatial existence as a different but recognisable kind of embodiment.

At the beginning of this study, I defined cyborg-SF as a fiction which has as a central narrative interest the use and effects of corporeally interpenetrative communications technologies and body–machine combinations, and which also imagines and explores societies which use such technology. These defining characteristics of cyborg-SF should offer a broader scope for feminist versions than has so far been the case, and certainly broader than strictly cyberpunk representations allow. However, it remains to be seen if either cyborg-SF, or its Siamese twin, late twentieth-century technoculture, are able to move beyond their present status where both reflect a world in which masculine anxieties still find reasons to exclude women from the unfolding domains of the technosphere.

3 Ross, 1991a, p.150.
4 I have borrowed this term from Zoë Sofia. See Sofia, 1993, pp.83–8.
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