

Transreferentiality: Mapping the Margins of Postmodern Fiction

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Abstract

Keywords: Postmodern, fiction, postmodernist fiction, science fiction, sf, possible-worlds theory, worlds, narratology, focalisation, immersion, reader experience, M. John Harrison, William Gibson, Jeff Noon

This thesis starts from the observation that, while it is common for commentators to divide postmodern fiction into two general fields – one experimental and anti-mimetic, the other cautiously mimetic, there remains a fairly significant field of postmodern texts that use largely mimetic approaches but represent worlds that are categorically distinct from actuality. This third group is even more pronounced if popular culture and “commercial” fiction, in particular sf and fantasy, are taken into account. Additionally, the third category has the interesting characteristic that the texts within this group very often generate unusual loyalty among its fans.

Based on a renewed investigation of the main genre critics in postmodern fiction, the first chapter suggests a tripartite division of postmodern fiction, into **formalist**, **metamimetic**, and **transreferential** texts. These are provisionally circumscribed by their **reference worlds**: formalist fiction attempts to derail its own capacity for presenting a world; metamimetic fiction presents mediated versions of worlds closely reminiscent of actuality; and transreferential fiction sets its narrative in worlds that are experienced as such, but are clearly distinct from actuality.

If transreferential fiction deals with alternate worlds, it also very often relies on the reader’s **immersion** in the fictional world to provide unique, often subversive, fictional experiences. This process can be identified as the **exploration** of the fictional world, and it is very often guided so as to be experienced as a virtual reality of sorts.

If transreferential texts are experienced as **interactive** in this sense, it is likely that they convey experiences and insights in ways different from either of the other two strands of postmodern fiction.

In order to investigate the **interactive experience** provided by these texts, an extended conceptual and analytical set is proposed, rooted primarily in **Ricoeurian hermeneutics** and **possible-worlds** theory. These two main theoretical approaches approximately correspond to the temporal and the spatial dimensions of texts, respectively. Much of the power of these texts is

rooted in the care they take to guide the reader through their fictional worlds and the experiences offered by the narrative, often at the hand of fiction-internal ‘guides’.

These theoretical approaches are supplement by sf theoretical research and by Aleid Fokkema’s study of postmodern character.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 apply the theoretical toolset to three paradigmatic transreferential texts: sf New Wave author M John Harrison’s *Viriconium* sequence; Gibson’s *Sprawl* trilogy; and Jeff Noon’s *Vurt* and *Pollen*, texts that have much in common with cyberpunk but which make much more extensive use of formalist techniques. Each chapter has a slightly different main focus, matching the text in question, respectively: aesthetic parameters and world-creation strategies of transreferential fiction; close “guidance” of the reader and extrapolation; and virtual reality and identity games.

The final chapter presents the findings from the research conducted in the initial study. The findings stem from the central insight that transreferential texts deploy a powerful suit of mimetic strategies to maximise immersion, but simultaneously introduce a variety of interactive strategies. Transreferential fiction balances immersion against interactivity, often by selectively maximising the mimesis of some elements while allowing others to be presented through formalist strategies, which requires a reading mode that is simultaneously immersive and open to challenging propositions. A significant implication of this for critical studies – both literary and sf – is that the Barthesian formalist reading model is insufficient to deal with transreferential texts. Rather, texts like these demand a layered reading approach which facilitates immersion on a first reading and supplements it critically on a second.

The final chapter further considers how widely and in what forms the themes and strategies found in the preceding chapters recur in other texts from the proposed transreferential supergenre, including sf, magic realist and limit-postmodernist texts.

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Notes on the Text

1. *Notes on the bibliographical style*
 - 1.1 In the body of the text, ***bold italic*** is used to identify series, which are referenced generally or *in toto* fairly often in this thesis due to the study field. On the one hand, this provides accuracy within economy, avoiding extended lists of texts. On the other, it helps avoid confusion, especially with regard to ***Viriconium*** the series from Viriconium the fictional city, *Viriconium* the 1988 collection, *In Viriconium* (the novel), *Viriconium Nights* (the linked collection) and “Viriconium Knights” the short story. It also provides a way to make statements that apply globally to a series that is both more concise and more graceful than repeatedly appending “the novel sequence” or listing the texts.
 - 1.2 Novels are referenced in the text by original publication date rather than edition date. In the bibliography, the original publication date is given first, followed by the edition used (if both different and relevant) to indicate historical sequence. There is one exception: Harrison reworked *In Viriconium* (1982) for republication in the later collection. As I elected to work with the later version (assuming this to be closer to Harrison’s “vision”) I use the later date (1988).
 - 1.3 In-text references to texts are rendered in *Title Case* to increase readability and avoid awkward constructions like ***Star wars***.
 - 1.4 The second chapter, especially, uses **boldface** to identify critical terms on first mention. While this convention is more often used in textbooks, adopting it seemed prudent in the light of the proliferation of theoretical terms, including theoretical use of ordinary words like **difference**.
 - 1.5 tegeus-Cromis (Chapter 3) is not a typographical error; this is how Harrison writes the name, including in the first sentence of the narrative proper.
2. *Language Use*
 - 2.1 This text makes use of Standard British English and not the spelling of the Oxford English Dictionary with regard to words ending with –ise/ize and –yse/zye for the sake of visual consistency.
3. *Terminology*
 - 3.1 Following Scott McCloud, comix has been used instead of comics to assert difference between humorous, short ‘comics’ (more properly, “cartoon strips”) and longer, more serious formats.
 - 3.2 SF in initial position and sf in the sentence have been used. While sf, SF, Science Fiction, science fiction, and other variants are all found in the literature, the above seems to be the more contemporary usage (exemplified by Broderick, 1995 and Csicsery-Ronay, 2008). “Sci-fi” refers (derogatorily) to mass media with science fiction window dressing.
4. *Formatting*
 - 4.1 While every effort has been taken to be consistent, conflicts between consistency of spacing between sections (and sometimes block quotations and text) and considerations of readability or logical flow (for example, to avoid a new section heading being widowed with two lines) have been resolved in favour of the latter.
 - 4.2 Chapter and section headings have been rendered in *Title Case* to avoid unnecessary ambiguity and awkward readability.

1 INTRODUCTION

[...It] may be the function of the most corrosive literature to contribute to making a new kind of reader appear, one who is himself suspicious, because reading ceases to be a trusting voyage made in the company of a reliable narrator, becoming instead a struggle with the implied author, a struggle leading the reader back to himself

(Ricoeur, 1988: 164).

In this thesis I revisit the field of postmodern fiction, aiming to include in its ambit some of the contemporaneous experiments in genre fiction, specifically fantasy and science fiction, by approaching the field with regard to the **reference worlds** evoked through the texts. Through this I construct a subfield I call **transreferential** postmodern fiction within which postmodern fantasy and science fiction (hereafter sf; see *Notes on the Text*) are the paradigmatic genres. I set out to explore the fictions as creating external reference worlds, in contrast to the more common postmodern approach of viewing textual worlds as almost exclusively self-referential. Instead, I argue that transreferential postmodern fiction strives to reconcile or overlap self-referential formalist approaches and immersive mimetic approaches. In possible-worlds terms, I see them as overlapping the tension between immersion and interactivity, the underlying aspects of virtual realities. The short-circuiting of these opposites makes postmodern fantasy and sf particularly suited for the presentation of radically different modes-of-being. I propose that such presentation makes use of specialised strategies in order to generate particular reading experiences.

In this initial chapter I give a broad historical contextualisation, after which I illustrate the relevance of this proposed subfield with reference to some of the main genre critics in the field. The redescription of postmodern fiction to include transreferentiality occasions the introduction and contextualisation of possible-worlds theory and Ricoeurian hermeneutics. These ideas are then combined to investigate a reading strategy appropriate to transreferential fiction.

The term postmodern has been used to refer to literature, culture, social phenomena, and numerous critical, theoretical and scientific stances, fashions and practices. All of these share a tendency to question established practices, but more specifically, a self-aware and self-critical attitude. Though common

in genre criticism, the term postmodern has been by no means been universally accepted or stabilised as historical descriptor, and adoption has invariably been awkward. However, most of the phenomena subsumed under the term emerged in the period between the 1960s – especially the late 1960s – and the early twenty-first century, making it a convenient – if not wholly precise – historical label.

While use of the term postmodern comes under fire in philosophy, science, and history, the term “postmodernist” fiction is fairly widely accepted in literary studies. Even if there is some disagreement as to the definition of the term, “postmodernist” fiction comprises a fairly stable central canon of authors: Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Umberto Eco, John Fowles, Italo Calvino, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, and others. There is also a second circle of authors who are invariably mentioned in the studies, but sometimes excluded from the “postmodernist” canon. These fall into two broad groups: the first, “magic realist” authors (usually, but not exclusively predating the main canon, and almost invariably cited as precursors): Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and others; and secondly, a wide group of authors mostly from the 1980s onwards who share some traits and most interests with the central canon. This group includes Peter Akroyd, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, D.M. Thomas, Graham Swift, Angela Carter and others. Finally, some serious attempts have been made by sf critics to describe sf as a forerunner of postmodernism, and by literary critics to include a number of sf authors, most notably Kurt Vonnegut, J.G. Ballard, Ursula K LeGuin, William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and Rudy Rucker (the last three being *bona fide* cyberpunk novelists; cyberpunk as a whole has been co-opted into the “postmodernist” canon by several critics).

Despite protestations that postmodernism is all-inclusive, the commonly used, though not exclusive form of the term “postmodernist” reveals a bias towards explicitly self-aware fiction. Like “mannerist”, it implies deliberation: an attempt to work in a specific style, or using a specific approach or set of approaches. Without necessarily assuming anything about the authors concerned, commentary of postmodernist fiction very often points towards its awareness of literary criticism and its affinities with (especially poststructuralist) theory.

The rise of postmodernist fiction, in this theoretically informed, highly self-aware sense of the word, has coincided with the triumph of the construction of literary fiction as a distinct category. In fact, there is a case to be made that the institutionalised study of literature over the twentieth century has enabled and even invited the rise of a distinct genre of literary fiction. Over the last forty or so years literary fiction has become a commercially viable genre, which is marketed parallel to so-called genre fiction.

Postmodernist fiction has become a kind of spearhead of literary fiction, allowing a close dialogue between literary authors, their audiences, and commercial literature.

Looking at *postmodern* fiction, in the historical sense suggested above, that is, as fiction emerging from the postmodern era, both allows a wider field and reveals the affinities between canonised literary postmodern fiction and the “genre fiction” that borders it. Such affinities spread wider than expected. For example, the revisioning of history that is typical of much postmodernist fiction is common in “romantic” fiction, such as the *Angelique*¹ series (1959-1985) by Serge and Anne Golon. Popular romantic novelist Danielle Steele has written historical fantasies, as well as both (romantic) sf and fantasy novels. Fragmentation of narrative and the relative problematisation of character has become common fare in texts as divergent as Eric Van Lustbader’s martial arts action series, Steven King, *Harry Potter*, and comix.

Fiction after all arises in response to the cultural and technological world that surrounds it. Some would argue that fiction is an attempt to model the ways in which the world in general changes, though literary and genre fiction does this with varying measures of self-awareness. This is true as much of literary fiction as of ‘genre fiction’. Contemporary literary fiction has eventually accepted cellphones, email and computers as much as has sf and for that matter adventure fiction². “Pure” fantasy, fully set in alternate worlds, might seem to be exempt from this, but even fantasy at some levels models actual-world political currents.

Broadly speaking, postmodern fiction represents a spectrum from completely “escapist” alternate-world fiction – fantasy and sf – through largely “realistic” adventure or romantic genre fiction to fully experimental literary fiction like that of the French Oulipo group. Along the way some “hybrid” genres occur, such as magic realism. None of these forms are exclusively popular or exclusively literary, though: literary fiction includes texts that are realistic, bar a more or less obvious questioning of its reliability, such as Alasdair Gray’s *1982: Janine* (2005) which on close inspection turns out to be fully set in the mind and consciousness of its narrator. SF includes the highly literary exponents of cyberpunk, among others, and genre fiction, at the extreme, contains fairly non-realistic satires such as the *Adrian Mole* books.

¹ Throughout the thesis I adopt the convention of using ***bold italics*** to identify series or sequences of novels, both to circumvent extended lists of texts in simple examples, and to help distinguish between, for example, Viriconium the city, *Viriconium* the collection, “Viriconium Knights” the short story, and ***Viriconium*** the series.

² “Literary” fiction appears to be comparatively slow to accommodate new technologies, possibly as a side effect of a desire to have a longer shelf-life than genre fiction.

Coincident with (and probably inspired by) Roland Barthes' distinction between *lisible* and *scriptible* writing (1973) – that is, writing which invites submission to the text and immersion in its world as opposed to writing that invites the reader to question and complete the text – critical attention to the postmodern canon has focused mainly on two strands: on the one hand highly experimental texts that attempt to disrupt any attempt to read them immersively; and on the other, texts that (re)present believable situations, usually historical, but make it clear that the world is textually mediated.

However, the extended field of postmodern fiction also contains a vast number of texts lying at what might be called the margins of postmodernist fiction; texts that are immersive *even while* they question the conventions of reality and often of literature. Fantasy and sf – whether combined or separately – form the bulk of this group, around 19% of total e-book sales in 2010 (Senior, 2011).³

These texts have received some critical attention under the general heading of “fantasy” (for example, Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy, the literature of subversion* [1981]), with magic realist fiction often drawn into the discussion. Especially since the 1970s, sf has developed a healthy critical tradition. Additionally, there have also been a fairly significant number of atypical works by ‘literary’ authors that would fall into this category. I believe this group of texts, composed of what Bertens and D'Haen call “*Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*” (1995) is large and significant enough to constitute a specialised category. As a general guideline, it may be noted that what is commonly measured in evaluations of “realism” are the fictional **worlds** or ontologies in which the action of texts are set. Provisionally, and for convenience' sake, these may be labelled alternate-world fiction, although it is not uncommon for such texts to explore both actual-like and alternative worlds.

³ Reliable sales figures for the publication industry are difficult to come by, and more so for ebooks. Senior writes, “One of the problems publishers face in setting strategy is the absence of industry-wide data on ebook sales” (2011). C.J. Anders responds to a reader's question, “There's no link to the data [on book sales]. What there is is, I asked a publishing insider who has access to the Bookscan data. And he told me, not for attribution [...]” (2009). In fact, there are two or three industry sources available – at more than \$2000 a copy (Amy 2012). Even James' figure – with sf making up 15 per cent of fiction sales in 1993 (1994:202) – comes from a single book store.

1.1 Out in the fields: M. John Harrison and other wanderers

An interesting example of the interrelationship of postmodern fiction, fantasy, and sf is provided by M. John Harrison, one of the first ‘postmodern’ theorists of sf and an author of fiction who has wandered from fantasy to sf to postmodern fiction and back to sf. As main reviewer for *New Worlds* magazine from 1967 to 1976 under Michael Moorcock’s editorship (Bould, 2005), Harrison became a well-respected critic and reviewer of both sf and mainstream fiction. Through his reviews and editorials Harrison helped to establish the tastes, style and attitudes of the authors of the British New Wave. His extensive criticism shows wide reading across genres, as well as in contemporary theory, especially poststructuralism.

There is a curious disconnect between Harrison’s stated critical views for confronting the reader on the one hand, and reader reception to his fiction on the other, which invariably points to the immersive qualities of his prose.

Harrison’s sustained criticism of sf and fantasy is perhaps the most immediately striking facet of his vision as critic. Like Moorcock, he is famously critical of Tolkien, believing that fantasy (and sf) has become “a literature of comfort” (Harrison, 1971[2005]:84)⁴, a genre which repeats form and content and which functions to “[carefully rationalise] any change in the status quo” (85), and that extended, mappable worlds like Tolkien’s invite readers to get stuck in the mechanics of the world. Overly detailed, or rather, precisely mappable, sf and fantasy disempowers itself as far as Harrison is concerned. In his opinion fictional worlds are metaphors. When readers (or writers, for that matter) become obsessed with the detail (“the moment you begin to ask (or rather, to answer) questions like, [...] “Just how might an Orc regiment organise itself?”) they “[dilute] the poetic power” (245) of the images, effectively flattening vehicle and tenor into one surface sign.

He argues that the obsession with world details (of both fans and authors), with surface, has led to sf featuring comfortable stereotypes that resemble, and therefore do not confront, the readers who are looking for a perpetual excuse not to become involved in the real world (1971[2005]:84-5). Or as Graham Fraser puts it in an article on Harrison’s *The Course of the Heart* (1990), “The critique of an adolescent desire to escape the claims of the world is Harrison’s major recurrent theme, whether it takes fantastic form [...] or more realistic shape (as in *Climbers*)” (in Bould, 2005: 301).

⁴ In a memorable turn of phrase, in “By Tennyson out of Disney” (1971) he argues that science fiction has perpetuated the vision of A.A. Milne rather than that of H.G. Wells.

Harrison articulates his suspicion of fantasy rather forcibly in a fairly recent blog post:

You can't hope to control things. Learn to love the vertigo of experience instead.

Any child can see that the map is not the ground. You cannot make a "reliable" map. A map, like a scientific theory, or consciousness itself, is no more than a dream of control. The conscious mind operates at forty or fifty bits a second, and disorder is infinitely deep. Better admit that. Better lie back and enjoy it - especially since, without the processes implied by it, no one could write (or read) books anyway. Writing is a con. Viriconium manipulates map-to-ground expectations to imply a depth that isn't there. Tolkien does the same thing. Or do you think that Tolkien somehow manages to unload an actual landscape into your living room? If you believe that, get treatment

(Harrison, 2001[2005]:246).

Comments like these indicate that Harrison believes himself to be writing experimental, non-referential fiction – and yet, the truth is quite a bit more complex, as is clear from his writing itself, much of the critical commentary, and his critical interest in others' writing.

To take these in reverse: as critic, Harrison's highest praise goes not to clever plots, complex worlds, or aesthetic writing (though he does appreciate the latter), but to complex presentations of character. Of the characters in the stories in Harvey Jacobs's *The Egg of the Glak and other stories* (1969) he writes, "the story comes out of the characters – ineluctably, action and reaction: Jacobs throws people together, and they spark – and not the metaphysical preferences of the author, they need only say what is in their heads" (1972[2005]:95). For the critics, it is often Harrison's descriptions of place that most impress, in particular his virtuoso switches between transcendental, magical description and the mundane, often juxtaposed to describe the same location. Finally, Harrison claims that he "didn't want [the question of what it would be like to live in the world ...] asked of Viriconium, so [he] made it increasingly shifting and complex. You can not learn its rules. More importantly, Viriconium is never the same place twice. That is because – like Middle Earth – it is not a place. It is an attempt to animate the bill of goods on offer" (Harrison 2001[2005:244]). *Despite* this statement, his critical readers invariably note his worlds, and in the case of Viriconium come back time and again to its unique characteristics. Harrison's fiction always exists in this double-bluff, oscillating between evoking a world and denying or destabilising that same world.

M John Harrison, then, simultaneously writes highly immersive fantasy and uses a variety of strategies to question that self-same fantasy, in an attempt to train self-conscious and critical readers.

Other strange coincidences occur on the fringes of postmodern fiction. Doris Lessing's fiction increasingly uses modernist and postmodernist structures, but is written more often than not with "a surface of unselfconscious fiction written in a dated nineteenth-century realist mode" (Kaplan, 1989:8), yet her subject matter and the complexity of her characterisation drew academic readers together to celebrate the "profound effect" and "powerful applicability to [their] own [lives]" (Kaplan & Rose, 1989:10-11). From being seen as a writer of "soap opera" (Ashley in Kaplan & Rose, 1988:18), Lessing has become one of few authors to have a journal (the *Doris Lessing Review*) dedicated to her work. Her 2007 Nobel Prize (to which she deadpanned, "it's about time") has vindicated these critics' belief in her work, but her body of work since *The Golden Notebook* (1962) has grown increasingly marked by science-fictional elements. Samuel Delaney's *Dhalgren* (1975) followed the opposite route. A highly experimental post-apocalyptic novel with strong modernist and postmodern characteristics by an established sf author, *Dhalgren* became a bestseller for beyond the normal readership of sf.

These texts from the postmodern margins all show important similarities: they resist the contemporary forms of their genres; they are experienced by readers as highly immersive; and none of them can be apprehended at a first reading. What you see is *not* what you get. Additionally, they share a number of uncommon aspects that (perhaps not coincidentally) also relate them to postmodern literature: all use "the powerful lens of the mundane" (Harrison 2003 [2005]:226) to evoke "the numinous" (Mieville, in interview with M John Harrison 2005). Finally, and perhaps most significantly for the current context, the worlds of all these texts that are different from actuality in significant ways.

Fiction such as this is clearly postmodern, but at the same time it resists being comfortably grouped with the "established" canon.

1.2 Postmodernisms

"Postmodernism" is a contested field, and to conceptualise a subcanon at its margins it is necessary to investigate the main arguments within its construction. As pointed out above, the core canon of postmodernist fiction – as well as its satellite canons – is widely agreed on, although arguments differ as to the nodes around which the canon should be collected. Apart from the

occasional discussion about where specific texts fit and for the addition of some recent texts, the core canon and the central arguments have changed little since the 1990s.

Genre criticism about postmodernist fiction, and for that matter, postmodernism in general, tends to fall into two large groups: the traits list approach, and the approach which attempts to generate what could be called an aggregator theory of postmodernism. The latter approach, which yielded several luminaries during the 1980s, including Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Brian McHale, Christopher Nash, Theo D’Haen and Hans Bertens, and others, often found itself criticised for being a modernist approach to postmodernism. That is, even by their own lights, the project of trying to find an aggregator for the underlying thematics, techniques, and ultimately the various logics of postmodern fiction defies “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1980), “depthlessness” (Jameson, 1984) or radical parody (Hutcheon, 1988), to mention but a few. The other main approach to categorising postmodern fiction has been the generation of lists of characteristics. Once a text exhibits a satisfactory weight of these characteristics, it is considered postmodern. Unsurprisingly, the second approach has gained many more voices on an Internet dominated by the logic of accretion and open editing: popular go-to voices include Dino Felluga (2011) and Mary Klages (c2004).⁵

Although some interesting work has been done in studies of postmodern manifestations of specific genres, starting with *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism* (D’Haen & Bertens, 1994), very little of interest has been added to help answer the question, What is postmodernism? that was not already present in the work of earlier critics.

One of the earliest essays in postmodern literary theory, Ihab Hassan's famous “POSTmodernISM” (1971) neatly set the tone for the ongoing debate. The essay itself performs postmodernist writing: different styles are combined side-by-side, argument is set next to list next to narrative, and the typography of the essay is manipulated. Postmodernism is described in relation to modernism, circumscribed in sociological terms, described as a list of characteristics (for example, “Postmodernist Notes [on ‘Modernist Rubrics’]” [1971:396]), but no single assertion commands absolute truth-value. This form still reflects, almost four decades later, the heteroglossic state of the debate on postmodernism. Although many critics would disagree with or qualify

⁵ To be fair, their soundbite summaries appear to have been developed in support of undergraduate and intermediate courses, which have become highly visible as a result of strong search engine optimisation at their respective institutions.

Hassan's actual characterizations, postmodernism is repeatedly and variously deconstructed and reconstituted by virtually every theorist working in the field, even as POSTmodernISM does section by section.

Hassan's essay already deals with literature, theory and cultural phenomena simultaneously, occasionally conflating these disparate fields, a tendency to be repeated in Linda Hutcheon's easy transposition to literature of the ideas of Charles Jencks on architecture (1984), Marxist analyses of postmodernism (especially that of Terry Eagleton [1985]), and elsewhere⁶. The discussion below will likewise flow across different fields, while disentangling central ideas within postmodern literary studies.

The most paradigmatic constant across fields is the characterization of postmodernism in terms of its "incredulity towards metanarratives", in Lyotard's famous phrase (1984:xxiv). Postmodernism, and postmodernist fiction, is regularly seen (though this is not universally overtly agreed upon) to "question" (Hutcheon, 1987:51) or "problematise" structures that traditionally and historically have accrued or claimed truth-value: religion, politics, gender, identity, history. Many theorists assert that "metanarratives" have been replaced as ordering systems by smaller or "local" narratives: Hutcheon (1988), Hassan (1971), Jencks (1984), McHale (1987, 1991), to name but a few. More recent formulations of postmodernism have tended to support this idea in spirit by dealing with increasingly narrow aspects, even while often studiously avoiding actually subscribing to Lyotard's explanation.

Another commonplace in the theorization of postmodernism – which, metatextually, reflects Lyotard's characterization in its implicit mistrust of "the whole" as explanation – is the description of postmodernism and postmodernist fiction in terms of a set of common characteristics. Hassan's essay contains several fluid lists along these lines, including "the literary act in quest and question of itself; self-subversion or self-transcendence of forms; popular mutations; languages of silence" (1971:389). The strategy of listing characteristics has become common among contemporary Internet commentaries. A well-known list of postmodern literary characteristics is that of David Lodge in his seminal book *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977): contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess, and short-circuit. It is not altogether surprising that Lodge's characteristics to some extent echo those of Hassan.

The title of POSTmodernISM itself flags another form of postmodern theorisation: the description of postmodernism as a movement in a specific

⁶ Since the Sokal incident critics have apparently grown wary of doing interdisciplinary work in postmodern paradigms, with cognitive approaches being the main toe in the water, as it were.

relationship to Modernism, or what John Barth describes as “breakthrough narratives” of postmodernism (1980). This approach is acknowledged and partially supported in Lodge and McHale. Barth himself (1967) sees postmodernist fiction as resulting from the realization and admission of the “exhaustion” of modernist fiction. Certain forms become overused and lose their impact, or stylistic possibilities are taken beyond their logical limits. Postmodernist fiction then seeks ways to turn the “fact” “that there is nothing original left to write” (Barth, *in* Wilson 1996) into the original material of a “literature of replenishment” (1980).

1.2.1 Parody and self-awareness (Jameson and Hutcheon)

Already mentioned by Hassan, parody – in both the ordinary sense of the word and the postmodern, which does not require humorous intent – and irony are so widely asserted as to be almost a given in descriptions of postmodernism, also universally seen as postmodern characteristics. In fact, the insistence on postmodernist parody forms the main axis of Marxist critiques against postmodernism, as well as of Linda Hutcheon’s and Charles Jencks’ affirmative constructions. For Marxists like Terry Eagleton (1992) and Frederic Jameson (1984) postmodernist fiction is the fictional mode appropriate to “late capitalism” (Jameson, 1984), a literature in a state of decay. The Marxist frame expects literature to be a reflection of society. For Eagleton, and to a lesser extent Jameson, the parody and the ironic tone of postmodernist fiction (which more charitable critics such as Hutcheon or McHale see as hesitation or skepticism), distances the fiction from society, in effect denying its social role and responsibility. Postmodernist fiction, then, would not reflect society, but only itself and other texts. In this sense, a postmodernist text would not represent an alternate experience, but only an index of the position of the text (and the reader) within a field of literary references.

Both these theorists see postmodern literature as another product of consumer capitalism. Jameson, in *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1984), argues that postmodernist literature is in fact in collusion with late capitalism, which replaces labour with consumerism as social organizing principle. For him, the irony and uncertainty of postmodernist literature helps to (dis)place the reader inside the structures of the late capitalist economy. Jameson also offers a call for a “new (and hypothetical) cultural form as an aesthetic of cognitive mapping” (1984:571).

Jameson does see cyberpunk as a possible direction towards this form, noting that cyberpunk is

fully as much an expression of transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia itself: William Gibson's representational innovations, indeed, mark his work as an exceptional literary realization within a predominantly visual or aural postmodernism

(1984:566),

but sees it as ultimately still subject to corporate power.

It has become a commonplace of cyberpunk criticism to point out that in this final analysis Jameson is blind to, or blinds himself, to the complexities of some extant fictions (McCaffery, 1991:16; Sponsler, 1992:640-641; Butler, 2005:534 among others). Interestingly, this apparent gauntlet of Jameson's has also been taken up from another side of the postmodern margin: discussing the mature work of Ursula K LeGuin (officially marketed as fantasy, but also garnering significant literary respect), Tschachler (1995) argues that in LeGuin and others this "cultural form" is already here.

1.2.2 *A double canon: Jencks, Hutcheon, Bertens and D'Haen*

Jameson discounts (or rather, distrusts) the possibilities offered by postmodernist "double coding", to use the original formulation of postmodernism by architect Charles Jencks. For Jencks (who would apply this construction to all expressions of postmodernism [1984:472]), postmodernism is "*double coding: the combination of Modern techniques with something else*" (1984:472; italics original). The result of such double coding is a confrontation between the immediate cultural here and now, and somewhere else. Simultaneously, though, Jencks sees postmodernism (specifically architecture) as having a double addressee: on the one hand, the public, on the other, an elite, largely other architects. Jameson's answer to Jencks is that the nature of architecture, as an art form dependent on patronage, embeds it within late capitalist economy; therefore, instead of being able to "set up and then question" the forces of late capitalism, it communicates to the multinationals their right to power, while it obscures the same power relations from the consumer⁷ at large.

If parody is for Jencks a mode of addressing a double audience and for Jameson an obfuscation of the power relations underlying a work of art, for Linda Hutcheon it becomes a mode of responsibility. Hutcheon's

⁷ Here as below I selectively use "consumer", "consumption" etc. to simultaneously mark the position of the individual vis-à-vis capitalism and (ironically) as a general term encompassing viewer and/or reader and/or spectator (of, for example, architecture) and/or reader – that is, "an individual accessing a work or a world".

characterization of postmodernist fiction in *Narcissistic Narrative* (1984) and *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) is based closely on that of Jencks. For her, postmodernism is constituted by the “paradoxes arising from modernist aesthetic autonomy and self-reflexivity meeting its grounding in the historical, social and political” (1988:ix). Where Jencks widens his idea of “double coding”, so that Modernism is not required as one pole, for Hutcheon postmodernist fiction, or “historiographic metafiction”, as she calls “her” postmodern canon, essentially sets up a present/past double coding. Other instances of postmodernist double coding operate within this framework. This definition has the drawback of limiting the possible canon of Hutcheon’s postmodernist fiction, but it allows her to construe it as socially responsible: postmodernist fiction is always in critical confrontation with the past, as a “critical reworking, not a nostalgic ‘return’” (1988:xii). In this sense, postmodernism is necessarily ironic since it subverts both itself and its precursors by setting up and then questioning metanarrative frames.

Hutcheon restricts her canon of postmodernist fiction to texts that exemplify this double coding of the past against the present, eliding works and authors seen as paradigmatic by other theorists (such as by Brian McHale and David Lodge). She mentions that “[t]here has been a certain move in criticism [references elided] to distinguish between two types of postmodernism: one that is non-mimetic, ultra-autonomous, anti-referential, and another that is historically *engage*, problematically referential” (1988:52).

Using Jencks’ idea of double coding, she suggests that the first “type of postmodernism” should belong to late modernism rather than to postmodernism. She places the work of the American surfictionists Ronald Sukenick, Raymond Federman and Steve Katz in this category. This bracketing is problematic, however, not least because she cites Sukenick in support of her poetics of postmodernism (1988:57). Federman’s *Take it or leave it* (1976), which ~~deals with~~ (among its ubiquitous metafictional concerns) the Holocaust and warfare, is definitely “politically *engage*”; and it is never clear why she admits to her canon John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, who, at their most experimental, fit her definition of “historiographic metafiction” less than the surfictionists.

Along with the differences between these different constructions of postmodernism there are also constants. The central issue at stake appears to be a perceived division between “realistic” (mimetic) fiction on the one hand and anti-referential fiction on the other (Bertens and D’Haen, Hutcheon). Such a split is also implicit in the names variously given to constructions of a representational subcanon of postmodernist fiction: Susana Onega (1994:47-50), Bernard (1994:121-144), Verhoeven (1995:41-42) and Tschachler

(1995:251-256) (among others) variously identify Neo-Realism, representational metafiction, and Amy Elias, metamimesis (1994). Various theorists tailor their own versions or domains from postmodern fiction. The domains are relatively stable, with very few authors (mainly Pynchon and Barth) that are not consistently grouped under the same heading, but the terminology and often the theoretical underpinnings vary.

Across these and other constructions of postmodernism, formal description is usually combined with a historical periodisation. Furthermore, virtually all implicitly or explicitly group the overall literary postmodern canon into two subcanons. The distinction between these is almost invariably implicitly premised on the member texts' opposition to realism. This is true for Jameson's critique that postmodern fiction fails to engage with actuality; for Hutcheon's refusal of the surfictionist canon; and obviously for Bertens and D'Haen's description of two postmodern canons. As discussed below, this opposition is central to the description of "postmodern" fiction of Christopher Nash.

1.2.3 *Ontology: McHale*

A different approach is offered by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) and *Constructing Postmodernism* (1991). McHale describes the shift from modernist to postmodernist fiction as a shift in dominant, organizing principles of fiction. He argues that modernist fiction is governed by an epistemological dominant, being primarily concerned with questions of knowledge, whereas postmodernist fiction is governed by an ontological dominant. That is, the primary interests and questions in postmodernism are those dealing with worlds, differences between worlds, the construction of worlds. As he puts it,

Postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls "post-cognitive": "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?"

(McHale, 1987:10).

He traces the change in dominant as also occurring *within* a number of "modernist" texts, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*. McHale's theorisation offers the widest single canonization of postmodern fiction, accounting for all preceding texts identified as postmodern by literary critics. He draws together all

‘canonical texts’ from Borges and the early novels of Beckett and the French *Nouveau Romanciers* through the works of “surfictionist” Ronald Sukenick to works like D.M. Thomas’ *The White Hotel* (1981) and Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) (the former, at least, firmly within Hutcheon’s canon). Notably, he also includes sf in general, as the “ontological genre *par excellence*” [1987:59] of postmodern fiction, and cyberpunk specifically.

This construction of postmodern fiction as governed by an ontological dominant accounts for the similarities between the “two types of postmodernism: one that is non-mimetic, ultra-autonomous, anti-referential, and another that is historically *engage*, problematically referential” (Hutcheon, 1988:52) identified by, among others, Bertens (1995) and D’Haen, as well as for their collective differences from modernist fiction. As such, McHale pays little attention to any subdivision: for him, all postmodernist fiction sets up worlds different from actuality, and all postmodern fiction places the relationship in question.

McHale proceeds to identify a large number of technical and thematic features that are signatures of the postmodernist ontological dominant. These features may be present in characters, worlds, narrative organization, linguistic features or any other levels of fiction. In many cases, these aid the foregrounding of the ontological structures and/or construction of the fictional worlds and their relationships to other worlds, whether actual or literary. Most of McHale’s examples are overt and deliberately disruptive of immersion, but as is clear especially from his discussion of cyberpunk (1992:225-240), many of them can also be embedded within the narrative world of the fiction.

McHale’s central thesis – that postmodern fiction is guided by an ontological dominant – generates a wide-ranging canon that includes the canons constructed by Hutcheon and Bertens. Ranging from cyberpunk and even traditional sf on the one end to experimental works by Coover, Cortazar and others, he also includes numerous examples drawn from magic realist texts and other less ostentatiously experimental fiction.

Apart from its inclusivity, McHale’s study has a number of advantages in relation to the current argument. Most usefully, McHale uses the framework to introduce and/or collect a powerful array of tools with which to dissect and compare postmodern fictions. Most of these are descriptive of formal devices that are common in postmodern fiction, but each device might occur at a variety of ontological levels, including the metatextual and being embedded as an aspect of the projected world. As such, each might also be either overt or implicit, but as McHale discusses, each also evokes a range of thematic implications while supporting the ontological dominant.

The proposition that postmodern fiction is governed by an ontological dominant can easily be extended to the content, at least, of commercial fiction and of cinema: the tremendous success of supernatural thrillers, sf, fantasy, and historical romance over the past few years is easily related to the idea of exploring ontological possibilities.

The idea of the ontological dominant also dovetails with actuality, holding explanatory power with regard to the coincidence of postmodern fiction with a largely textualised and extensively fragmented world. Of late, of course, the fragmentation has more clearly split into distinct worlds, with the ubiquity of social media and in particular the competing social grouping of facebook, Google+, mySpace, and others, as well as an increasing number of serious online gamers. The relevance of the ontological proposition is even more apparent with cyberpunk, articulating as it does a corporatised world in which information- and biotechnology bears overriding importance.

McHale's inclusivity means that he does not distinguish between different subcanons like Ryan (1994) does, arguing that all fiction equally generates worlds. However, the toolset he identifies does *potentially* at least allow distinctions between different "degrees" or strands of postmodern fiction.

1.2.4 *Experimentalism versus Realism*

Another strand of criticism downplays or denies the relevance of "postmodernism" as a literary category or period separate from modernism, arguing that the true historic break is that of the Second World War. One critic who takes this view, but whose ideas are useful to the current discussion is Andrezej Gašiorek (1995).

Gašiorek attempts to rethink the categorisation of "postmodern" fiction as a whole, centering on postmodern critics' preference for fiction of an antirealist bent. He argues that the separation of postmodern and late or 'high' modernist fiction, for that matter, has been overemphasised based on an earlier, ideologically motivated dialectic. Post-war theorists, eager to signal a radical break with conservative ideology, equated "experimental" fiction (Joyce and Burgess are some of his examples) with ideological progress, while realist fiction became equated with reactionary politics. Gašiorek points out that, thematically at least, experimental and realist postwar fiction have much in common, and argues that the "postmodern" categorisation is misleading. Inasmuch as Gašiorek sustains a distinction, it is largely on *formal* grounds, between 'realist' and 'experimental' fiction.

Gašiorek downplays the critical relevance of these two directions in favour of their similarities of content. However, his distinction clearly corresponds in general terms to the classifications constructed by Hutcheon, Bertens, and others. Even if he doesn't support the idea of postmodern fiction as a specific category, his postwar "experimental" fiction largely corresponds to formalist and postwar "realist" to metamimetic fiction.

Gašiorek's point is of interest here because it shifts the critical emphasis in two ways. Firstly it separates the *style* of presentation from issues of mimesis. Secondly, while Gašiorek downplays the importance of the distinction between realism and experimentalism, his registering these as two major directions in postwar fiction actually provides support for the classifications of commentators like Hutcheon and Bertens. Thirdly, Gašiorek's emphasis on the constructedness of the distinction also invokes the possibility of the two tendencies having preceeded postmodernism.

1.2.4.1 *Realisms*

The division between "experimental" and "realist" fiction cited by Gašiorek relies on a formal understanding of realism that recurs widely in postmodern criticism. Realism has a referential bias towards actuality, but in execution it is a construct comprised of a cluster of strategies. Elias points out that much "metamimetic fiction" (postmodern realist fiction; see below) realigns essentially realist techniques along an ontological dominant; Nash's argument below rests strongly on the association between realist technique and content.

The idea of realism as a set of conventions is also taken up by Paul Ricoeur, who in *Time and Narrative* (Volume 1, 1984; Volume 2, 1985; Volume 3, 1988) shows that realism, initially a form that challenged epic, tragedy, and comedy, established "verisimilitude" as the crucial evaluative paradigm, but achieved the illusion of verisimilitude at the cost of narrative probability. The "representative ambition" (Ricoeur 1985:12) of the realist novel necessitated an ever-growing insistence upon an ever-growing set of conventions. When modernist and (especially) formalist postmodern authors in turn set themselves against verisimilitude and realist technique, they overlooked the innovations in forms of emplotment that were occurring.

Marie-Laure Ryan puts forward a similar argument, showing how specific realist conventions such as "omniscient narration, free indirect discourse, and variable focalization, all of which presuppose morphing narrators whose manifestations oscillate between embodied, opinionated human beings and invisible recording devices" (Ryan 2001:159) are in fact highly artificial. Ryan's insight is that "[Language] has to make itself invisible

in order to create immersion” (2001:159): realism’s success is less that of verisimilitude and more that of immersion. Rather than rendering actuality as such, realism is successful at enabling suspension of disbelief.

In *World Postmodern Fiction* (1993), Christopher Nash articulates postmodern fiction as separated into not two, but three categories, in part in an attempt to bring fantasy and sf into the ambit of postmodern fiction.

Like Gašiorek’s, Nash’s argument relies strongly on the idea of realism as a collection of writing strategies that have achieved cultural dominance. Nash, too, largely eschews the term “postmodern”, except in the title of his book, although he does support the general canon. Nash also extends the central canons of postmodern fiction by tracking related tendencies in non-English language texts. More importantly to the current argument, though, Nash is one of the very few general critics of postmodern fiction to investigate sf and fantasy as postmodern phenomena (McHale and Jameson being the other significant ones).⁸

Christopher Nash argues that, if realism has become the privileged mode of fiction, its dominance has increasingly been questioned by “antirealist” writing. For Nash the dominance is questioned by two different antirealist forms: “neocosmic” fiction, which creates the illusion of an alternate world, including but not limited to all fantasy and most sf, and “anticosmic” fiction, which attempts to disrupt the very concept of world. This group is smaller, but Nash provides ample examples from various languages. “Anticosmic” fictions have become more common with postmodernism, but have been around for a long time.

Nash sees “postmodern” fiction as the making visible of a trend that has run alongside Realism all along: the textualization of fiction. “Anticosmic” fiction obviously places significant emphasis on the anti-immersive textuality of the work with its main worlds being that of the flat of the page, and Nash argues that “neocosmic” fiction generates a world that is, in absolute ontological terms, situated *within* the text.

Nash’s classification thus explicitly includes fantasy and sf under the postmodern umbrella, thereby introducing to the classification the consideration of the fictional world projected by the text. His explanation for the working of “neocosmic” fiction corresponds to M. John Harrison’s view that Tolkien doesn’t somehow unload a world into your living room, but it hardly reflects the experiences of most readers of fantasy, for whom the point is exactly that the textual world is highly immersive.

⁸ Some sf critics have also described sf not just as postmodern, but as one of the leading edges of postmodernism, as Butler (2003:144-146) relates.

For most readers, such worlds are “within the text” only as far as mental constructions of *anything* is considered textual. The immersive fictional experience suggests worlds that, while not in actuality, are not situated at textual level, but somehow beyond both the text and actuality. This runs counter to the popular postmodern critical position which argues that all experience is equally textual. The corollary of this position would be that all texts are equally somehow realist, undercutting *any* classification. Viewed internally, the distinction between “realism” and “anti-realism” rests to a very large extent on the content of the fiction, not its textual surface.

The other problem with Nash’s taxonomy is that, while he notes some cross-pollination between the two “antirealist” genres, he underestimates the fluidity of the boundaries between these and realism itself. Crossovers are in fact common in all directions: much of “historiographic metafiction” very often filters realist techniques through “anticosmic” presentation, and magic realist fiction relies on the juxtaposition of realism and “neocosmic” worlds. There is also a multitude of examples of other hybrid texts, for example Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* (1985) where two of its four books are fantastic and two are realist. In texts like these, *both* realist and “neocosmic” principles exist side-by-side.

1.2.4.2 *Revisiting Realism*

Nash and other critics note that realist technique has largely become conflated with subject matter that resembles actuality. Developed to showcase and explore urban reality and the self-aware consciousness, the techniques of realism have a strong association with the depiction of ‘reality’. While Nash largely supports this assumption, in *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001), Ryan re-examines it to find that

The "reality effect" of nineteenth-century fiction is achieved by the least natural, most ostentatiously fictional of narrative techniques – omniscient narration, free indirect discourse, and variable focalization, all of which presuppose morphing narrators whose manifestations oscillate between embodied, opinionated human beings and invisible recording devices; but the discrepancy between mode of narration and mimetic claim wasn't noticed until the development of narratology and linguistic pragmatics, because the mode of functioning of these techniques was to pass as spontaneous self-inscription of events. Language has to make itself invisible in order to create immersion

(2001:159).

She points out that the “reality effect” has less to do with portraying reality than it does with creating immersion, or in possible-worlds terms, making the journey to the fictional world as unobtrusive as possible.

The literary effect that was pioneered by Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett, and perfected in the next century by the likes of Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol [...], is clearly neither the art of revealing “how things are” nor the art of imitating real-world speech acts but the art of getting the reader involved in the narrated events

(2001:159).

An important implication of Ryan’s analysis is that realist techniques need not be applied to “realist” subject matter. In fact, she explicitly points out that fantasy often uses realist techniques to provide immersion in a completely non-real world. Given her focus on immersion in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Ryan has little to say about anti-realist (in Bertens’ sense) texts. These would necessarily be anti-immersive, although in an earlier book (1994) she points out that “postmodern fiction” [here obviously meaning experimental] destabilises the concept of world itself.

Ryan’s arguments support Gašiorek’s division between “experimental” and “realist” technique, while clearly allowing for the perception of fantasy worlds as “real”, which coincides with the experience of many readers.

1.2.5 Postmodernisms

Most of the canonical constructions discussed above address at least two distinct ‘strands’ of fiction, whether they consider both to be postmodern or not. There is wide agreement on a distinction between “experimental” fiction, on the one hand, which is seen as largely anti-realist and disruptive of the idea of fictional reference and fictional worlds; while on the other, “problematically referential” fiction presents characters and worlds in a deconstruction of realist style, but with apparent realist mimetic intentions. In most cases, sf and fantasy are left out of the equation, in part at least because these are not considered ‘literary’ fiction, for which the category ‘postmodernist’ is reserved. However, implicit in Ryan, Nash, and Gašiorek is the acknowledgement that commercial fiction shares at least some of the characteristics of literature, with Nash actually calling for the inclusion of fantasy and sf as a postmodern subcanon.

Most of the critics discussed provide descriptions that are *exclusive* rather than inclusive. Hutcheon selects literary, problematically referential texts to form the set “historiographic metafiction”; Bertens and Jameson exclude non-literary fiction; Barth effectively selects experimental fiction (though

much of his work that has *followed* the theorisation would be more accurately ‘problematically referential’ with experimental facets). The exceptions are Hassan, Nash, and McHale, although the last is so inclusive as to actually problematise subclassification.

Another way of looking at the realism–anticosmic–neocosmic pattern is to consider these in terms of the worlds they represent or construct. In this case, realism is seen as work that represents actuality, or at least a fictional world so similar as to make little difference. Neocosmic fiction represents largely ‘realistic’ worlds that are clearly distinct from actuality, while anticosmic fiction might present a collection of fictional entities (such as “characters” and events), but it is made almost impossible for the reader to reconstruct these into a world.

Commercial fiction could theoretically utilise any of these three categories. In fact, most commercial fiction would be either ‘realist’ or ‘neocosmic’ in Nash’s terms. ‘Anticosmic’ fiction would almost per definition be non-commercial, although some novels by Kurt Vonnegut, not believable as sf, but definitely not realist either, show strong tendencies in this direction.

This classification does not necessarily apply only to postmodern fiction, but might equally well fit earlier fictions. Here, too, ‘anticosmic’ precursors are rare, but *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1761-7) fits, and in some ways *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and especially *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) tend in this direction.

1.3 Formalist Reading: The Legacy of Roland Barthes

The ideologically motivated distinction between experimental and realist fiction that Gaşiorek notes might arise after World War 2, but it gains new impetus and focus with Roland Barthes’ distinction in *Le Plaisir du Texte* (1973) between *lisible* (readerly, or more accurately, readable) and *scriptible* (writerly/writeable) texts. According to Barthes, readerly texts lull the reader into an escapist state, allowing minimal active interaction with the text, while writerly texts are open and challenging to the reader, inviting the reader to become a writer and complete the text.

The appeal of this distinction to literary criticism should be obvious, as it licenses the critic to produce an extended reading without needing to consider standard interpretations or authorial intentions. It clearly also holds appeal to many authors. Since modernism it has become *de rigueur* for artists, including authors, to claim that their work is open to the reader’s interpretation. Hence, it shouldn’t be surprising that many of the paradigmatic formalist

authors (Sukenick, Federmann, Barth, Barthelme) write in the wake of Barthes' *Le Plaisir Du Texte*, and write from indentured positions at universities (Barthelme at the University of New York and elsewhere; Federman at the University of Buffalo; Sukenick at Cornell and elsewhere, having actually written a collection called *The death of the novel and other stories* [1979; the title is a reference to Barthes' "*The Death of the Author*"]). This kind of fiction is more likely than not what prompted Raymond Tallis (1987) to take on poststructuralist theory, arguing that bad criticism leads to bad fiction.

While some fiction (especially formalist) invites a writerly reading, most is slanted more towards a readerly reading. As Ryan points out (2001:159-60), realism might be dependent on a set of conventions, but these are hardly arbitrary, they are conventions designed to maximise the reader's willingness to submit to the fictional world. The writerly position, "reading against the grain", is a deliberate strategy *counter to* general reading practice, and as a result its explanatory value in terms of the reader's experience, and hence, of metamimetic and transreferential texts, is limited.

The opposition between *scriptible* and *lisible* readings can also be viewed in terms of "spatial" perspective. Possible-worlds theorist Thomas Pavel (1987) distinguishes between external and internal readings *vis-à-vis* the textual world: the former is a view of the fictional world as if from the outside, the "objective" critical position (which is truly possible only once one has finished reading a text). An internal reading describes a text, or a world, as it would appear to the denizens, the characters, or a reader immersed in the fiction.

In Pavel's articulation, the reader undertakes a "journey", sending an aspect or incarnation of him/herself called the *fictional ego* into the fictional world to observe as "a kind of non-voting member" (1986:85). Marie-Laure Ryan's slightly more cautious formulation has the reader invited to impersonate a fictional listener in the fictional world (1994: 75), pointing out that taking this role is up to the reader's discretion. Hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur uses the term "emigrate" (1988:179 *inter alia*) and the phrase "to dwell in" fiction to describe the reading process.

These terms express the internal reading, where the reader becomes immersed, accepting the rules and exceptions that guide his or her commerce with the fictional world (for instance, the fact that their physical body does not enter the fictional world, or the idea that non-human sentients may exist). By contrast, in an external reading the reader actively resists the journey, deliberately not immersing him/herself in the fictional world. As a specialised tool, an external reading strategy allows insights into the experience provided by the internal, but by itself neither reading reflects the full range of possibilities of the text.

These different reading styles are fairly closely related to the two poles of fictional experience identified by Ryan (2001), interactivity and immersion. These poles tend to pull against one another: the more immersive a text is (for example, a horror movie), the less interactive it is in the strong sense of the user being able to influence the outcome. The reverse is also true: highly interactive texts tend to not be highly immersive in the sense of entering the fictional world.⁹ In the context of reading, interactivity relates to the reader's analysis and questioning of the text, including predicting the direction and, ideally, modifying the fictional world, while immersion relates to the reader's submission to the narrative and transportation to the fictional world. Ryan (2001:98) distinguishes four degrees of immersion, with pure aesthetic appreciation (of for example formalist fiction) at the one extreme, and full immersion, to the extent that the reader allows the fiction to dictate truths in actuality, or what she calls "Don Quixote syndrome" (99) at the other.

The intervening degrees, *imaginative involvement* and *entrancement*, describe most "normal" readings, with the former allowing both a fictional journey and "aesthetic or epistemological detachment", and the latter being highly immersive with little simultaneous evaluation of the reading situation or the content of the text (Ryan, 2001:98). Imaginative involvement is close to reading literature in an academic context; entrancement is similar to escapist reading.

Both main forms of reading, the formalist and the immersive, *scriptible* and *lisible*, contribute to the experience of the text. Paul Ricoeur insists that readers deliberately deploy both modes. On first reading, the reader should follow the instructions of the text (Ricoeur uses the word *sens*, direction as well as meaning), becoming immersed in textual events and associating with the characters. However, a second reading is necessary to understand the journey of the first, and to bring the text into perspective relative to one's experience and understanding of actual life. Ryan independently points out that, in fact, a difficult text might create immersion on the *second* reading rather than the first:

But immersion can also be the result of a process that involves an element of struggle and discovery. How many of us, after finally turning the last page of a difficult novel, compulsively return to the first page with the exhilarating thought that deciphering is over and the fun

⁹ As Ryan argues in the second half of her book (2001) computer games show some potential to buck this trend, although many of the most interactive games are immersive only at a fairly visceral level – in an FPS (first person shooter), one is immersed in the action far more than in the fictional world.

can now begin? In literature as in other domains [...] it is through hard work that we reach the stage of effortless performance

(Ryan, 2001:97).

The variation in reading interest among consumers of fiction can in part be ascribed to varying attitudes towards *scriptible* versus *lisible* readings corresponding to external and internal constructions respectively. Realist fiction (and much fantasy) invite a strong internal reading. Some texts, so-called anti-representational texts, open themselves to external reading habits while others balance internal and external reading habits. Mystery fiction and formalist postmodern fiction require a stronger commitment to an external reading, whereas metamimetic fiction requires a willingness to background the *scriptible*. Transreferential fiction reflects some compromise between the positions as will be discussed in more detail below. Magic realism in turn presses an oscillation between the positions, while sf requires a strong initial effort corresponding to a *scriptible* reading, but allows the reader to settle into a largely (mediated) *lisible* position and to correspond internal reading. Most fiction resists, rather than encourages formalist reading, while much of postmodern fiction facilitates a double reading, where the “representational” reading invites modulation by a “paranoid” reading (see McHale, 1987).

The various constructions of the postmodern canon also reflect such preferences, at least as constituting the critic’s position: an emphasis on reading experience and involvement (e.g. Hutcheon, Elias) leads to subcategorising postmodern fiction, while the larger inclusive canons result from a critical preference for *scriptible* readings and formalist descriptions.

1.4 Initial Definition

Even if it is not often foregrounded, the idea of fictional worlds, different worlds, alternate worlds, runs throughout almost all theorizations of postmodern fiction, not to mention all theories of “fantasy” and “science fiction”. McHale’s theorisation of postmodern fiction, for instance, is predicated entirely on the relationships between *zones* (also Doris Lessing’s preferred term in *Canopus in Argos*), which are distinguishable ontological spaces or hierarchically organised levels. In sf, which McHale calls the “ontological genre *par excellence*”, ontological levels are almost identical to different worlds. Nash’s “neocosmic” fiction creates alternate worlds, while

his “anticosmic” fiction creates worlds on the flat of the paper (as it were). Various Marxist critics, Jameson among others, criticize postmodern fiction for not dealing adequately with “the” world. This prejudice also informs Hutcheon’s categorization of Sukenick *et al.* as “late modernist” – her historiographic metafiction necessarily (re)creates *worlds* related to actuality. Authors themselves, sf and fantasy authors especially, speak of “worlds” and the creation of worlds.

McHale’s broad construction of postmodernist fiction as controlled by an ontological dominant provides the most representative canonisation of postmodernist fiction. The ontological dominant articulates questions about existence of characters, but more consistently about the construction and definition of worlds.

Intuitively the idea of “world” may be easily grasped, but in the context of an ontological literature it begs specific definition. Pavel defines a world as “the state of affairs described by the collection of all possible true statements about that state of affairs”, or put differently, a world is a discrete version of a state of affairs separated from other versions by time, space, ontology, or belief. “World” as a conceptual term is always relational, that is, a state of affairs cannot be compiled as a world if it cannot be compared to a different one.

The reading situation always implies at least two discrete worlds: the world in which the reader is situated, and the world projected by the text. Postmodern fiction at the very least complicates this relation, often by questioning the relation between the actual world and the fictional, but very often also by putting into play not only two, but multiple worlds. These are often presented as coherent and ontologically discrete worlds, but many postmodern fictions also present conflicting or incoherent world-versions describing a sometimes irrecoverable implied world. One example of this is novels that are exclusively set in the mind of one character, such as Alasdair Gray’s *1982, Janine* (1985).

Most texts, from newspaper articles through advertisements to fantasy novels, project worlds, or at least world-versions. Because of the basic referential function of language, even something non-actual can only be described with reference to actuality. We understand language because it refers to actual-world objects and concepts. In this sense, even realist fiction – or the news, for that matter – presents but a world similar to actuality.

To argue, as McHale appears to, that a fictional world’s relation to actuality is a matter of degree rather than kind, is rather glib though. While it may be true from an absolute point of view, to most users the world of a contemporary realist novel seems similar to the actual while that of *The Lord of*

the Rings does not. At the very least, realist fiction draws much of its meaning from its relation to actuality, whereas the relation of the actual world to sf and fantasy worlds is mediated by a referential system that largely bypasses the reader's knowledge of actuality. Put differently, realist fiction relies on its similarity to the actual world to generate/invoke its reference world, while fantasy and sf and other alternate-world fiction rely on difference, and the reference worlds are extremely unlike the actual.

As such, the reference worlds of postmodern fiction are constructed within one of three contexts, largely corresponding to the three divisions proposed by Nash.

Of these, the most common is that which uses some version of actuality as reference world. The canon for this group includes Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction", but more recent texts that might be less *engagé* – for instance, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) – would also fall under this strand.

Onega, Tschachler and others have different names for this group, but the best theorised description is that of Amy Elias (1994), who calls it **meta-mimesis**, the mimesis of representation and/or self-reflexive mimesis. This strand effectively represents the postmodernisation of realist fiction. Like realism before, this strand has become the most common form of postmodern fiction, and many of its techniques, such as self-reflexive narrators, high levels of intertextuality, and the self-conscious narrative or metanarrative embedding of media, have become common in both commercial and 'literary' fiction.

Ryan points out that "it is always easier to build mental representations from materials provided by personal experience than by putting together culturally transmitted images-photographs, paintings, movie shots - or by following the instructions of purely textual descriptions" (2004:128). This goes some way towards understanding the relative popularity of fictions representing worlds similar to the actual. By the same logic, it helps explain the relative popularity of *Harry Potter* over, say, Gene Wolfe's work. (This logic is further explored, though differently articulated, with reference to Pavel's ideas below).

A second strand, often seen as the definitive type of postmodern fiction, attempts to disrupt the reader's construction of a fictional world and of fictional characters. Again, this strand has been variously labelled: from Barth's "literature of exhaustion" to Bertens' "anti-referential" fiction, to Sukenick's "surfiction". Nash's term, "anticosmic" fiction is also descriptive. Here, the focus is usually not on the characters or the world but instead on the formal techniques of fiction. Often, as in Barth's *Letters* (1979), the artificiality of the

plot is foregrounded; many texts in this group explicitly question their own status, regularly reminding the reader of both their constructedness and their fictionality. The term proposed for this group by Loes Nas (1998) captures this focus neatly. Speaking of Barth (whose work, to be fair, would sometimes fall in this category and sometimes not), she coins the term **formalist** postmodern fiction. Apart from its own descriptive accuracy in reflecting the dominance of formal aspects, the term has the added appeal of corresponding to the equivalent logic in fine arts, where formalism is a tendency to be concerned, first and foremost, with the material form of the work of art and the techniques of creating it.

The third strand comprises alternate-world fiction that creates the illusion of a reference world nearly as real as the actual, but definitely separate from it in many ways. The most obvious constituents here are sf and fantasy, including its satirical expressions, such as Terry Pratchett's work. There is some cause to further extend this strand to fiction that radically questions the idea of actuality as reference world, notably magic realist fiction, most of which has much in common with both fantasy and historiographic metafiction. While this category would include a great deal of "neocosmic" fiction, Nash's Barthesian reading leads him to lump texts subverting actuality as reference world together with texts that simultaneously subvert 'realism' as a mode of representation. Following reader experience, the latter would be more properly considered a species of formalist fiction.

This category also includes texts that re-envision a version of actuality rather than create a radical new world. As all fiction is necessarily rendered in a language that belongs to actuality (which often does not correspond to any language in the fictional world), all fiction bears *some* reference to actuality, but alternate-world fiction appears to generate a world that lies beyond actuality, mediated by, but also mediating actuality. The worlds projected by these novels are, in a sense, on the far side of the novel's surface, and those worlds form their primary reference worlds. As the discussion of Lessing's work shows, not to mention the cult surrounding *The Lord of the Rings* and films like *Star Wars* and more recently *Avatar*, fictions like these often generate a reading and commitment that borders on the religious. I therefore propose the term *transreferential* fiction to identify this third strand.

Some fluidity between the three strands is to be expected, as should be clear from the instance of magic realism, which often uses actual-world historical events as reference background, but contrasts these with 'unrealistic' events, characters or even partial worlds. It is in fact to be expected that hybrid fictions deliberately entwine the strands.

There is some evidence, as Nash also suggests, for texts representing all three strands preceding postmodernism *as such*, although formalist fiction would by McHale's definition be essentially postmodernist. Hence the oft-repeated comment that *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* is actually the first postmodern novel. It also becomes possible to distinguish between transreferential fiction that essentially extends realist themes and tropes – Robert Heinlein would be the paradigmatic example here – and fiction that explicitly deals with ontological aspects.

1.5 Textual Overview (Fiction Review)

The late 1960's to the mid-1980's may tentatively be taken as the point of emergence of postmodern fiction. The experimental work of Pynchon, Barth, Barthelme, Sukenick, Federmann, the French Oulipo group (with Georges Perec as the most visible exponent), led in the period and represent the clearest examples of formalist postmodern fiction.

At the same time, authors like John Fowles started publishing historical novels with strong metafictional overtones, although it was only by the 1980s that metamimetic fiction became widespread. By the early 1980s a fairly consensual postmodern canon had been established by critics like Hutcheon, McHale, and D'Haen and Bertens, the last in particular in their role as series editors of *Postmodern Studies* (Amsterdam:Rodopi). This canon is usually centred around authors such as John Barth, Gabriel García Márquez, William S. Burroughs, Umberto Eco, D.M. Thomas, Julian Barnes, John Fowles, and Anne Byatt. In addition to these, most theorists also list Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon.

The Latin American Magic Realists, including Julio Cortazar and Gabriel García Márquez in the 1950s and 1960s, actually predate and influence formalist postmodern fiction. Popular fiction started dealing with ontological themes in detail around the same time. The most notable is fantasy and sf, which truly became self-aware with Ballard, Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius novels, and the British (and later, American) New Wave during the mid- to late 1960s.

1.5.1 Formalist

As the name suggests, formalist postmodern fiction emphasizes the formal aspects of fiction to the deferment of representational concerns. The texts and authors which have been labeled “anti-representational” or “anti-

referential”, Raymond Federman, John Barth, Ronald Sukenick, Donald Barthelme, Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Such* (1966), occasionally Thomas Pynchon, share a number of “formal” features: in the first place, an extreme self-reflexivity, and more importantly, an explicit **foregrounding** of such self-reflexivity. Secondly, this double self-reflexivity is accompanied by (or is an expression of) what Hutcheon (1982) and Jameson (1984) have labelled postmodern irony.¹⁰ Thirdly, these texts also foreground their concern with formal experimentation. The heyday of formalist postmodern fiction was the 1960s to 1970s, which saw a dramatic rise in the publication of “novels” opposing traditional and Modernist forms of realism in almost all ways possible. These novels explicitly destabilise all facets comprising their worlds.

Marc Saporta's *Composition No 1* (c.f. Ryan, 2001: 180), for one, was published as collections of loose pages that can be read in any sequence, destabilising expectations regarding format. George Perec of the French Oulipo group famously wrote a novel without using the letter “e”; other experiments include not naming the characters, writing novels in the second person, or randomly generating stylistic aspects. Several of William Burroughs’ novels use his “cut-up” technique, where pages from other books are literally cut into small strips and randomly reassembled, yielding a surreal surface to his already unusual narratives. Other techniques use concrete prose or aleatory generation of phrases or images to draw attention to the novels’ status as artifact. The French nouveau roman and also J.G. Ballard’s *Atrocity Exhibition*¹¹ (1970) downplay and undercut narrative in favour of obsessively detailed description. In Ballard’s case, the narrative is cut into vignettes, some of which are narrative, but many of which are simply lists. Ballard’s characters, in particular in this novel, keep on changing names and are flagged with only fragmentary characteristics. Similarly, Pynchon’s *V* (1963) has the title character multiply, collapse, and reform. Barth’s *Letters* (1979) arranges its plot to fit a calendar. Richard Brautigan’s *Trout Fishing in America* (1964) likewise destabilises characters, as well as reference as such: the title phrase is throughout the novel applied to people, places, hobbies, and other aspects, and the novel is written as a collection of texts ranging from fliers to diary entries to letters.

¹⁰ This is of course not the only instance of postmodern irony. Self-reflexivity, which is one hallmark of most postmodern fiction, is essentially ironic. It very often occurs at the narrative level rather than metatextually, though, for instance in Ursula Le Guin’s *The Tombs of Atuan* (1972) where the narrator concludes with an expression of doubt as to the accuracy of her/his otherwise third-person narrative.

¹¹ Despite Ballard’s early novels being published as science fiction, only his “disaster novels” and some of his short story collections are unequivocally science fiction. His best-known novels from the late 1960s – *Crash* (1973) and *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) are in hindsight certainly more ‘literary’ than science fiction.

While less common, similar experiments occurred in sf: Brian Aldiss' *Barefoot in the Head* (1969) rescripts Joyce's *Ulysses* into a sf framework by "naturalising" the linguistic experimentation as the results of hallucinogenic radiation, while Michael Moorcock's *Jerry Cornelius* books (1969, 1971, 1972, 1977) present in fragmentary form an ostensibly alternate-dimensional secret agent traipsing about a revised 1960s Britain.

Such experiments were not exactly new: they had been prefigured in *Ubu Roi* (1896), *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), *Flatland* (1884), and – most famously – *Tristram Shandy* (1761-7).

Formalist fiction ostensibly answers to Barthes' call for "writerly" fiction. In texts like these, the formal aspects do not function to elicit a second level, but become the novels' *raison d'être*. In Federman's *Take it or leave it* (1976[1997]), for instance, the formal aspects are themselves the main theme, the act of narration becomes the protagonist more than does any of the "characters". The text encourages an anti-representational reading by resisting the reconstruction of a "world" or "characters". As Federman's "QUESTIONNAIRE", placed about halfway through *Take it or leave it*, explicitly reinforces:

Have you understood up to now that MOINOUS [me-us] dead or alive is only a symbolic figure? [...] Is it clear that the JOURNEY [which never occurs] is a metaphor for something else? [...] Do you think that a metaphysical dimension would improve this story?

(Federman, 1997: 235[unnumbered]; *elisions and interjections added*).

Formalist fiction probes the extremes of fiction: "characters" become names with apparent actions linked to them. The mention of objects is often a primarily visual or associative mention, and the references to space do not aggregate into a coherent reference world. The primary emphasis is on self-referentiality and metafictional devices.

The very premise of formalist fiction forecloses an internal reading. By dissociating the coherence of reference it draws attention to the surface texture of the text instead of any world the text might hint at. If formalist fiction provides a game, it is a non-immersive game. As Ryan argues leading up to her discussion of formalist fiction (though she simply uses Bakhtin's **carnavalesque**) in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*,

Whether they concern the graphic, phonic, or semantic substance of words, the rules that define these genres clearly throw "unnecessary obstacles" in the way of message formation. These voluntarily chosen obstacles bracket out the utilitarian, referential function of language

and turn words into toys, much in the way that children at play recycle broomsticks as horses and cardboard boxes as fairy-tale castles. In these textual games, the partners in play are language and the writer who completes the fixed pattern in the most ingenious way, but from the point of view of the receiver, the games are more a spectator sport than a participatory activity

(2001:179).

Formalist postmodern fiction attempts to bypass the projection of a recognisable ontology, or, more precisely, it tries to make the surface texture of the text its projected ontology. Much like Abstract Expressionist painting, which yielded autonomous paintings representative only of formal aspects like line, colour and mark, formalist postmodern fiction strives to make the text-as-being-read its primary ontology. For formalist postmodern fiction, in its purest (purist?) form, the text should indeed refer to nothing outside of itself, in particular, not to any real or imaginary characters or worlds.

1.5.2 *Metamimetic*

In “*Meta-mimesis? The Problem of British Postmodern Realism*” (1994), Amy Elias proceeds from the observation that throughout the 1980s British postmodern fiction shows a marked representational tendency. In this kind of fiction, the reference world largely corresponds to actuality, but the representation of that world is mediated. Very often, the fictions represent actuality as itself mediated through representation. As such, they become representations of representations.

Elias remains with British fiction, including Graham Swift's *Waterland*, Martin Amis' *Money* and Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* (see Elias, 1994:9-31), but the organising principles of her canon allow for easy retroactive inclusion of Linda Hutcheon's “historiographic metafiction”. Following Jencks, Hutcheon (1988) defines postmodern fiction as double coding, with current actuality as its one constituent and any other period as the other. She sees historiographic metafiction as always in critical confrontation with the past, as a “critical reworking, not a nostalgic ‘return’ ” (1988:xii). For Hutcheon, “historiographic metafiction” uses the past to tell the present something about itself, making it socially responsible in opposition to the perceived irresponsibility of formalist postmodern fiction.

An early example of “historiographic metafiction” can be found in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). A reconstruction of Victorian England, the novel both creates “realistic” characters and lays bare

its own meticulous research. At the same time it is self-reflexive, acknowledging the contemporary filter through which it views history while showing traces of its own construction.

By the mid-to late 1980's metamimesis becomes the central postmodern canon, with authors like Peter Ackroyd, Julian Barnes, Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Martin Amis, Umberto Eco and others cementing a variety of postmodern strategies in fiction while in many cases achieving considerable commercial success. This success is not yet spent. Novelists like Jonathan Saffran Foer produce novels that both represent actual-world history and question its relationship with the present.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, genre fiction parallels historiographic metafiction with the reappropriation of historical settings becoming common. For example, the *Angelique* series, early Danielle Steele, and a host of other "historical romances" appear. In some cases the historical period is so far back that the fiction reads as fantasy, as with Mary Renault's *Greek* and Jean M. Auel's prehistoric novels¹². There are even a few high-profile "fantasy" novels that are primarily historiographic revisions, especially of the Arthurian legends: both Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1979) and Mary Stewart's *Merlin Chronicles* (1970, 1973, 1979, 1983) rewrite Merlin as an astronomer and scientist more than a magician. Film had already had its first major reconstructive period with classical epics like *Spartacus* (1960). However, the 1980s and 1990s saw widespread revision in film of 20th century history, especially centering on World War II and the 1960s.

Extending McHale's notion that postmodern fiction can be characterized as fiction with an ontological dominant (1991), Elias defines meta-mimesis as "mimesis with an ontological dominant", in other words, fiction that represents actuality, but which simultaneously reflects the ontological problematics of the twentieth- and twenty-first century discourse-mediated constructed actuality.

As much as formalist postmodern fiction is predicated on the denial and subversion of representation, metamimetic fiction represents a world already saturated with representation, very often by acknowledging its own problematic position as yet another representation. As such, the two may be seen as lying alongside with overlap only in hybrid fictions, together constituting two 'strands' of postmodern fiction.

¹² Renault's novels retell Greek history, often providing plausible origins and scientific explanations for the supernatural events from the legends, including two novels about Theseus, *The King must Die* (1958) and *The Bull From the Sea* (1962). Auel is a multimillion-selling author, and her *Earth's Children* series, including *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980) and *The Valley of the Horses* (1982) is meticulously researched and deal with the interaction of Neanderthals and Cro-Magnon.

1.5.3 *Transreferential*

If formalism and metamimesis are the established strands of postmodern fiction, they clearly do not cover the complete field. The most obvious because most widely acknowledged escapees are cyberpunk fiction and magic realism, but there are many other novels, both “literary” and commercial, that are not circumscribed by either. Other subgenres that share similar characteristics include “disrupted reality” postmodern literature, postmodern fantasy, humorous fantasy and sf, and fantastical history. Horror fiction (but not necessarily suspense) would also by and large fit here, depicting as it does the collapse of worlds often similar to actuality into non-actual ontological and ethical rules.

What these (sub)genres have in common is that, from the internal perspective of the reader, they project reference worlds that clearly *do not* correspond to actuality contemporaneous with the novel’s publication. These subgenres are brought together by the fact that their reference world is coherent, but different from actuality. Here called ***transreferential*** postmodern fiction, this third strand encompasses Nash’s “neocosmic” fiction, but extends beyond that to embrace carnivalesque texts as well. In establishing these reference worlds, and especially in guiding the reader through them, these texts share numerous other strategies and themes.

In general terms, the ontological discomfort of these novels already answers McHale’s criteria. Given Nash’s contention that “neocosmic” fiction is not new, but has been in opposition to realism for a long time, it becomes relevant to distinguish between postmodern and “traditional” forms. The obvious distinguishing characteristic, the point at which neocosmic fiction “goes postmodern” as it were, would be the exhibition of self-aware metafictional qualities. This is indeed the case with both magic realism and cyberpunk, but most pre-New Wave sf and fantasy – and in fact, much contemporary fantasy – is completely without irony with regard to its own ontological status.

It is very common for fantasy (though less so for sf) to extensively use realist techniques and strategies in its depiction of its alternate worlds. Thus the detailed description of hobbit genealogies and orcish rites, always accompanied by detailed visual descriptions of the protagonists leaves minimal *scriptable* room for the reader.

In this sense, *The Lord of the Rings* would be the neocosmic equivalent of Dickens, Thackeray or Balzac, with its sf counterpart possibly being Heinlein, whose worlds are large in scope and characters almost completely

devoid of irony. Modernist fantasy might be represented by the first two books of Mervin Peake's *Ghormenghast*, which creates a complex world in which very little happens, and where the characters are ironic or exaggerated versions of realist characters. A clear sf equivalent is Frank Herbert's *Dune*, where the very incompleteness of the underlying fictional master texts and the use of epigraphs, as well as the focus on incomplete knowledge, establishes a modernist neocosmic text.

Extending the analogy to the sf new wave might be contentious. Though much of the sf New Wave draws explicitly on modernist techniques, this happens within a highly self-aware ontological context. As such, self-consciously modernist sf is in some ways already postmodern. In *Barefoot in the Head* (1969) Aldiss maps Joyce's *Ulysses* to a post-apocalyptic narrative, complete with the gradual formalisation of the narrative texture. Many of LeGuin's novels, both sf and fantasy, deal explicitly with postmodern thematics, for example radically undermining gender identity in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), or exploring the role of language in the construction of worlds (the *Earthsea* novels).

While some of the New Wave might be seen as transitional, later novels become fully transreferential. Aldiss (again) appropriates the hyperdescription of the *nouveau roman* in *Report on Probability A* (1968), a depiction of an English garden being watched by extradimensional beings who are in turn being watched by others. In fantasy, Michael Moorcock and M. John Harrison use various strategies to explicitly articulate ontological questions.¹³

Cyberpunk fiction, pioneered in the early 1980s by William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker and others, extrapolates the present into highly plausible near futures, often using antirealist techniques similar to that of "literary" fiction. Cyberpunk usually incorporates various representational layers, often exploring representation through a world-internal representational layer based on surveillance technology. Later developments in cyberpunk, notably the work of Neal Stephenson and Jeff Noon, straddle the spacetime of reconstructed past, alternate reality, and complex literary and philosophical reference.

Perhaps as a result of its not being a single genre, transreferential fiction shows not one, but many lines of development.

¹³ Interestingly, the tripartite division of postmodern fiction offered here – between formalist, (meta)mimetic, and transreferential postmodern fiction – is paralleled by Robert Stram's three main strands in European fiction. Stram (2005) identifies a (self)-reflexive tendency, inaugurated by *Don Quixote*; a mimetic or realist tendency, grounded in *Robinson Crusoe*; and a carnivalesque tendency, of which *Madame Bovary* is his prime example. He further points out that these strands are also visible in Arabic, Semitic, Greek and other literatures that, in fact, predate the European novel (2005:8-11).

More commonly than in either of the other two strands, transreferential fiction borrows and combines elements from its counterparts. It is common for transreferential fiction to utilise narrative strategies similar to those of metamimesis while linking these to formalist narrative textures, or to import apparently formalist narrative features as world-internal modes of representation. One example of the latter is the character Bascule from Iain Banks' *Feersum Endjinn* (1995), who has a "speech impediment" which renders his interior monologue as idiosyncratic phonetic script. Much of Kurt Vonnegut's fiction would fall in this category: *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1970) inserts historiographic metafiction into a highly ironic frame that purports to be sf, but with little coherence to the science fictional frame.

The former category of text, novels where transreferentiality and metamimesis are integrated, can take a number of forms. The best known is magic realism, here taken to include most of the Latin American magic realist texts, but also more contemporary works like Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1992). Rushdie's novel is set in a world very similar to actuality in many regards, but distorts history, geography and the laws of physics in various ways. In magic realism, much of the world is presented in detailed realist manner, in the case of the Latin American authors, often including socio-political realities. This realist world is then overlaid, or shown to be built on ontological systems that operate outside of the underlying socio-political world.

There are also a fair number of texts that either present realistic histories of fictional countries (such as Ursula K LeGuin's *Malafrena* [1980]) or present versions of actual-world history as fantasy. An example of the latter is Michael Moorcock's *Gloriana* (1976), set in a historically transposed version of Elizabethan England. Often, transreferential novels initially appear to be metamimetic, with their world only gradually infiltrated and eventually disrupted by a transreferential tangent. Such novels include Rushdie's *The ground beneath her feet* (1999), several of Peter Ackroyd's novels, and some of the later Ballard novels, such as *The Day of Creation* (1987). The alternate world need not be dramatically different. Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1993) [*The Trial of Elizabeth Cree*, in the USA] differs from actuality in that it replaces the Ripper murders with a different set of murders eight years earlier, for no reason more apparent than allowing Marx

and Charles Babbage walk-on parts in the novel¹⁴. Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* has four 'books', the first and third set in Scotland, the other two in a fantasy world with formalist aspects (for instance, emotionally inept people contract a condition called dragonhide). Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City* (1969), the final novel in the realist (and semi-autobiographical) *Martha Quest* series, is largely a dissection of 1950s and 1960s London society, but the narrative ends thirty years after the novel's publication date (not to mention in the same world as *Canopus in Argos*¹⁵). Another limit-text is Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, which is largely metamimetic, but in which a number of factors disrupt the world to the point where it does not correspond to consensus actuality anymore.

Another set of texts that are primarily transreferential, but with both formalist and metamimetic components, is the humorous fantasy (and sf, though this is less common) of authors like Douglas Adams, Terry Pratchett, Robert Rankin and others. In the case of Pratchett, *Unseen University* is a direct parody of Oxbridge, and much of the series parodies horror fiction, film or rock music, but the series also deals extensively with creations that are purely world-internal. Adams' *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (1987) is in several ways a 'literary' postmodernist novel (including intertextual dependence on Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"), in addition to its sf and humorous credentials.

Popular culture produces large numbers of transreferential texts. An extremely common example is superhero films and comics (and television series, though budget constraints have held these back somewhat). Both fantasy and sci-fi fiction film have become self-aware, with a wide range of techniques developed primarily to depict the variation between actual-world and fictional physics. This includes the famous use of "bullet time" in *The Matrix* (1999), as well as a wide range of editing techniques that owe much to MTV music videos. In fact, transreferential tendencies appear fairly often in rock music as well, especially in the sf/fantasy lyrics of Hawkwind, Blue Öyster Cult, (occasionally) Led Zeppelin, Gary Numan, and Kraftwerk (to

¹⁴ Many of Ackroyd's novels, in fact, are set in worlds that would be difficult to recuperate as versions of actuality: laws of physics both hold and do not, for example in *Hawksmoor* (1985), *English Music* (1992), *Chatterton* (1987); time takes on characteristics largely at variance with actual time, in *Hawksmoor*, *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), *The Plato Papers* (1999), actual events are displaced (at least in terms of importance) in favour of wholly fictional ones. What distinguishes them from Elias' "metamimetic" novels is that their worlds deliberately rewrite actuality.

¹⁵ *Shikasta* (1979); *The marriages between zones three, four, and five* (1980); *The Sirian experiments* (1981); *The making of the representative for Planet 8* (1982); *The sentimental agents in the Volyen empire* (1983). London: Granada.

remain with the 1970s) among many others. More contemporary artists that write songs that simultaneously read as about ‘ordinary’ concerns and as sf or at least sci-fi include Muse, VNV Nation and the Parltones.

Even at this stage it is clear that “pure” fictions in any of the three strands are very rare. Most formalist texts contain some referential, if not quite mimetic, aspects. Generally formalist authors occasionally produce fictions featuring near-metamimetic characters and/or settings that are nevertheless guided by formalist principles, as Barth does in *Sabbatical* (1982), Coover in some of his short fiction, and in very rare cases, and Pynchon. Metamimetic fiction may occasionally display radical ontological uncertainty, blurring lines between dream and reality, or even transreferential aspects.



The ontological difference of transreferential fiction from formalist and metamimetic fiction suggests differences in construction, but it is in its *reception* that transreferential fiction is truly distinguished from the other forms. The reception of Lessing’s work as something that brings new personal insights into readers’ lives, and the obsessive rereading of Harrison’s work is typical of many transreferential texts from sf, fantasy, horror, and the superhero subgenre. Multiple readings are also occasioned (and even required) by many of the literary transreferential fictions from Márquez *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*.

In transreferential fiction, texts that cannot be fully grasped at first reading are a common occurrence. The strength of readers’ commitment to these texts is reflected in the frequency of transreferential fiction extending across series: in the commercial subgenres at least, it is common for a narrative to sprawl across several books. Both fantasy and sf often expand worlds across series, but the phenomenon also appears in the work of more ‘literary’ authors such as Doris Lessing.

The reader commitment to transreferential fiction gives pause for consideration: might the ontological structure of the fiction itself, and the ways in which readers interact with it, actually invite a different approach to reading from other kinds of fiction? Might the popularity be due to aspects within the transreferentiality itself, or at least to such aspects attracting a particular profile of reader?

The tension in transreferential fiction between the increased difficulty (relative to metamimesis) of reading and the immersion generated by the fictions suggest a rethinking of critical reading to accommodate both the critical and the immersive dimension of the fiction.

1.6 Reading Transreferentially

“I have seen things ... you people wouldn’t believe.
Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion.
I’ve watched C-beams glitter in the dark near Tannhauser
Gate. All these moments ... will be lost ... in time ...
like tears ... in rain. Time ... to die”

Roy Batty, *Blade Runner* (1982).

“What did you see today?”
Fundamental educational item in Ursula LeGuin’s *The
Dispossessed* (1974).

The fannish reception of much transreferential fiction, of which the translation of the Bible into Klingon (in Csicsery-Ronay, 2008:45), is perhaps the most extreme example, proves that the fiction generates a degree of immersion so complete that it allows readers to recapture it outside of the reading experience. Even if such reconstructions are done knowingly – one hardly dresses as a stormtrooper unconsciously – they are the visible surface of a strong commitment to the fictional world’s ontology. This commitment is equally prominent in readers’ responses to Lessing’s fiction discussed above. What such responses articulate is the fantasy of full interactivity with the fictional world, the genesis of which lies in the reading process.

Transreferential reading is marked by a strong internal reading during which readers suspend their disbelief as completely as possible. However, readers’ discussions around transreferential fiction and their ability to reconstruct the fictional experience implies a conscious, even critical reflection on the implications of the fiction and the premises of its world as well, which is often accompanied by at least partial appropriation of some elements.

SF theorist Istvan Csicsery-Ronay (2008:76, 216 *i.a.*), developing ideas implicit in the work of Damien Broderick (1995) and John Clute (in Csicsery-Ronay 2008:83), argues that the reading of sf is always ironic, both because the future worlds in which it is set is by definition unreal, and because any sf text relies on the body of sf that precedes it (which they call the “sf mega-text”) while demanding from the reader familiarity with representative work from that same body of work.

This suggestion does little to explain the “Don Quixote syndrome” fairly widely observed among sf fans. Emerging from an external view of the reading situation possibly inherited from Darko Suvin (whose pleasures in sf occasionally appear rather dry), it attempts to reconcile the ontological difference of sf (and more generally of transreferential fiction) with the

immersion of its readers. To my mind, Csicsery-Ronay overplays this hand in his discussion of the sf sublime (2008:146-163) which, he claims, is likewise “playful” (160).

To a reader familiar with or just able to imagine the photographs Cassini has sent back from the dark side of Saturn, Rutger Hauer’s last words from *Blade Runner* form a powerful evocation of someone who has in fact been out there, near the shoulder of Orion; and simultaneously, an imaginary displacement to deep space. In spite of the image being in several ways scientific nonsense, the sf sublime is here experienced as no more ironic than Romantic Poetry.

An internal view of reading substitutes for the dual vision an experience of the fictional world as analogous to reality, at least to the same extent that metamimetic fiction is real, which is *followed* by a retrospective appreciation of the fictional world in spite of its impossibilities.

Broderick explains the importance of the sf mega-text as follows: “[no] doubt this is true to some extent of all genres, but the coding of each individual sf text depends importantly on access to an unusually concentrated ‘encyclopaedia’ – a mega-text of imaginary worlds, tropes, tools, lexicons, even grammatical innovations borrowed from other textualities” (1995:xii). Even if sf is dependent on its “unusually concentrated” mega-text to a far greater extent than is most other fiction, the mega-text is a specific and narrower instance of a more general truth about fiction. No reading occurs in a vacuum. Any text is already read against the background of narratives heard, read and told before, and relies on some knowledge of its world of reference. In fact, speaking of fictional worlds in general, Pavel identifies cultural “superzones” (1987:99) that guide the generation and reception of texts.

Paul Ricoeur goes even further, establishing readers’ familiarity with previous narratives as a fundamental requirement not only for reading, but for memory and temporal awareness. As he puts it, “there can be no thought about time without narrated time” (Ricoeur, 1988:241). In his three-volume *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur argues that human experience of time is rooted in “narrative capability” – the human capability to explore and structure the temporal experience through narrative – which is what grants knowledge itself its context and structure, since it exists in and is processed in time. Narrative capability is formed and honed by the narratives we hear, but storytellers in turn use this in their “emplotment” (1984:3 *and after*) of narratives. This process generates and propagates cultural narrative forms and modes over time, and gives rise to complex narrative structures that drive the history of genre. SF’s “mega-text” is a highly specialised subset of the superzone of narrative capability.

Readers apply the same abilities and learnt forms to reconstruct a narrative from a text. As narrative structures all understanding of time, narrative forms also impact on our understanding of our own lives, since memory, reflection, belief, and principles derive from narrative superimposed on the flow of experience. This hermeneutical circle is one explanation for the appearance of what Csisery-Ronay calls “science-fictional thinking” (2008:132): elements from the mega-text gradually bleed into the cultural narrative repository.

Ricoeur calls these three modes or stages prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration (or more commonly, but not as descriptively, *mimesis*₁, *mimesis*₂, and *mimesis*₃), and they are active in all apprehensions of time and narrative. In the world of action, prefiguration enables conceptions of social position, of the future, of temporal continuity; configuration understanding of self and planning, as well as the ability to apprehend time; and refiguration, the ability to question, learn, and to expand our personal conceptions of self.

In reading, prefiguration enables the reader to recognise and respond to genre codes. The reader (re)configures the textual world and its narrative from the text, combining the disparate mentions of (for example) characters into character-signs. Refiguration (which Ricoeur also occasionally, and tellingly calls transfiguration) occurs when the reader pauses to compare the narrative with his or her own life, in particular at the end of the narrative.

This hermeneutic process also finds reflection at the smaller level of the narrative: events leading up to a certain point form part of the prefiguration for understanding the narrative section (or “moves”, to use Pavel’s term) to follow, and the reader configures the section in part in accordance with the understanding of the text to date. At this level, refiguration is the checking whether the narrative followed the expected arc of development, to set a new prefigurative frame for the next move.

At the same time, narratives embed their own configurations of time that are different from that of the reader. Many novels additionally represent the temporal experience of characters, readable in terms of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. Ricoeur believes that a large part of the appeal of reading narratives lies in the imaginative exercise of different possible configurations of time, different “modes of being-in-the-world”.

An internal reading is the only way to explore all the possibilities of experience offered by the narrative, by imaginatively entering the world represented by the text. Here, the reader follows the logic (or in Ricoeur’s terms, the *sens* – meaning both direction and meaning) of the text through an imaginative transference to the fictional world. This is particularly important

with transreferential fiction, in which both time and space provide alternate experiences to the reader's world of action. The fictional world has to be experienced and its propositions understood before it can be analysed.

Understanding the text and the unique modes of being it offers in order to refigure these into one's own frame of reference, though, requires an external, critical, analytical view of the text in which reference and temporality recede in importance and become subordinate to thematic and structural concerns. Ricoeur therefore suggests that each text be read in two distinct ways: first an internal, and then an external reading. In criticism, this final stage also involves considerations of form, style and presentation: *how* the text achieves its effect.

With any fiction designed to have a significant impact during refiguration, the ideal reading is that which maximises one's exposure to the text. Reading occupies actual time in the reader's limited life, displacing our *Care*, a phenomenological notion implying focus, involvement, responsibility, which depends on our "recognition" of the world and on our "recognition of debt and responsibility" (Ricoeur, 1988:69), onto a non-actual world. As such, Ricoeur points out, there is a moral dimension to reading: its value must be measured in time against its deepening of one's understanding of and involvement in actual being-in-the-world.

1.6.1 Reading as Process

Acknowledging that each strand of postmodern fiction has a different central focus also implies that the strands respond differently to theoretical approaches. Formalist fiction is particularly well suited to what, in Ryan's words, "contemporary critical idiom calls [...] the construction of meaning" (2001:194). Metamimesis by contrast comments on the representationally layered nature of current actuality, making the strand particularly susceptible to contextual approaches.

In transreferential fiction, the focus is primarily on the construction of an alternate world offering alternate forms of experience. A strong theoretical approach to transreferential fiction needs to address both these aspects: an understanding of the generation of fictional worlds, and a grasp of the way in which these are experienced.

The strong internal reading invited by transreferential fiction implies a comprehensive suspension of disbelief, and a willingness to treat the fictional world *as if* it were real. This requires assuming a position closer to the

fictional world than the actual, with accompanying commitment to curiosity and expectations in the fictional world, as well as a commitment to the lives and interests of the characters.

Broadly, the internal reading may be broken down as follows:

- i the reader leaves the actual world behind to **journey** to the fictional world;
- ii certain textual cues shape the initial prefiguration, establishing a “contract” with regard to possibilities, and to the differences between the actual world and the fictional;
- iii important elements of this include the extent to which the narration appears reliable, the tone of the narrative and its ontological stability, and the interactive relationships between reader, narrator, and text;
- iv the reader **explores** the fictional world and the narrative. The world is constituted as a fictional space, but it is explored temporally: spatial relations are established mainly in terms of travel between locations, and both spatial and narrative elements have to be reconstructed using a process of analysis, extrapolation, and verification, which occurs in time;
- v the world is reconstructed as an ontological construct apprehended independently of the reader’s world (for example, the reader can imagine narratives other than the current set in the world);
- vi characters are reconstructed and evaluated in terms of goals, morality, realism, relative success and so on.

The last three aspects are very closely interrelated, as the characters often show the limits and rules of the world, while both they and the world can only be reconstructed through exploration.

The unifying element in all of the above is the idea of fictional worlds: worlds that are reconstructed, entered, questioned, compared with one another, and explored. Fictional worlds are spatial-temporal constructs.

Transreferentiality’s focus on alternate worlds introduces specifically a concomitant focus on the *exploration* of their worlds as a spatial-temporal activity (with possible exceptions for the most pedestrian of fictions).

Given the strong emphasis in transreferential fiction on fictional worlds, the theoretical approach used in this study owes much to possible-worlds theory, and specifically the development of its use in literary studies by Thomas Pavel and Marie-Laure Ryan. For the temporal aspect of reading, as well as the historical construction of time I look to Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* (1984-8). There is a surprising amount of overlap and mutual reinforcement between these two main influences on the theoretical approach used here, notably in terms of their conceptions of the reader and of reference, as well as of their insistence on the importance of an internal reading.

1.6.1 The Conception of “The Reader” in an Internal Reading

Obviously, “the reader” is a placeholder concept that does not refer to or bind any actual reader. An external reading places no real limitation on the actualisation the actual reader brings to the text¹⁶. However, in an internal reading this extreme freedom is curbed by the idea of submitting to the *sens* of the text, including the position the text offers to the reader. A study of the “implied reader” therefore also generates a partial approximation of the actual reader’s response to transreferential fiction.

The internal reading implies that imaginatively the reader leaves actuality behind. As Ryan puts it, the reader impersonates a listener in the fictional world while the author impersonates a storyteller (1994:76 *i.a.*). In similar terms, Ricoeur suggests that an “imaginative variation of [the reader’s] ego” experiences the fictional modes-of-being (*in* Valdes, 1984:94). Pavel articulates the idea even more forcibly: the reader projects an aspect of him/herself, called the **fictional ego**, into the fictional world. The fictional ego is empowered with relevant knowledge and mental skills (or *disempowered*, as the case may be, in particular in terms of forgetting historical outcomes), and is tasked with experiencing fictional events *as though* the reader has relocated to the fictional world. Part metaphor, part methodological construct, the concept of the fictional ego helps to explain both Ricoeur’s suspension/transference of *Care* and readers’ perspectival experience of texts.

The fictional ego is guided into the fictional world by a ‘contract’ set up between text and reader, or more specifically, between the implied author of the text and the fictional ego. For Ricoeur (1988:156-167), the most influential part of this contract is the perspective on the narrative set up in the text through the implied reader, the (usually) empty addressee of the text.¹⁷ The fictional

¹⁶ Recent cognitive experiments under controlled conditions suggest there might be a much higher interpretative coincidence among readers than the Barthesian school might feel comfortable with. So far, these have been restricted to paragraph-length texts, which hardly constitutes absolute proof at novel length. See for example Gabriel & Gygax (2008); Marmolejo-Ramos *et al.* (2009).

¹⁷ Ryan’s formulation of the reading situation (1994:74-76) is somewhat more complex, mainly to allow for the fact that the actual reader does not necessarily identify with the implied reader (or “substitute hearer”, in Ryan’s explanation [1994:75]). As she explains it,

By producing text *t*
[the] actual speaker ---- invites ----> [the] actual hearer to pretend that

↓
pretends that
↓

[a] substitute speaker ---- transmits text to ----> [a] substitute hearer
To this might be added, also based on Ryan’s explanation (1994:75), that the reader may or may not identify with the “substitute hearer”.

ego has slightly more freedom than this would suggest; though led through the text by devices like focalisation, partial information, and compression and expansion of time (*c.f.* Pavel), it can ‘look around’, as it were (for instance, imaginatively moving through areas implied by, but not specifically described by the text).

To give a specific example of the differences: the implied reader of the “Time Passes” segment of Woolf’s *To the lighthouse* (1927) experiences space and time as dislocated, with time accelerated in the sphere of focalisation, while the fictional ego might expand the passage with images of battlefields, or note the lack of an identifiable speaker in the segment.

Various narrative devices reveal the position of the implied reader, including (but not limited to) partial knowledge, association with fictional characters, prolepses, analepses, the creation and fulfilment or negation of horizons of expectation. These in turn reveal the *sens* of the text, the process of exploration and one dimension of the exploration of alternate modes-of-being. In fact, the text suggests patterns of experience and interpretation that delineate the position and experiences that it offers to the reader.

1.6.2 Narrative Capability, Superzones, and Narrative Forms

The ability to construct or reconstruct narratives (what Ricoeur calls narrative capability or prefiguration) emerges from the apprehension of time itself, the habit of watching events recede into the past where they may be preserved and viewed as memories. Prefiguration is in turn shaped by the narratives learnt and inherited, often over centuries.

The “modes of fiction” articulated by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and cited, despite its early publication date, by both Pavel (1987:90-91) and Ricoeur (1985:19-23), are a prominent example of narrative “forms” deeply entrenched in the cultural narrative consciousness. Frye ranges the modes of fiction along a scale of five modes: myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic, and irony, each of which finds ‘comic’ or ‘tragic’ expression. The scale is based primarily on the power relationship of the protagonist to the world in which s/he finds him/herself, and is analytical, not evaluative, although Frye points out that preference for the modes cycles through the scale over time.

The “cultural superzones” Pavel identifies, including the sf mega-text described by Broderick, are an even more specific example. Broderick defines the sf mega-text as “part encyclopaedia of knowledge drawn from current scientific data and theories, part iconography established in previous sf, part

generic repertoire of standard narrative moves, their probability-weighted variants, and their procedures for generating new moves” (1995:67-8). Each sf text uses the mega-text to negotiate narrative and descriptive shortcuts and to considerably deepen its narrative semantic complexity, all the while relying on the reader’s familiarity with the mega-text to activate this complexity.

Superzones, the modes of fiction, narrative tone and the like modulate expectation and qualify the relationship between the reader and the text. Apart from allowing more concise narration, they also indicate reading modes and attitudes to the reader. For example, “comic” romance (like the Western) elicits a more escapist response than does “tragic” low mimetic, like Hamlet, while the mythical and high mimetic modes alert the reader to the relatively high world-internal importance of characters and events, inviting a greater metaphysical investment from the reader.

Of course, prefiguration is also largely responsible for inviting the reader’s response to the fictional strand the text belongs to. The incidence of the realist (and metamimetic) mode focuses attention on the characters and their interaction, inviting an emotionally immersive reading; while the formalist invites *scriptible* reading, invoking what Ryan calls the game metaphor of fiction, wherein textual entities become generators of abstract pattern and/or meaning rather than representations of minds or events.

The various prefigurative aspects of a text influence the ‘fictional journey’ (Pavel 1986: 89; more precisely, Pavel talks of “travel to the fictional world” among related metaphors) or “recentering” (Ryan, 1994:21) that the reader undergoes. The fictional world is not apprehended as a whole from first entry, but unfolds over time as the reader transitions from his or her actual-world frame of reference to the fictional one. Pavel (1987) identifies a number of factors describing the journey such as duration, difficulty, and foregrounding vs. occlusion, according to which ‘target worlds’ are distinguished from the actual. These factors in turn determine aspects such as the eventual level of immersion, the commitment required by the text, and the truth-claims the reader may accord the text.

1.6.3 *Reference, Reconstruction and Interactivity*

The question of fictional reference is a recurring problem inherent in literary studies, as witnessed by the various arguments around “anti-referential” or “anti-representational” fiction. A recurring idea is that fiction stands completely apart from actuality: fiction cannot actually refer to actuality, since it is “made of” a different material from actuality (i.e. words, syntax, semantics, rather than matter). This is of course a central problem, not just of

fiction, but of language itself, as is already apparent from De Saussure's assertion that signification in language is arbitrary. Ricoeur's most detailed examination of the problematic is in *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977), where he shows that language always retains 'metaphorical' elements by virtue of its very nature.

The question of reference is important for this study at two distinct levels. Firstly, does fiction refer in a way that is different from non-fictional applications of language? If it does, can significant differences be identified between the ways of reference of metamimetic (and mimetic, for that matter), formalist, and "transreferential" fiction?

Ricoeur and Pavel both explore the idea of *analogous* reference, a concept from theology, where according to the analogy of being, "the verb *to be* is only analogically asserted of God and his creations" (Pavel, 1986:61). The rationale here is related to the distinction between the "material" of fiction and that of actuality: aspects or modes of a being who presumably exists in all possible dimensions cannot be adequately described by elements that exist in limited dimensions, such as words.

According to this argument fiction is seen as operating in a mode *analogous to* actuality, that is, a mode based on "a resemblance between relations rather than between terms per se" (Ricoeur, 1988:151). This would mean that, where actual-world entities are stabilised by their referents and by contextual determinations, fictional entities have projected referents active only in the context of the fictional world. For example, the mental operation behind a statement like 'Bond quietly sips his martini' can be paraphrased as, 'accepting an ontological sphere featuring a protagonist called Bond, the protagonist performs an action that transfers a liquid similar to actual-world martini from a glass to his mouth', and so on. Underlying analogous reference is make-believe operation: *if* this world is accepted as operating in a manner similar to our own, *then* (within its context) the following statements obtain truth-value.

It is immediately apparent that the distinction, though drawn in order to separate our understanding of actuality and of non-actual assertions, is relevant primarily from an *external* perspective: the journey to a fictional world, through the conventions of reading, allows the flattening of the distinction between 'levels of being', allowing the "as if" to be subsumed inside the fictional contract itself.

Even externally, the supposedly clear division between the actual and the fictional offered by the idea of analogous reference is more fluid in practice. As Ricoeur shows, the analogous is a key strategy in the (actual-

world) science of history: history is constructed by analogy to a (projected) field of what ‘really was’. History ‘*is*’ not ‘the past’, but an analogy of the past, stabilised to some extent by its debt to traces like documents and archaeological evidence (1988:152-4). Ricoeur believes that fiction and history interweave, and that this process adds depth to both. “[We] have to combat the prejudice that the historian’s language can be made entirely transparent [... and also] a second one, which holds that the literature of imagination, because it always makes use of fiction, can have no hold on reality” (Ricoeur, 1988:154-5). The same applies to fiction and news, which is after all history in the making.

Taken in this sense – with fictional reference and historical reference equally analogous – the distinction between fictional and non-fictional discourse becomes problematic once more. Certainly, our knowledge of the world, apart from the relatively small part of it we experience with our own senses, is almost completely textually based. The texts constructing this knowledge, including but not limited to journalistic and historical reportage – and lately, and even more problematically, the Internet – have notoriously slippery relationships to ‘truth’ and ‘reference’ (as discussed by, among others, Baudrillard and Deleuze and Guattari). Leaving this aside, for many people *most of* our personal world-versions for remote locations and events are primarily constructed on knowledge drawn from institutionally “fictional” texts. Most people know less about the Victorians from historical documents than from Dickens and Austen, or more precisely, today, from film and television versions of Dickens and Austen. Most Western conceptions of Japan are less based on academic studies than on the Zone generated between anime, Clint Eastwood’s *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), James Clavell’s *Shogun* (1975) (or, again, the television miniseries), *Lost in Translation* (2003), countless martial arts movies, and as many movies arguing that Japan is in reality different from the martial arts films.

If different world-versions are compared internally, though, it is clear that all language refers to historical or actual-world phenomena by analogy. The greatest distinction lies in our *intentionality*, the truth-value we attach by conviction or convention, and as determined by the creation and consumption of particular projected words, to particular statements and the contexts within which they occur.

If textual knowledge is analogous, it does not mean that all textual worlds refer in the same way. In possible-worlds theory, the idea of analogous reference is extended through the theory’s central assumption that texts project worlds. As soon as a text is ‘read’ (or viewed, or conceptualised etc.), it articulates a **complex ontology** with a distinction between the world of the

‘reader’ and that of the text. The world of the text is connected to that of the reader in many different ways such as reference, intentionality, truth-value, possibility, and relevance. Projected worlds are inevitably related to actuality, since the referents for the conventional meaning of words belong to actuality: for example, we only know what a fictional boat is because we know what an actual boat is. This implies that projected worlds are always related to actuality at least through semantic reference, although the relationships between objects within the projected worlds are constructed analogically.

1.6.4 Worlds and Possible-Worlds Theory

The concept of “worlds”, perhaps because it is intuitively simple, is variously used with very little attempt at definition or discrimination. Many critics, including McHale and Ricoeur, suppose that each text generates a unique world uniquely different from the actual. To anyone who has ever followed a series on television, or even more tellingly, in comics¹⁸, it seems clear that worlds often encompass numerous texts. To sf critics, it seems obvious that worlds fall into two broad categories; the versions of the actual world presented by mimetic fiction, and the counterfactual worlds generated by sf and fantasy. At the same time, little consideration is given to what exactly makes a referential field “world-like”. Furthermore, perspectives change between reading and criticism (or internal and external readings). A dream or hallucinatory sequence is internally experienced as a distinct ontological frame, but tends to be flattened in discussion or criticism to a purely narrative device, often in the service of characterisation. All of these issues gain a distinct urgency in postmodern fiction, and especially in transreferential fiction, where different worlds and ontologies proliferate, often with deliberate complication of the relations between them.

Possible-worlds theory is uniquely suited to address these issues. Its focus on worlds was originally developed as a tool to investigate the idea of necessity, in particular as applied to the contingency of counterfactual statements. In this original formulation developed from formal logic and the philosophy of linguistics, the exemplary texts are minimal, as in a classic example (cited in Ryan, 1994:16): “If Napoleon had not been defeated at Waterloo, he would not have died on St Helena”. In this example, the statement is related to actuality, the proper nouns would have no meaning otherwise, but it also projects an unrealised counterfactual world (in which

¹⁸ Most of the major comix publishing companies set most of their titles in a single universe; thus the “Marvel Universe” or the “DC Universe” are built up of scores of separate titles, some of which have up to 850 issues published to date.

Napoleon was not defeated at Waterloo). This statement does not project only one world, though, but its own reference world (in which Napoleon was not defeated at Waterloo) and a projected future world of that reference world.

Scaled to literary studies, and history, as in the work of von Wright (*in* Ricoeur, 1984:133-4), a “world” is the referent of a conceptually discrete description of a state of affairs. Any ontologically bounded referential field may be seen as a world. The boundaries may be spatial, temporal, perceptual, or ontological, and most texts contain numerous worlds of differing degrees of completeness. Examples of ‘worlds’ and systems of worlds include video games, dreams, embedded novels, daydreams, videotapes from security cameras and news channels (consider the difference in projected worlds offered by, say, US Fox News and Al-Jazeera). These are different ‘kinds’ of worlds, distinguished by Ryan (1994:1-2) along three axes: literary vs non-literary, narrative vs non-narrative, fictional vs non-fictional.

The reading (or viewing, or gaming) situation always involves at least two worlds: that of the reader, and that of the text. Worlds are usually studied relationally. The actual reader journeys to the fictional world (of *Neuromancer*, say) to observe and accompany Case as he enters the cyberspace world. At each point, the target world is compared to the source world.

If we consider the differences in ‘worlds’ occasioned by two different interpretations of the same set of circumstances – whether real individuals or characters, individually or collectively – most ‘worlds’ are technically made up of any number of different world-versions that share the same reference world, but either contain false statements or take unproven statements as true.

In addition to ‘actual worlds’, world-versions, dreams, wishes and so forth, the term “world” is also used to denote an individual’s modal models of their world, primarily wish-, obligation-, and knowledge worlds (Ryan, 1994: 114-119), or, importantly, discrete moments in history (von Wright *in* Ricoeur, 1984:143-7; Laurie, 1997:51-53). In the latter case, events are divided into a series of world-states, each consecutive one treated for purposes of analysis as a discrete possible world accessed from the previous one.

A model of ‘the world of a text’ is therefore made up from a cluster of worlds, some actual but incomplete, some possible, and some impossible (such as a wish for the office party to have turned out differently). Such a cluster arrayed about a world of action is called a **universe**, and in the case of fiction, a **fictional universe** (Pavel, 1987; Ryan, 1994:123).

Ryan (1994:1-30) proposes a set of generalised terms to denote the relations between worlds. These include the actual world AW, the text-internal world of action TAW (textual actual world), and various textual projected

worlds (TPW), among others. Applied to the complex fictional universes of postmodern fiction, which often present multiple worlds with equal or reversible ontologies (in fact, the “point” is often that the world the reader initially assumes to be the TAW is in fact a TPW), this terminology would still be insufficient.

In this thesis sets of worlds will be identified where useful and/or relevant, but the specific labels, as well as the precise connotation of the word ‘world’ will be contextually determined. Thus, the **fictional world** will generally refer to the universe of worlds constituting the setting of the fiction, while specific world-versions, world-states or distinct worlds will be identified as such when relevant. The world of action shared by all readers (with its reality consensus of generally shared knowledge) will be referred to as **actuality** or the **actual world**.

Two specific categories do need to be distinguished, however. As readers try to ‘make sense’ of narratives, in complex ontological systems they also privilege particular worlds. Thus, the ‘main’ world of a narrative is usually seen as the world of its action, not the world of its narrator, and among various competing versions of reality (TAW), readers will try to find the ‘real’ or ‘true’ one. (Texts with forking paths and/or alternate endings such as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* or the 1998 film *Sliding Doors* are clear examples of this). Readers relate further projected worlds to this ‘main’ world. Such justly or unjustly privileged worlds are here called **base worlds**.

Another commonly recurring construct in postmodern fiction is the projection of clusters or series of distinct world-states, often centred around different characters and dealing with different themes, between which the action oscillates. Such temporally local sections of time belonging to the same fictional world will be called **timepockets** to distinguish them from distinct worlds.

1.8 Worlds as virtual realities

The idea of an imaginative displacement to a fictional world evokes a vision of the novel as virtual reality, a world temporarily experienced by the reader to be as real as the actual. This would certainly help to explain the willingness of readers to transfer their *Care* to a fictional world, and to allow fiction to shape their view of actuality.

Marie-Laure Ryan (1996; 2001:62-73 *et passim*) measures virtual reality by the successful integration of two central aspects: immersion and interactivity. Immersion (what Coleridge called the suspension of disbelief) is

the great achievement of the novel, and in particular of the realist novel, which developed a complex set of conventions to generate a sense of spatial immersion (121-137).

Full interactivity she claims (2001:55-66) requires the disappearance of the medium (56), the experience of the illusion of presence (66; also an element of immersion), and the ability to influence the outcome of events (61-65). It is here that written fiction is limited: the textual medium interposes an additional level between reader and narrative, while attempts to allow the reader to influence the outcome of events, such as the “choose your own adventure” type of books where the narrative is divided into a tree structure, is experienced as a formalist device, countering the immersivity of the text.

In *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001) Ryan examines a wide variety of platforms, from narrative fiction to hypertext narrative to interactive theatre and computer games. None of these manage fully to integrate full immersivity and full interactivity (although, since the publication of the book, computer games have progressed to highly complex narrative tree structures, which are often further influenced by the style of gameplay, ever more closely approximating this goal).

Generally speaking, the two aspects remain in conflict: the more interactive a representation becomes, the more it draws attention to its own abstraction (Ryan, 1996; 2001:18-19). This is particularly true of fiction, where the linearity and symbolisation of language cannot simultaneously evoke interactivity (for instance, through allowing reshuffling of the pages of a novel) and allow immersion. Textual interactivity prohibits the language from being experienced as a transparent medium. Ryan’s conclusion with regard to the written text is that virtual reality cannot but remain a metaphor.

Despite this, virtual reality remains a particularly potent metaphor, as the persistence of immersivity beyond the textual boundaries in sf fandom proves. I would suggest that transreferential fiction combines highly immersive strategies with at least two different forms of interactivity: ludic elements (also discussed by Ryan), and the reconstruction of the world.

Ryan points out that the “text-as-world” metaphor commonly adopted by narrative studies can be combined with the alternate “text-as-game” metaphor (Ryan, 2001:90-92, 175-199), although as she points out “game” is used in several different senses of the word (182-188). While Ryan’s focus here is on experimental forms like interactive drama, the approach is also well suited to the study of formalist fiction, which often uses game-like rule sets to structure the narrative and the reading process, and “flattens” its signifiers to allow comparative reader-directed free play of meaning.

One way of combining the two approaches would be to perform one reading focusing on the text as world (internal) and a second focusing on the text as game (external). Some texts – notably detective, espionage, and crime fiction themselves invite ludic approaches. Here, the reader might not influence the outcome, but tries to second-guess the rules and outcomes before the detective (and the novel, therefore) make them explicit.

A slight shift in perspective shows that, in addition to its immersive elements, transreferential fiction offers heightened interactivity at a variety of levels. Mystery elements, which are common in transreferential fiction, occasion ludic reading during the reading process, as does the fairly common occurrence of characters with divided or unsure loyalties.

At another level, the very fact that novels are made up of symbolic entities that do not share the ontological nature of their reference world – words – means that the reader has to reconstruct the referent. Although the reconstruction is generally consistent enough that the individual reader has little effect on the outcome of fictional events, the process still involves some low-level interactivity. This gains added relevance in fiction where neological language is common; as Broderick and Csicsery-Ronay have argued (partially following Delany), sf is at one level distinguished by unusual words and combinations of words.

Both these forms of interactivity are significantly heightened if the text occasions a strong sense of transference to the fictional world (which Ryan calls **presence**), generating the *illusion* that the reader can observe objects and locations from multiple angles. In fact, the experience of transference to the fictional world generates the impression that the reader becomes of a piece with the fictional world – becomes textualised, in a sense, so that it is the reader's reconstruction that becomes symbolic rather than his or her actions.

Finally, immersion itself, consisting of the complex manoeuvring and connection of many different narrative strands, involves interactivity as, most certainly, does the processing of the confrontational material common in transreferential fiction from sf through fantasy to magical realism.

1.9 Problem definition and methodology

The preliminary overview of transreferential fiction highlights the tension the novels set up between immersivity and interactivity: while presenting immersive worlds, often in easily accessible style, the narratives and/or worlds simultaneously demand interactivity from the reader, if only in terms of the difference between the fictional world and that of the reader. A key correlative of this is that the novels evoke both the world and the game metaphor in their reading.

The commitment of readers in the reception of transreferential fiction suggests that a more fundamental operation is evoked than the matching of genre to personal taste. The tools assembled during this chapter and the next have been selected to maximise exploration of the novels, both with acknowledgement of their ontological predisposition, the worlds that they present – and with regard to the process of reading that they occasion.

While I have suggested a wide variation of subgenres to be collected under the heading of transreferential fiction, the scope of this project precludes in-depth discussion of all the subgenres and limit-texts. Instead I center the discussion on postmodern fantasy and sf, the subgenres most likely represent the “core” transreferential genres, certainly in terms of volume. This presents an additional challenge in the **serial worlds** common in sf and fantasy, which further impacts the reader’s experiences. The sf New Wave and cyberpunk have both produced large numbers of texts that have strong postmodern and transreferential characteristics. While cyberpunk has been partially accommodated under postmodern fiction, this classification has been focused primarily on the initial cyberpunk “school”, as McHale calls it, centered on Gibson, Sterling, and Rucker. Later writers drawing on and expanding cyberpunk aesthetics, such as Neal Stephenson and Jeff Noon, have thus far not received much literary attention.

The distinction is not only between different kinds of texts but also between different kinds of referents and different ways of ‘referring’. Additionally, it is likely that transreferentiality also encourages specific ways of reading and specific ways-of-being using, if not unique strategies, characteristic groups of strategies.

The *Sprawl* trilogy has been widely studied, but Both Harrison and Noon, despite the respect their work has garnered in prizes, are woefully underrepresented in dedicated studies. These, as well as most of the limit-texts

studied in preparation for this report, including Lessing's *Canopus in Argos* and Moorcock's *Gloriana*, have been chosen exactly for the dearth of serious critical work dealing with them, despite their being very well-respected outside of mainstream academia.

Problem Statement

The main questions guiding this thesis are, How can the concept of ontological referent be used to reconfigure the postmodern canon? How may the newly configured transreferential strand be theoretically articulated? And how is the reading process influenced by transreferentiality?

Further questions that arise include, What strategies are deployed by transreferential fictions to articulate their worlds and/or to involve the reader? Can specific kinds of themes be identified as typical of transreferential fiction?

The next important question is answered through a second reading: how does the text communicate its world and its rules to the reader, and how does the reader experience the world unfolding around him?

The overall question posed not only by transreferential fiction, but given a stronger urgency in transreferentiality by its alterity to actuality, is that of refiguration: how is, or at least may, the reader be impacted by the ideas and rules represented by the text?

Methodology

The primary methodological approach is theoretical and hermeneutic, with a strong focus on first-hand analysis. Underlying the theoretical approaches in this thesis is the understanding that adventures in a fictional world are both spatial and temporal: it takes *time* to experience the *space* of a fictional world. Each of the two main theoretical approaches addresses one aspect of this logic: possible-worlds theory, the world; and Ricoeurian hermeneutics, the process of exploration. While the use of possible-worlds theory is self-explanatory, hermeneutics, specifically Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, is used in a supplementary role, but offers three distinct elements to the analyses.

In the first place, in accordance with Ricoeur's injunction, the underlying analyses utilised a deliberate dual reading, firstly a naïve reading, and secondly a critical reading. This impacts the analyses to varying degrees, specifically with regard to the *gradual* reconstruction of the fictional worlds and the narratives, as well as in terms of identifying elements in the primary texts that gain additional meaning in retrospect.

Secondly, Ricoeur offers perspectives on time, history and conceptual processing of fictional material that are not readily available in possible-worlds

theory. These in turn allow relatively systematised observations of the experience of time and history in the primary texts.

Finally, the co-incidence of a number of shared precepts between possible-worlds theory and hermeneutics and, in fact, to a lesser extent of criticism, allows a more stable conceptual framework. Such precepts include prefiguration (including the superzone/megatext), the importance of an internal reading, and the refiguration of aspects of the narratives being reintegrated into the reader's conceptual framework. Put differently, hermeneutics helps to explain the immersive dedication readers of transreferential fiction display.

Immersion in fictional worlds is also partially influenced by aspects neither Ricoeur nor Ryan discusses in detail. For example, in an internal reading, characters play a significant part in guiding the reader through the fictional world. Chapter 2 will supplement Ricoeur and Ryan's approaches with other approaches where necessary.

If transreferential fiction aims to change its reader's understanding of the world, it is relevant to consider not just the techniques it uses, but also the propositions it presents. While the main focus is to investigate the ways in which transreferential fiction generates the modes of existence and immersive experiences it offers to its reader, a concomitant effect of the analytical approach is that the interpretation of the texts receives more weight than is customary. The reason for this is twofold: interpretation is important both as the result of the first reading – not just particular in-world facts are important, but also the process of their reconstruction – and as a component of the refiguration process.

The *Sprawl* trilogy has been widely studied, but many of the other texts here, as well as most of the limit-texts studied in preparation for this report, including Lessing's *Canopus in Argos* and Moorcock's *Gloriana*, have been chosen exactly for the dearth of serious critical work dealing with them, despite their being very well-respected outside of mainstream academia. Both Harrison and Noon, despite the respect their work has garnered in prizes, are woefully underrepresented in dedicated studies.

Chapter 2 sets out to establish a rubric for analysis of transreferential fiction, setting up a critical dialogue with Ricoeur's and Ryan's work. Building on this, it constructs and explores a toolset inspired by these and other approaches, preparing the ground for the analyses to follow.

Chapter 3 is a detailed analysis of M John Harrison's *Viriconium* sequence as representative of postmodern fantasy. *Viriconium* is of particular interest both for its ontologically informed presentation of world that shifts from fairly straightforward 'swords-and-sorcery' to complex postmodernism,

and for its stylistic complexity. The analysis is comprehensive because of its demonstrative function of the toolset, and to redress the fairly exclusive readership of *Viriconium*. Harrison is widely read and applauded by other sf and fantasy authors, as well as by the sf critical community, a respect evidenced by his being one of the first sf authors to have a book in the Science Fiction Foundation's series dedicated to his work. Despite this, his work is not very well known in the wider academic community or for that matter among contemporary readers of sf.

Chapter 4 is a study of William Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy, as paradigmatic of cyberpunk fiction. The impact of Gibson on both sf and popular culture cannot be overstated. Presenting himself as "reality hacker" (McCafferey, 1991:13) and producing sf that is literate, articulate and deliberately intertextual, Gibson can fairly be stated to have launched the cyberpunk 'movement'. Of particular interest here is the potential transreferential fiction has for exploring boundaries between personal and public identity.

Chapter 5 is a display of the 'outward momentum' of transreferentiality, and of the expansion of the legacy of cyberpunk poetics. While critically relatively unknown, Jeff Noon's future Manchester novels, including *Vurt* (1993) and *Pollen* (1995), contain some of the most daring conceptualisations of the nature of identity and reality to date, while maintaining a fine balance between formalist and transreferential tendencies. Of the novels analysed here, Noon's work perhaps comes closest to 'true' literary virtual reality. This thesis sets out to provide a preliminary map of transreferentiality in postmodern fiction. Having provisionally indicated the space in which transreferentiality arises as guiding principle, the following chapters will investigate the forms and effects of transreferential strategies in fiction. In the process, the various texts and their subgenres will be provisionally situated within the postmodern and transreferential field.

CHAPTER 2: TRANSREFERENTIALITY/THEORY

2.1 Introduction

Following the reading schedule I proposed in “Reading as process” above (1.6.1.), in this chapter I explore theoretical tools germane to the analysis of transreferential fiction. In addition to placing various tools in close proximity, the chapter also explores specific aspects that are not sufficiently dealt with for my purposes in any of the theoretical approaches.

Firstly, the focus of the investigation of possible-worlds theory differs slightly from that of both Ryan and Pavel. In both Ryan and Pavel’s work, the focus is on the similarity between fictional worlds and actuality. Put differently, both assume the centrality of the actual world to the complex system of worlds (both gesture towards radical recentering, Ryan in her distinction between Actual World and Textual Actual World, and Pavel in the relative independence of some of his ideas). The effect of this is that Ryan’s and Pavel’s ideas are better suited to *comparing* fictional worlds to the *actual* than to comparing them to one another. This has implications for a multiple-world system, not least because *characters* are not understood as having the actual world as their base world. I wish to establish a clearer idea of what makes a referential field world-*like*, independent (at least as far as possible) of similarities to the actual world. To coin a phrase, how does one measure the **worldliness** of a world?

Secondly, the spatial-temporal experience of moving through a text and exploring its world is not clearly dealt with in either hermeneutics or possible-worlds theory: Ryan, and especially Pavel, privilege spatiality while Ricoeur assumes its importance with little detailed investigation. I address this problem by bringing the two into a dynamic relationship.

Finally, this productive relationship allows a re-valuation of the sense of virtuality, of interactivity and immersion in the fictional world, including that generated by the fictional journey the viewer/reader undertakes.

To reiterate, in an internal reading:

- i The reader projects a fictional ego that undertakes an imaginative **journey** to the fictional world.
- ii The preparation for and early steps of the journey (here called **access**) are set, and are guided by, a “contract” between text and reader, with effects on the fictional ego, its powers, and its expectations.

- iii This contract is structured by, among other aspects, the narration, the tone of the narrative, epistemological and ontological stability, and the relationships between reader, narrator, and text.
- iv The reader **explores** the imaginary space of the fictional world through a temporal process, analogous to travel in the actual world. Both spatial and narrative elements have to be reconstructed using a process of analysis, extrapolation, and verification, which occurs in time.
- v Through this process the reader reconstructs the fictional **world** as an *independent ontology*, capable of sustaining any number of offstage elements, and a home to the characters as much as the actual is to the reader.
- vi The construction of the fictional world is partially guided by the **denizens**, who are reconstructed as if they were “really” existing in their world. The word “denizen” here is chosen to signify both the characters’ debt to spatiality as well as temporality, and to broaden the term to include non-human characters, as well as the reader’s fictional ego.

2.2 Access, Journey and Contract

The journey from the actual world to the fictional (or the historical, or the newsworthy, for that matter) forms the reader’s first contact with the text. As such, access has a lasting impact on the reader’s experience of the fiction: it establishes the guidelines for immersion, the fictional mode, and the reader’s potential position – the implied reader – in the fictional world, which in turn helps set the reader’s expectations and *sens* within the text.

The access window differs between texts, and is to some extent subjective between readers; but it can be said to reach from the initial taking up of a text to the point where a reader has taken up temporary residence in the fictional world. Generally, this would be by the end of the first narrative ‘move’, often the first chapter.

It is worth noting here that access is a relevant stage, not only upon initially entering a fictional world from actuality, but also when moving *between* different worlds within the same text. As an example, in *Neuromancer* Case’s initial access to cyberspace is highly significant and coded as such, but later entries are no more significant than scene shifts would normally be. Additionally, characters may also be depicted as experiencing a parallel process, as indeed Case is.

Access to the fictional world can itself be broken down into three ‘stages’: prefigurative aspects, the narration (including both the structure and the narrative tone), and the initial impressions of the fictional world.

2.2.1 *Prefiguration*

If prefiguration reflects a capability as well as a propensity to apprehend time in narrative terms, our prefigurative ability is itself based in and extended by examples. Our ways of narrating experience are themselves structured by narratives: “When I was your age...” is a cautionary narrative as well as an affirmation of the continuity and validity of narrative itself. In Ricoeur’s terms, “familiarity with literary works [...] instructs narrative understanding, before narratology constructs an atemporal simulacrum of it” (Ricoeur, 1985:14). In terms of writing, this means that new narratives are *both* divergences from tradition *and* reiterations of it. The reciprocal relationship between narratives and prefiguration has two correlatives. On the actual side, our understanding of time is partially influenced by narrative. On the fictional side, it means that generically coherent narrative structures influence the way we understand fiction.

Thence the interest Frye’s typology of fictional modes holds so many years later for Ryan, Ricoeur and Pavel: embedded within tradition and the larger social system within which prefiguration, configuration and refiguration operate, the modes already influence our interpretation of the world itself, as well as the production and consumption of fiction. Implicitly, this means that we allow texts to influence our actual-world spheres of action and therefore how we see ourselves according to the modes. Thus in the sphere of action (Ricoeur, 1984:166, 184 *inter alia*), stoicism belongs to and is an affirmation of the Romantic or High Mimetic mode; acquiescence is related to the Ironic. The emplotment of texts embeds modes, or evokes modes through associated styles.

Tradition also influences the reception of texts by various audiences. Science fiction and fantasy, for example, are traditionally read by critics in the Low Mimetic or Ironic mode, but by their primary audience in the Mythical. Similarly, Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* (1943) or Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* (2003) end up being read and refigured by a significant number of readers as belonging to the Mythical mode, as opposed to (respectively) the High Mimetic or the comedic Ironic Mode (or the tragic Ironic Mode, if one were to take the novel seriously). Very often, these texts – or others, such as “Stairway to Heaven” (1971), *A Catcher in the Rye*, *Easy Rider* (1969) – end up being read as *myth*, assigned by their readers the authority to direct and give meaning to their lives.

Some elements influence the reader even before he or she starts reading a novel. The choice of author, the cover of a novel, and the genre it belongs to all influence the reader's experience by activating specific areas of narrative capability. Obviously sf and fantasy covers tend to be clearly identifiable (although these have shifted away from the pulp depiction of a dramatic moment to depictions of characters or of the world, or even abstract, non-specific but evocative illustrations); but even magic realist fiction is often recognisable at first glance, often utilising a 'primitivist' style reminiscent of Henri Rousseau (an early "magic realist" painter).

Recognisable generic styles (sf, realist, reportage, or historical fiction for example) simplify access, since the reader already knows some of the skills demanded by the text. As an extreme example, Donald A. Wollheim (in James, 1994:88) proposes that "by the 1950s sf writers had managed unconsciously to create a consensus future history or cosmogony, with a pattern of premises which enabled experienced readers to situate themselves in the context of any new story very rapidly". (For a reader unfamiliar with the generic style, it might be an obstruction to access, although I believe this is both less common and less problematic than some sf critics would have it. A related idea is that of permeability, discussed in "Reconstructing worlds" below.)

2.2.2 *Narration*

As the 'medium' of the reader's first encounter with the narrative, the narration has a significant effect on access, particularly at the opening of the narrative. 'Narration' here includes the narrative instance, the narrative style and the structure of the opening sequence.

Transreferential fiction might use any narrative instance, but reliable, omniscient narration is fairly common. Omniscient narration allows a wide perspective on the fictional world and its history, as well as the relatively unobtrusive insertion of specialist knowledge. Impersonal, apparently objective narrators are common in sf, in particular a narrator "which relies on the historical past tense [which creates] the illusion of a completed future" (Csisery-Ronay, 2008:77), contributing to the impression of sf as "an analogy with scientific cognition" (Csisery-Ronay, 2008:73, following Suvin). Omniscient narration in transreferential fiction often creates the illusion of the narrative 'telling itself', but the narrator might also be personalised or semi-personalised, for example as 'a historian', a common ploy in fantasy and historical fantasy. Omniscient narration could also be embedded within a personalised frame.

The apparent distance of the narrator from the narrated events also has an impact. Balanced against personalisation and reliability, it helps to project the text's truth-claim. When there is a large narrative distance, as in for example with Tolkien's *Silmarillion* (1977), the narration is easily read as legend or myth. Because the narrator's timepocket – even though undefined – is ontologically more *stable* than the timepocket in which the main action is placed, the text signals a somewhat sceptical reading of the narrated events.

Narrative styles vary quite widely, although in sf the omniscient narration is most often cast as objective. Style, mood, and tone, to some extent tied to genre and mode, can ease the fictional journey (if appropriate and apparently reliable). Overt humour makes access more attractive, but unless it is filtered through the consciousness of a character, it institutes a split or ironic reading, signalling a lower requirement for reader immersion. An abrasive, overtly cynical, or highly self-reflexive voice may impede access (or may not, if for example the voice belongs to an identifiable speaker).

The narrative structure of the opening sequence also modulates access. Without discussing them in detail, Pavel (1986:88) lists some variables in the journey: duration, difficulty, and foregrounding (or occlusion) of the journey. Difficulty is largely a function of narration and difference (discussed below under "First impressions"). Foregrounding of the journey is not uncommon in formalist fiction, for example the second-person instructions that Italo Calvino gives the reader in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979, English 1981).

Mimetic forms more often occlude the journey, naturalising it by introducing the fictional world through a 'key' of sorts. In realist fiction, such a key often takes the form of a detailed description of the setting (Dickens, Balzac, Hardy and others) or a sociohistorical positioning of important characters (Austen, Hardy, and in Modernism, Faulkner). Fantasy very often literally provides an overview in the form of an actual map.

Many texts, especially realist fictions, ease the journey by opening with a description of the fictional world or a key character in that world. This creates a gradual zoom effect: the traveller can 'see' the target world before actually 'entering' it and participating in it. Examples include Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854) and Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native* (1878).

Some texts articulate the journey fairly explicitly: Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* "zooms" from a historical description to an interior, to specific character interaction. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) uses a combination of this and the Realist exposition, as does *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

In medias res is a less common form of access for alternate-world fiction, unless the narrative opens onto a quiet, usually domestic scene, dotted with *novi*. Filtering events through the consciousness of a world-internal character, though, allows *in medias res* to function as a zoom of sorts.

Focalisation is a powerful tool for modulating access. Seeing the world from a clearly defined perspective, including the point of view of a character lessens the importance of rapidly establishing a basic sense of the world, thereby softening the learning curve. Characters and/or narrators may be used as guides into the fictional world, whose knowledge of it allows privileged understanding of the world, both during and subsequent to the initial journey. Unknown entities in the fictional world are far less confusing if the characters know how to respond to them.

Access is of necessity a process of crossing **borders** (Pavel, 1986: 75-78) between worlds and world-versions. The most obvious borders – and the ones with the greatest impact on access as such – are those between actuality and the fictional world, and internally between subworlds. Other boundaries include those between world-versions describing actuality and fiction, between fiction and myth, and between fiction and history.

Borders can be very clearly defined, as is the case with most computer games, or they can be indistinct, as for example in fictionalised biographies and autobiographies. (Peter Ackroyd, award-winning biographer, has claimed that the difference between biography and fiction is that “in fiction you have to tell the truth” [in Onega, 1996: 213]). Borders can also be porous or impermeable: a text that invites or requires extensive comparison with others projects a world with porous borders, and vice versa.

During access, borders and the transition from one world to the other smooth or obstruct immersion. Distinct borders, as between actuality and the universe of *Star Wars*, draw attention to the fictional status of the text, but simultaneously invite immediate immersion. Indistinct borders, especially where the fictional world closely resembles the actual, ease the transition to the fictional world and can often subvert the actual/fictional distinction. In rare cases, texts “fake” indistinct borders, as in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Such devices combine a kind of forward blurring of boundaries with a simultaneous disruption of fictional conventions.

Text-internally, borders articulate the possibilities of movement and action within the fictional world. Clear borders tend to tie in with narrative or thematic disruptions, whereas indistinct borders empower navigation, but destabilise the fictional ontology.

2.2.3 *First Impressions of the Target World*

All fictional worlds differ in some way from actuality, but in general this is a matter of selection and “small miracles” (Pavel, 1988:105), such as invented or renamed pubs, fictional characters, or websites. Some genres – crime fiction is a prime example – present their worlds in a style or with a focus different from the reader’s everyday world-version. By definition, transreferential fiction is fiction in which readers sooner or later realise that they are definitely no longer in Kansas.

Access is significantly influenced by **difference** and **distance** (c.f. Pavel, 1986:85-90) between origin and target worlds. Difference can be qualitative as well as material. Qualitative differences can involve different social or environmental atmospheres, or it can be a matter of narratorial focus. *The Stepford Wives* (1972) provides a clear example of qualitative difference: on first entering the town, the characters (and the viewer) find the residents uncomfortably friendly and the town unnaturally neat. A more typical example is Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* (1985) where the narrator, focalising through antisocial characters, repeatedly mentions the ubiquitous dust and garbage of London.

Material differences appear readily between city and countryside, and in transreferential fiction, very often manifest as unfamiliar relations between familiar objects (as in magic realism), or in *nova data*, “new givens”, a term Tom Shippey (2005:11-14) coins by extension of Darko Suvin’s *novum*. The term includes the inventions of sf, both everyday and specialised, but it might as well be applied to magical charms or hobbits. Nova data are “high-information” (Shippey, 1005:16), and require additional mental effort on the part of the reader. Because they introduce uncertain elements, they occasion a slight hesitation in the reconstruction of the fictional world. By convention, most nova data can in fact be parsed fairly quickly. The reader realises that the elements mark entry into a non-actual world, but can also imagine how they function.

Distance is usually both temporal and spatial, although particular genres tend to privilege one aspect. Adventure fiction, or texts set in non-actual worlds, tend to emphasise the spatial (as [Disney’s] *Peter Pan* has it, “second star to the right, and straight on till morning” [1953]). Except in psychological novels, text-internal worlds and subworlds are often spatially divided. In Lessing’s *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1980), the

fictional world is divided into various Zones. Physical distance between the various Zones also articulates the wide gulfs between their spiritual and social systems.

SF and historiographic novels tend to favour worlds set either in the past or the future. In fact, SF relies on “the illusion of a completed future”, as Csicsery-Ronay puts it (2008:77). In both cases, the text often projects series of temporally remote text-internal fictional worlds.

At the level of reading, distance is a measure of the extent to which the reader needs to adjust his/her understanding and/or perception in order to assimilate the fictional world. Such adjustment is influenced by a variety of strategies and/or conventions: the extent to which a text is “friendly” or hospitable to a reader; whether a text is self-contained or import-dependent; generic conventions; narrative strategies designed to the purpose; and the use of fictional modes.

Although it is often the case, it does not necessarily follow that worlds with high difference would be experienced as very distant. It could be argued, for instance, that the success of *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) relies strongly on presenting a very different world as very close to actuality, while *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) presents a world very similar to actuality as fairly distant.

Difference and distance are also relevant from the perspective of characters. The impact of *Vurt*, for example, partially depends on the fact that the novel’s depictions of virtual reality are relatively ‘closer’ for the characters than for the reader.

Access to such embedded or parallel worlds occurs not from actuality, but from a textual real world, although the ‘root’ referential information still, of course, emanates from the actual reader. Fictional worlds can be ‘daisy-chained’ to allow more gradual access to worlds that are very remote from actuality. This strategy occurs with some regularity in Gothic fiction, with (for example) a reader in the base world reading a letter that recounts events that are remembered from experiences in a foreign land.

It seems likely that a comparable process is at work in historical fiction, or at least when reading fiction written a long time before the reader’s present: the reader refocuses to an actual-world equivalent historical world in order to access the fictional world. During the first transition to a version of actual-world history, the principle of optimal departure removes and/or substitutes inappropriate objects, beliefs etc. During the second journey to the fictional world, it allows the variation in characters, technology etc. demanded by fiction.

2.2.4 *The Fictional Contract*

Access guides the reader in refocusing his or her Care into the fictional world. This leads to the establishment of a ‘pact’ (Ricoeur, 1988:162) or contract (Pavel, 1986), which restricts an internal reading within reasonably stable parameters, while offering a maximally immersive experience. Textual cues (some might say, the implied author) activate prefigurative responses to genre, mode, and narration. These in turn set the reader’s expectations of the novel in terms of expected truth-value; the relative distances between narrative instance, author, and reader; initial emotional responses such as wonder or apprehension; tempo and narrative moves; and thematic content.

It is in the context of the fictional contract that Broderick’s and Csicsery-Ronay’s insistence on the power of the sf mega-text is most problematic. To use the latter’s articulation, there is “no reason for [a future history] to be believed in or committed to”, and “the future history of any given sf text is generally understood by authors and readers alike to be part of the megatext of all other fictive futures” (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008:83), of which, as he points out, many have by now been superseded. All these points imply an *ab ignitio* weakening of the ontological stability and therefore the immersive potential of the sf text.

If taken at face value, this argument implies that sf genre conventions require a specialised version of the Barthesian *scriptible* reading. However, such a reading does not jibe with the immersivity to which sf fandom attests. During an internal reading, the fictional ego is displaced, and superseded historical details are not ‘kept in mind’ by the fictional ego, while fictional details are. In reading, the reader holds fictional “propositions unasserted” (Carroll in Ryan, 2001:156), or in this case, *de*-asserted, emotionally and cognitively acting on fictional knowledge. Additionally, I am not fully convinced by the uniqueness of sf or, for that matter, future history in this regard: being able to positively disprove Little Dorrit’s existence does not grant Dickens’ text much more ontological stability than being able to disprove commercial flights to the Moon.

As I argued in Chapter One, it is my belief that such elements of the *scriptible* reading enter in the refigurative phase, or at a second reading. The referential reliance on the megatext (for instance, allowing “the cruiser” to be read as a fairly rounded sign) is *already* encoded in the contract by the genre conventions, allowing other elements (such as sf’s common use of the mythical mode) to function normally. The fictional contract stabilises the interacting sets of reading conventions.

In this particular regard the implied reader differs from the fictional ego. The fictional ego has to learn some details that the implied reader might already know. For example, in *Shikasta*, as presumably “a first-year student in the Canopean colonial service”, the implied reader already knows about Canopus, and that Earth is called Shikasta, whereas the fictional ego needs to learn these.

The contract guides the fictional ego to adopt a knowledge set appropriate to the text, suspending the actual reader’s experience and interpretation of actual space and time, and empowering the fictional ego to record and interpret fictional space and time. The subjective present of reading becomes the present of narration.

Through tone and narrative distance the contract indicates to the reader the appropriate level of commitment to the events and the characters. Thus, a reader of Pratchett knows to not associate with his characters too closely, as they might die or be made fun of, while an early invocation of the mythical mode indicates that a *greater* level of commitment is expected.

Access and the fictional contract also open some of the narrative’s moves (to use the term preferred by Pavel [1986] and Ryan [2001] for the minimal components of narrative), as well as give an indication of their density. Thus, by the end of the opening move, the reader already holds expectations of events likely to occur much later in the narrative, and has an idea as to its complexity.

The reading contract negotiates the differences between actuality and the fictional world to streamline understanding while allowing actual-world regularities to hold. This negotiation, called the principle of minimal departure by possible-worlds theorists (Pavel, 1986:88; Ryan, 1994:48-60), allows for textual economy as it limits the facts actually imported into (as opposed to merely applied to) the fictional world while acting as a guiding convention for the reconstruction of the fictional world (a “bracketing device”, in Derrida’s terminology). Since the reader can draw on any pertinent actual-world information as necessary, he or she does not need to keep track of an extensive bank of fictional possibilities, thus keeping the fictional world from expanding to unmanageable size.

Secondly, the principle of minimal departure accounts for or “glosses over” the incompleteness of the fictional world. In most texts, characters may be assumed to be the result of normal biological processes, even if their family structures are not explained. This glossing extends to the reconstruction of the temporal succession of world-states of the narrative framework of the fiction. Transitions between scenes are not perceived as “holes”, but merely as

inaccessible and/or (more often) mundane events. As Ryan (1994:55-9) points out, the principle enables a distinction between epistemological incompleteness and ontological incompleteness, with the former often related to genre. To use her example, the princess in a fairy tale is not perceived as asexual; rather, the principle relates fairy tales to one another in such a way that we don't consider the princess' sexuality relevant.

As this example suggests, it might be more appropriate to speak of a **principle of optimal departure**, which is modified by factors like genre, mode and tradition to guide readers to balance ease of access against sensitivity to the specificity of fictional worlds.

2.3 Reconstructing Worlds

The worlds of transreferential fiction are its most apparent distinguishing feature. The exploration of the alternate worlds also becomes a key pleasure and interest: what these worlds look and feel like, what secret they hold, and how they work. Certainly this is a widely identified attraction of sf. James writes, "part of the sf writer's art is to introduce the reader to the background by means of clues [...] the decoding [of which] can be a major part of the pleasure provided by the work" (1994:114).

Fictional reference is necessarily at least partially tied to actuality. The primary referent for any familiar word, as well as for the relationships between words, remains actuality. In this sense, the fictional ego remains tied to the actual world by the red string of signification, no matter how different a fictional world is from actuality.

However, it does not follow that "red" is more real in, say, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1881) than it is in a *Conan* story (which would be the implication of Nash's description of transreferential fiction as "anti-real", and implicitly of readerly discrimination against sf in favour of mimesis). Rather, texts generate and impart rules as to how reference works in a particular world. Theoretically, a world is the sum of statements that can sensibly be made about it. The rules that guide the generation of meaning within fictional worlds are here called **correspondence relations**.¹⁹

Listing all such rules about a world is both impractical (since the list would be almost infinitely long) and redundant (since most of the rules reiterate correspondence to actuality). Rather, possible-worlds theorists

¹⁹ Pavel (1986) uses the phrase "relations of alternativeness" and Ryan (1994) "accessibility relations". I prefer to de-emphasise discontinuity in this instance.

identify sets of categories of correspondence relations strategically suited to particular purposes.

The set Ryan develops in *Possible Worlds, Narrative Logic and Artificial Intelligence* (1994) is aimed at measuring the similarity of texts to actuality. Arranged hierarchically to reflect this goal, her categories range from “identity of properties” and “identity of inventory” (a strict combination of which is found only in non-fictional texts) to “linguistic compatibility”, which breaks down in limit-texts written in non-referential ‘languages’. Conveniently Ryan’s typology allows for a concise, almost binary evaluation of a world’s ‘realism’: each category is either in force (+) or “relaxed” (-). The full set is listed in the table below.

A	identity of properties (A/properties)	F	taxonomic compatibility, natural species only (F/taxonomy)
B	identity of inventory (B/inventory)	F'	taxonomic compatibility, both natural species and manufactured objects (F'/narrow taxonomy)
C	compatibility of inventory (C/expanded inventory)	G	logical compatibility (G/logic)
D	chronological compatibility (D/Chronology)	H	analytical compatibility (H/analytical)
E	physical compatibility (E/natural laws)	I	linguistic compatibility (I/linguistic)

(Ryan, 1994:34; *abbreviations added from* Ryan, 1994:32-3).

While Ryan’s categories are useful, in particular in describing meta-genres, their applicability as analytical tools is limited in transreferential fiction, since the set yields very little difference between individual texts. Almost all SF texts would defy A-D, with more experimental texts explicitly problematising G, H and I as well, while high fantasy would enforce G-I only. Magic realism and two-worlds fantasy such as *Harry Potter* would need two sets of descriptors, since part of the point is the explicit contrast between the actual-like world and a fantasy world; yet even here, the one would generally sustain E-I, while the other would operate as fantasy.

For the current purpose of describing fictional worlds as ontological constructs largely independent of actuality, I would like to propose a complementary set of categories of correspondence relations that more closely articulate an internal reading. The goal is to firstly establish a more general measure of “worldliness” that may facilitate the identification of unique worlds; and secondly, to incorporate mental and metaphysical aspects.

Five tiers or orders of correspondence relations are here identified: **basic**, **lower order**, **higher order**, **anthropogenic**, and **transcendent order**. These are approached as analytical categories with a potentially wide range.

The **basic** order of correspondence relations governs the stability of the medium of (re)presentation, that is, the relative stability of language in the case of linguistic artefacts (or, in the case of film, the relative stability of the two-dimensional image, of time, and of editing). This order largely encompasses Ryan's G/logical, H/analytical, and I/linguistic types, which need to remain mostly intact for a projected experiential field to be experienced as a world at all. I/linguistic and H/analytical together ensure the interpretability of the projected world. This order guides the "as if" of correspondence relations at the level of semantic reference, as well as the relations between words. G/logic operates at this level insofar as it serves to individuate entities, both as separate from one another and as cohesively re-identifiable across different sections of the text.

Lower order correspondence relations govern the natural laws of the fictional world as perceivable by the reader, as well as their basic apprehension by denizens. Ryan's F/taxonomy (natural classes) and E/natural laws, at least as perceived by the reader, lie on this level, but so does the existence of magic in fictional worlds. The lower order includes geological, meteorological and biological phenomena and their effects; linear temporal progression; and singularity and continuity of individual entities – or explanations of the above-mentioned that are available to the reader and the denizens.

In general, the lower order governs aspects known with a high degree of epistemological stability. We can assume with a high degree of certainty that lack of precipitation leads to drought; that seasons have meteorological and biological effects; that there are variant geographical zones; that inanimate objects do not move by themselves; that creatures give birth to self-similar offspring; that 'Alice' can travel through time "only like everyone else [...] one minute at a time" (Gaiman, *The Books of Magic*, 1993:151) that 'Alice' will remain basically analogous to a human being, and that every mention of 'Alice' refers to the same individual. (This last, of course, is also related to the lower order).

Higher order correspondence relations govern extrapolated phenomena and knowledge with a lesser degree of epistemological stability and/or circulation. Examples would include technical, such as technology (and its understanding); formalised natural and social 'laws' such as family structures or honour; history; and geopolitical facts and distributions (the location and names of particular cities, 'the West', and so on). Ryan's F'/taxonomy (manufactured classes) belongs to this level. E/natural laws also reverberate on this level as *character* knowledge: when Mary Stewart's Merlin (in *The Crystal Cave*, 1970) uses his understanding of astronomy to awe a crowd during an eclipse, the lower order, including E/natural laws, corresponds to

actuality, but the higher order differs from current actuality (as it does, in fact, between Merlin's and the crowd's world-versions).

Anthropogenic correspondence relations have to do with human interactions and individual-specific knowledge (such as the personal history of other human beings). Neologisms generally also lie at this level, since they imply cultural rules of descent, as do emotional and intellectual responses that vary among individuals. This order helps to examine the vindictive behaviour of the confectioner in Carver's "A small good thing", and on a larger scale, strongly biased narrators like Moorcock's racist narrator Colonel Pyat in *Byzantium Endures* (1981) or Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. It also involves cultural differences in "realistic", as well as fantasy and science fiction texts.

Again, orders may interact. For example, Ursula Leguin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) presents a subspecies of humanity that is able to switch gender (lower order; ~A/properties, ~F/taxonomy). This means (among other aspects) that family structures are radically different (higher order) and that gender relations are very different (anthropogenic) from actuality.

Transcendental correspondence relations are here distinguished from anthropogenic not so much to ascribe a 'higher truth' to them (which might not find universal acceptance) as for the reason that many fictions actively make use of them. These relations govern beliefs like religion (or lack thereof) and basic assumptions about the meaning of life or the origin of the universe. Primarily, the transcendental order describes metaphysical assertions about the projected world, especially those explicitly or implicitly made by the narrative instance, but also assertions that emerge from narrative structures. For example, in children's fairy tales, virtue is rewarded, and avarice is punished.

Figure 1 provides a summary of sets of correspondence relations:

Level of correspondence relation	Domain and function	Examples	Ryan's categories
Basic order	Stability of medium semantics, relations between words.	Semantics in language 2D for 3D in film, painting etc. Objects, colours, actions etc. Use of personal names to denote individuals	I/linguistic H/analytical G/logic
Lower order	Natural laws Epistemologically stable knowledge Temporality Singularity and continuity of individual entities	Relation between rain and drought Geographical variation Progeny type-identical Linearity of time Stabilising effect of proper nouns	F/taxonomy (natural classes) E/natural laws A/properties
Higher order	Epistemologically variable knowledge Technical applications of lower order knowledge Formalised social and natural 'laws' History Geopolitical knowledge	Technology Specific geographical/geopolitical facts (as designated by human consensus)	F/taxonomy (manufactured items) A/properties D/chronology C/expanded inventory (objects)
Anthropogenic	Human interactions Individual-specific knowledge Fiction-internal neologisms Emotional intellectual responses that vary among individuals	Friendship, manners, education Personal history of specific individuals; the total field of specialised knowledge belonging to a particular individual Interpretations	A/properties (human [interaction]) C/expanded inventory
Transcendental	Concepts, beliefs and understanding concerning unknown things	Beliefs Religion (or lack thereof) Cosmology	A/properties C/expanded inventory

At a more general level, Pavel suggests a number of general characteristics to describe fictional worlds. In addition to difference, distance and borders – all of which are to a greater or lesser extent *relationally* measured between different worlds – he also identifies **size** and **incompleteness**.

The overall size of the projected universe might be much larger than that aspect directly accessible to the fictional ego. This distinction is often fairly dramatically articulated in science fiction and fantasy, especially in the oeuvres of authors who return to the same fictional universe time and again, for example Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* novels and *Hainish Empire* stories, or Iain

M. Banks' *The Culture*.²⁰ In the latter two instances, the action is often set on a single planet within the larger universe. LeGuin's *Tehanu* (the fourth of the *Earthsea* books [1990]) is set in two towns on a small island in the world set out in the first three novels of the series. Here, the fictional ego is (made) aware of the wider world, but largely restricted to a comparatively small sphere of action.

Projected universes, and the subworlds comprising them, differ in size, ranging between minimal and near-maximal. The size of both universes and specific focal areas is influenced by the complexity, the scope, and the range of inference of the texts from which they are projected. The size of fictional worlds can also be increased by their having a high permeability to extra-textual information (Pavel, 1986:91). This is one effect of sf's use of the sf mega-text. Other examples can be found in postmodern fiction, such as Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1989), in which the protagonist slips into worlds heavily reliant on the reader's knowledge (or willingness to obtain knowledge) of the superzones of English art, music and literature.

Pavel points out that any non-actual world is necessarily incomplete, but that texts have different ways of dealing with incompleteness. Some, like Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* wherein the characters find themselves in a house of which most of the rooms don't exist (in McHale 1986:32) flaunt their imperfection, but these will tend to be read as formalist.

Texts use different strategies to manage incompleteness. Pavel (1986:108-10) identifies high descriptive density, high narrative density, and invocation of fictional modes. One function of the invocation of mythical structures (by the text or by denizens) is to append a mythological world seen to have *higher* ontological stability to the fictional world.

Transreferential and metamimetic fiction often balances on a form of **functional completeness**, which at turns suggests a fairly large world and steers the reader away from its more obviously incomplete areas (an idea fairly literally explored in Stephen King's "Langoliers" [1990, television adaptation 1995], where the past is continually devoured by monsters that we miss only because we're looking the other way).

²⁰ Le Guin has several worlds to which she returns to time and again in both novels and short stories. The Hainish Empire is the backdrop for much of her science fiction. The scattering of the texts across a wide number of books, combined with the fact that the setting of some stories is not explicitly defined, would make rehearsal of a full list here otiose. Banks' *Culture* fiction represents a similar case.

2.4 Exploration

Exploration, as defined here, focuses on the movement of the fictional ego through the text, both in terms of gradually discovering how the world works, and in terms of the fictional experience of time. In part, then, it deals with how the aspects discussed under “Reconstructing Worlds” above are revealed to the reader.

The strong spatial focus of possible-worlds theory is apparent in the metaphors it favours, the journey, distance, actual world vs. fictional world. Possible-worlds analyses of time slice time into a series of discrete worlds and then compare these to find transformative rules (Von Wright in Ricoeur, 1984:133-4; Ryan, 1994:125-147; Laurie, 1998:51-53). While this approach provides a high degree of precision in comparing time-segments, it is both cumbersome and not well suited to the back-and-forth movement of memory and expectation that occurs during reading.

The experience of temporality is of direct importance in this study, but time is also important in the construction of fictional worlds, as well as in both the experience of and the portrayal of characters. Fictional worlds, in particular transreferential fictional worlds, often construct their own histories, which frequently contain ‘clues’ to the nature of the fictional world itself. As with the fictional world itself, the reader “gets to know” the characters as a temporal process, and the characters in turn help to construct the world. Characters also interact with the history of the fictional world as people do with actual history, and they therefore offer perspectives on the reader’s relationship to time.

2.4.1 *Time and History*

Fictional time and fictional space differ ontologically in their relation to actuality. Fictional space is built up entirely by analogy, being literally constructed from signs rather than matter. By contrast, fictional time is built up from layers of represented time, analogously experienced time, and literally experienced time, with the latter two participating in the experience of actual time.

In *Time and Narrative* (1984-8) Paul Ricoeur demonstrates that the prefiguration, configuration and refiguration of narrative are processes that emerge from and partake in the human experience of time. Ontologically, we exist only in the present. Action occurs in the present, and becomes situated within present, past, and future only through an operation of the mind. Memory allows the imposition of a retrospective pattern on events, which in

turn enables the projection of future events and future patterns. It is only by imposing a subjective and arbitrary system – a sequence with a beginning, a middle, and an end, i.e., a narrative – that we make time into a meaningful quantity (*c.f.* Ricoeur, 1984:132-136).

Considering life requires deliberately turning our *Care*, our attention, the focus of our interaction, toward perceiving time as a sequence of “sign-images”²¹. Our experience of time passing is our continual re-assignment of these sign-images: a sign-image related to the future becomes the object of our attention, and hence present; once our attention shifts towards the next sign-image, the previous one moves into the past and becomes memory.

However, although time is ‘actually’ point-like, we don’t experience it as such. Generally, a micro-event – say, the current note of a song we’re listening to – is experienced primarily as *part of an ongoing present* instead of as a discrete moment. As time moves forward, the micro-event recedes into **recollection**, the “past” component of the present, while similarity with past events or familiarity with the event (or its genre, for songs and other texts) generates expectation. In this way, our Care is “stretched” along an extended present (a process Ricoeur [1984:3-21], following Aristotle, calls *distentio animi*).

Though guided by textual pointers, the beginning and end points of such an extended present are assigned by each individual based on personal narrative as well as prefigurative capability. An experienced salesman, for example, is able to place responses and questions within a narrative of making a sale. The mind usually sustains several actions or experiences simultaneously as overlapping extended presents.

Once an extended present reaches resolution, it becomes part of the past “proper”, what Ricoeur calls **remembrance**. Processed as such, it becomes part of the reader’s prefigurative understanding. In practical terms, we learn patterns of events – how people act, for instance – which then modifies our expectation of the future.

The future is ‘present’ as the expectation of death, as the end of a narrative of a life. Likewise, the present is indebted to the past as resulting from past actions. In this way, memory, action, and expectation become part of a narrative consideration of time.

History is an extension of the same principles to larger scales. The narrative of an individual is set against social history, which in turn occurs within the embrace of the historical *longue durée*, within the larger scale of

²¹ Ricoeur hedges the term very carefully: “intentional activity has as its counterpart the passivity engendered by this very activity [which], for lack of a better name, we designate as impression-image or sign-image” (Ricoeur 1984:21).

geological time. As narrative gives meaning to human life, so history carves cultural stability into the implacable face of the immensity of natural time. History encompasses many events shared among people, creating a narrative weight that stabilises the meanings they convey. Cultures narrate themselves in similar terms, with the narrative of past events informing their desires and goals for the future.

SF criticism notes that “*SF is in its very nature a symbolic meditation on history itself*” (Jameson in Broderick, 1995:43; emphasis original), creating the imaginative narrative of humanity’s exploration of and potential impact on history (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008:82; Broderick, 1995:45). While the scope varies between transreferential novels, history carries significant weight in SF, in most magical realism, and in much fantasy – as well as, obviously, in historical fantasy and (perhaps less obviously) in postmodern fictions that modify history dramatically enough to blur into transreferential fiction – such as much of the work of, for instance, Peter Ackroyd or Umberto Eco.

2.4.2 (Re)configuration

Reading enacts this narrativisation of consciousness in miniature. Prefigurative ability – influenced by genre, mode, access and so on – informs expectation of the fiction. Various narrative lines each form an extended present, receding into remembrance as they pass, thereby informing the prefiguration for the remainder of the narrative. In reading, of course, the sense of experience as a series of overlapping timeframes is heightened, in part because fictional selection marks the beginning of narrative moves more clearly than they are marked in actuality.

In the process, the projection of the fictional ego generates an alternative timeline: actual time is replaced by narrated time. The relationship between narrated time and narrative time is partly analogous to the shift of Care of the actual consciousness, which selects spatial and temporal elements from actuality, particularly in remembrance and expectation. Fiction moulds the reader’s experience of time by varying narrative density and narrative. Such experiments partially refocus Care on behalf of the reader (in the sphere of action, the individual has extensive control over the selection process). This experience is analogous to actual time, with descriptions and narrative moves experienced as resolving rapidly or slowly, and some sections experienced as ‘busy’ and others as comparatively relaxing.

Fiction also models temporal experience through its portrayal of the different ways in which characters experience time and deal with temporal experiences. Central to *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913-1929), *Ulysses* (1922) and other modernist novels, the depiction of a character’s temporal

awareness might be different from that experienced by the reader. Additionally, it is entirely possible for fiction to model experiences rare or impossible in actuality.

Both narrative time and temporal modelling establish a ‘base’ frequency, which, analogous to ‘real time’, functions as a measure of relative narrative tempo. This is obvious in film, where narrative time is often close to narrated time. Narrators and characters also *describe* temporal frames explicitly (for example, fictional history). Time thus features as a described element of the fictional world, as the experience of characters, and as the moulding by the fiction of the actual time spent to read it.

Narratives (including those of characters, and those constructed in remembrance by actual people) tend to select for intensity and significance. This forms an implicit part of most fictional contracts: while the importance of characters and events vary, they rarely have no impact in the reader’s reconstruction of the narrative and the fictional world.

Any event therefore shapes the reader’s horizon of expectation, which is arguably more acutely focused than most people’s consideration of their future. The introduction of a character sets in motion a narrative line that interacts with others, and the reader actively engages with how that character might influence relationships in the fictional world. A similar case might be made for any *novum datum*. (Delaney in fact argues that every word in every sentence influences both one’s expectation of what is to come and one’s understanding of what has gone before [in Broderick, 1995:67-71], although Broderick points out that contemporary understanding of reading points towards sentence- or paragraph-level parsing rather than phrase level). The horizons of expectation of various narrative lines are met, postponed, or refuted, with each influencing both the understanding of the novel up to that point and the prefiguration for the rest of the narrative.

2.4.3 *Immersion and Presence*

Immersion, the sense of temporarily belonging to another world, depends on a sense of presence, which allows a non-actual world to replace the sensory input of the actual. Presence also influences interactivity, as it enables the imaginative exploration of a non-actual world.

In *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001) Ryan approaches literary presence through its application in virtual reality (VR). From VR theorist Thomas Sheridan (1992:122 in Ryan, 2001:67) she draws three requirements for presence: the comprehensiveness of the display (“realism”), “the ability to

explore an environment”, and the ability to impact that environment (the last two, together, form the bulk of the concept “presence”). Phenomenologically (with reference to Merleau-Ponty [in Ryan, 2001:70]), presence arises from “imagining ourselves physically reaching out toward things” (70), in other words the sense that sensory perception and manipulation belong to the same body, and that this body shares an ontology with the objects that it perceives.

Ryan describes the literary modelling of this sense of presence as an interrelation of immersion, “transportation”, and point of view. Ryan identifies three main forms of immersion: spatial, temporal and emotional.²²

Spatial immersion is the sense of place generated by the world itself (as discussed above), its description, and especially its focalisation and the component techniques involved therein, including the use of deictic indicators and what Fokkema calls the “signifiers of character” (1991:76) (discussed in more detail under “Denizens: Postmodern characters” below). These “signifiers of character” include the modes of representation of character, namely authorial description, autonarration, and free indirect discourse. These techniques naturalise the journey, and allow the reader to share the point of view of world-internal individuals.

Temporal immersion is defined as “the reader’s desire for the knowledge that awaits her at the end of narrative time” (Ryan, 2001:140), or technically, **suspense**. Temporal immersion is the process of exploration, by which narrative lines and moves “fill up” the time of the fiction. Suspense can be subdivided into “what”, “how”, and “who” suspense (2001:143-145): in other words, the gradual exploration of the fictional world and its givens, the play of curiosity against expectation, and the guided process of selecting one among a limited number of responsible agents.

Temporal immersion is balanced against emotional immersion, the sympathy with or imaginative replication of characters’ situations. Various explanations have been offered for readers’ willingness to involve themselves emotionally. Noel Carroll (in Ryan, 2001:155-156) suggests that two different modes of thought, “belief” and “thought” are used to contemplate actuality “as asserted” and non-actual ideas as “unasserted” respectively. Ricoeur, following Heidegger (and ultimately, Augustine), speaks of Care “intending” towards the sphere of action or that of a projected world (1988:69). The key point, though, is that “emotional responses [...] are not sensitive to the distinction between asserted and unasserted propositions” (Ryan, 2001:156, paraphrasing Carroll); or in other words, “to the simulating mind, it does not

²² A fourth kind of suspense, *metasuspense* (Ryan, 2001:145) is more appropriate to an external reading. Metasuspense has little bearing on immersion as such, but rather on the diminishing number of pages in the physical book).

matter whether the envisioned state of affairs is true or false, and its development known or unknown, because simulation makes it temporarily true and present, and from the point of view of the present, the future has not happened” (*ibid*).

The interactive element of immersion obviously functions at a more metaphorical level in literature. A key element is the process of reconstruction of the fictional world. As Ryan explains,

The idea of textual world presupposes that the reader constructs in imagination a set of language-independent objects, using as a guide the textual declarations, but building this always incomplete image into a more vivid representation through the import of information provided by internalized cognitive models, inferential mechanisms, real-life experience, and cultural knowledge, including knowledge derived from other texts. The function of language in this activity is to pick objects in the textual world, to link them with properties, to animate characters and setting – in short, to conjure their presence to the imagination

(Ryan, 2001:91).

Reading internally then already generates a world – or at the very least, elements of a world – that “exists” independently of the specific words on the page. While this should hardly come as a surprise (after all, characters are memorable even if none of the specific descriptions can be recalled), it flies in the face of advocates of formalist reading.

In this light, the achievement of realist fiction (Ryan uses the term in the widest possible sense, meaning fiction that evokes a world) is the use of strategies that attempt to make the “language-independent objects” as conceptually stable as possible. Objects and characters obtain additional ontological weight through cumulative mention or description, and in particular through being “observable” from multiple points of view. This is facilitated in part by focalisation: even a momentary shift between a character’s point of view and that of the narrator strengthens the sense that the observed part of the fictional universe has an existence independent of the observer.

2.5 Denizens: Modes-of-being and Character

The experience of a fictional world is greatly amplified by the reader's interaction with its denizens. Characters often function as "guides" in the fictional world, indicating by attention or example the possibilities of movement and action within the fiction. The narrator is in this sense a specific type of foregrounded character, even when not identified. Characters elicit emotional immersion: in fact, many readers' main interest in fiction is the experiences and decisions of characters even more than events and fictional worlds. (This tendency is very clear in the popularity of soap operas: while the fictional world is often portrayed as nearly identical to actuality as can be, the plot dynamics turn entirely on interpersonal relationships.)

Ricoeur, too, asserts that one of our main interests in reading is the investigation of alternate "modes of being-in-the-world" (1985:100; 1988:63-74; here, often shortened to "modes of being"). Modes of being-in-the-world – from Heidegger's *dasein* (in Ricoeur, 1988:69-74) – involves the experience of the individual in relation to first, existence, and second, the experiential field. Variant modes-of-being can be investigated in fiction through the contrast set up to actual world modes-of-being, and are offered both directly and indirectly. Through their modes-of-being characters influence the experience of both fictional worlds and narrative. In this regard, Aleid Fokkema's model proposed in *Postmodern Characters* (1994) provides a useful theoretical tool, in part because her focus is on various fictional modes-of-being (although she doesn't use the term), from fully representational to near-abstract. Additionally, she takes account of various modes of representation (represented thought, autonarration, free indirect discourse), which articulates well with possible-worlds theory.

Directly, the text offers an alternate mode-of-being in the experience of reading the text, ideally from a position approximating that of the implied reader (who is a non-specific member of the fictional world). This mode-of-being almost by definition organises *what* the reader can observe in the fictional world, movement between various narrative domains, *when* particular information is conveyed, and the tempo and order of the narrative. The combination of these gives rise to expectations and retrospections in the narrative, as well as to secondary emotional experiences such as excitement, fear, and others.

Apart from this direct mode-of-being, fictions embed other modes-of-being in or through the characters, including both intradiegetic and extradiegetic individuated narrators.

In any text that represents a more or less coherent world, the characters are assumed to share most aspects of their modes-of-being that have bearing on their physical (or analogous) relationship towards that world. As such, characters collectively and often singly serve as ‘guides’ within the fictional world. The physical, social-conventional, and ethical limitations on characters play an important role in depicting the fictional world. A character’s approval and disapproval of or familiarity or unfamiliarity with technology, customs, or other world-internal entities and structures help sketch the general state of the world. This is illustrated, as one example, by the bafflement of the narrator of *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four, and Five* when the rulers of Zones Three and Four are instructed to “marry”.

All characters (re)present modes-of-being as alternate to that of the reader as those of actual-world individuals, but under the imperative of reading the characters in a text become a select group flagged as specifically relevant to the reader’s experience. In this, as in much else, fiction is selective, a distillation when compared to actuality. A higher percentage of fictional characters than of actual-world individuals impact the reader’s experience and understanding.

That said, in fiction as well as in actual life the impact of individuals is variable. In actuality, distinctions are possible (even if most people don’t consider them consciously) between close friends, casual friends, acquaintances, casual acquaintances and strangers. In fiction, and especially film, the world-user makes distinctions between protagonists, supporting characters, walk-ons and so forth.

Personalised first-person narrators both provide access to the fictional world and offer experiences in contrast to those of the fictional ego, especially when these feature as intradiegetic characters as well. Protagonists and antagonists in particular, especially when these are complexly presented, present alternate modes-of-being for the viewer to investigate. Motivations are questioned, examined, and implicitly compared to the reader’s own personality. As such, characters also evoke the question, “how would I act in the same situation?”

2.5.1 *Postmodern Character*²³

Aleid Fokkema, in *Postmodern Characters* (1991), largely subscribes to the view of postmodern fiction as opposed to realism. This logic leads to a scale for evaluating the extent to which characters are “representational”, but which is insightful for a more general study of the modes-of-being of characters as well.

Characters do not emerge fully-drawn from their texts; rather, the reader collates their traces throughout the narrative. These collected traces are traditionally seen as a collective signifier of an actant (Greimas, 1983) or an imagined person. Fokkema points out that characters emerge from the texts in which they appear, and remain, at least at some levels, tied to these texts. Thus, at the level of reading she refers to a **character-sign**, which combines signifiers that relate to actual-world frameworks, such as occupation or race, as well as signifiers that gain ‘weight’ as signifieds of individuals, such as character traits, names, family structure etc. which are more specifically related to a particular character than to actuality. The character-sign is thus simultaneously a sign that draws together signifiers for possible individuating characteristics – a signifier for an imaginary person; and it is the signified of numerous textual references – itself an imaginary person.

Characters are delineated by **codes** that function very much like correspondence relations. Fokkema identifies six codes: the **logical**, the **biological**, the **psychological**, the **social**, the **code of description**, and the **code of metaphor and metonymy**.

The **code of metaphor and metonymy** is a purely literary code, relating the character more to normalised modes of representation than to actuality, and operates by drawing implicit or explicit connections between characters’ personalities and nature, appearance, and other world-related features, as commonly happens in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and other Gothic novels. The association of characters with nature gives way in modernist and postmodernist fiction to subtler forms, such as literary or musical tastes; in SF it is common for particular elements to be associated with particular character-functions, as discussed in “character templates” below.

Fokkema suggests that the **code of description** is also mainly literary, as the use and form of both these codes vary significantly according to genre and period conventions. Thus, 19th century realist conventions required full

²³ This section corresponds closely to Laurie (1997:55-58), where Fokkema is similarly summarized for similar purposes.

physical descriptions, while contemporary fiction often offers minimal visual detail. In this sense, the code of description *is* literary, but it is also in a sense a general code, applicable to actual-world individuals as well as fictional ones. At least to some extent, it could be seen as merely a ‘translation principle’ between the media of fiction and actuality.

(It is likely that the increased use of social networking websites, including **Twitter**, **Mxit** and **Facebook**, will bring about an upswing of these codes’ popularity, matching the ‘special effects’ available to the most casual user through *Photoshop*).

The **logical** code is a general code, which guides our desire to make sense of others, including asking for logical explanations for changes in hair colour and behaviour. It assumes that continuity and identity accompany change in individuals.

The other three codes, the social, the psychological, and the biological code are general codes that have specific literary applications. The **social** code stabilises individuals’ ‘position’ on the basis of status or occupation. Literature often supplements or integrates the social code and that of metaphor and metonymy, with specific occupations implying certain characteristics. The **psychological** code guides our assumption that people, and characters (as other-worldly people) have ‘inner lives’ and private thoughts and awareness. The application of this code might lead one to attempt explanations of personality in terms of past experiences, or to project future developments of personality based on observed events. Lastly, and applied equally to characters and people, the **biological** code is expressed by bodily functions, family relations, bodily construction and so on.

These codes, but especially the last four (logical, social, psychological, and biological) relate to human psychology, operating on human interest in comparison to “others”, and go some way towards explaining the associations readers make with characters (admittedly, of varying personal attachment).

The more codes are used, and the denser their application, the more “complete” a character appears. Codes can be used either denotatively or connotatively, though. Direct statements (“he had dinner”) activate codes denotatively, saving space, while connotative activation adds depth to characters (“He cut the meat carefully into small cubes; then, assigning each bit its load of greens, he slowly carved away at his meal”) (examples duplicated from Laurie, 1997:57). Even with all codes activated, characters constructed mostly from denotative codes tend to appear flat.

The character codes and the text in general are guided by a **principle of coherence**, which is a convention based on psychology, according to which
 [the] reader – or human beings in general – will try to
 reconcile the differences between signs where possible ...

The principle of coherence guides the assimilation of various signs and their merging into a larger sign without too many inconsistencies

(Fokkema, 1991:76).

The main signifiers of character, for Fokkema, are their modes of representation. Drawing on Cohn, Fokkema (1991:76) identifies three: psychonarration, the authorial description of thought; narrated monologue, where thoughts are embedded in a free indirect style; and quoted monologue, which is the apparent direct quotation of monologue. Cohn suggests a hierarchy among these modes, but Fokkema finds that postmodern fiction often uses all three equally to render characters' consciousnesses. Texts are not necessarily restricted to using only one of the modes; often they are merged, or used in perspectival representation.

With character constituted as a sign, Fokkema points to the 'modal roles' (based on Philippe Hamon's thinking [in Fokkema, 1991:40]) of character as its signifieds: being able (to), knowing, and wanting.

Fokkema postulates five interpretants of the character sign. 1) An iconic sign, built up with a substantial number of codes. "This interpretant constitutes a character that appears to be autonomous and to have an accessible, knowable self" (Fokkema, 1991:77). By analogy and convention, such a sign is taken as representing (a) human being. 2) A sign of which the interpretant is still iconic, but where the focus is on "provisional presentation" rather than representation. 3) An interpretant that is experienced to be not only subject *in*, but also subject *to* discourse, which presents a non-representational character. 4) A "tangled" interpretant, which becomes a sign emphasising the linguistic nature of knowledge of and discourse about the world. With its existence hinging on a linguistic paradox, such an interpretant is suspended between representation, presentation and non-representation. 5) Signs that present (virtual) iconic representation despite not being conventionally constituted and appearing not to possess a self.

In addition to the complexity and 'realism' of characters measureable with Fokkema's toolset, fictional characters offer "modes of being" to the reader. After all, if the reader becomes a temporary, albeit "non-voting" denizen of the fictional world, the reader also interacts with characters in ways analogous to his or her interaction with actual human beings. In this sense, characters represent ways of experiencing and dealing with the world.

As with actual people, the relationship to fictional characters takes at least three different forms. The simplest terminology for these can be borrowed from actuality: fictional characters function as "friends", in whose

fate the reader actively invests and whose modes-of-being and decision-making processes are actively investigated by the reader; “acquaintances” (observable from the outside, and of interest primarily for their interaction with “friends”), and as members of a community.

In the first sense, characters function as points of view on fictional time.

Fictional time structures the mode of existence within which events, experiences and characters change, but – like actual time – it also influences the experience of space, and *vice versa*. The reconstruction of a broad outline of a fictional world may be quick, or may take up much time. Narrative can accelerate or slow down both the ‘spatial’ and the temporal experience in a number of different ways. At the same time, the exploration of a fictional world is also an exploration of the narrative.

Time emerges in narrative at different levels: firstly, in the distinction between narrative time, the time it takes the narrative instance to relate events, ironically most accurately measured in the number of pages (a spatial dimension) and narrated time, the time the narrated events take in the fictional world. Closely related to the former is the time taken by the actual reader to read the fictional text, which may not be quantifiable in a theoretical study, but during which the actual reader necessarily withdraws from spending time in the sphere of action. Narrated time concerns both the real events in the fictional world, and (less obviously) the way in which these are temporally experienced by the characters or conceptualised by the narrative instance.

If fictional entities are conceived of as analogically similar to humans – which, in general, they are – they can be portrayed as experiencing time in any way that any human being could, and in fact in various ways that humans can’t. Fiction can portray beings that live far longer than humans, or are reborn various times, that can isolate a moment and ‘freeze’ it to examine it in minute detail, or who can experience various points in time simultaneously²⁴, among others.

Both individual characters and collectives of characters in fiction also participate in communities, which, like actual communities, often participate in **narrative identity**.

Ricoeur discusses narrative identity (of individuals, 1988:246-9; of communities, 1988:256-260) as illustration of and expansion on refiguration. An individual cannot discuss his or her identity without considering their life, and such consideration necessarily involves narrating aspects of that life. Therefore, “the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or

²⁴ Examples of the first three types can be found in, among others, Lessing’s **Shikasta** and Terry Pratchett’s *Hogfather* (2007). The last is particularly well articulated in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s graphic novel *The Watchmen* (1986).

fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself” (Ricoeur, 1988:247). Regarding communal narrative identity, Ricoeur points out how hearing a narrative of community, such as the Old Testament (Ricoeur’s example), helps to construct that community’s (and its individual members’) understanding of themselves.

Communal narrative identity is to a large extent the inscription of the community’s mode-of-being in historical time against the background of geological and natural time. Historical references and narratives of predecessors, contemporaries, and successors (*c.f.* Ricoeur, 1988:234-248) help to situate a community against geological time, or, in the case of religious texts, projected cosmic time. The most obvious transreferential example of this is *The Lord of the Rings*. Characters are identified by family names, which in turn commemorate participation in large-scale historical events celebrated in history in song and ritual. This is accentuated by the passage of relics of the past, which in Tolkien is also on the transcendental order tied to transhuman and transhistorical time: the “ages” of Middle-Earth, which are largely distinguished by the relationship between humans, and magic and the magical races.

2.5.2 *Character Templates*

As a specific instance of superzones, literature often generates characters within particular templates. In SF studies and among SF readers a range of character templates is generally acknowledged: hackers, tyrants, razor-girls, and the like. While “literary” fiction tends to depict characters as complex, at bottom many characters also fit into templates such as the aspiring writer, the artist (or musician) friend, the active, worldly acquaintance.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay (2008:225-260) suggests a cluster of SF character-functions: the Handy Man, the Fertile Corpse, the Willing Slave, the Shadow Mage, the Tool/Text, and the Wife at Home. Provocative as these are in studying the thematic aspect of characters and the narrative dynamic, the actual character fulfilling the function, and his or her portrayal, remains widely divergent among texts, and in analysis, the functions are so generally applied as to lose most relevance to an internal reading. From an internal perspective, the main impact of such character-functions is as shorthand for motivation: hackers, for example – one manifestation of the Handy Man – share certain beliefs and ways of thinking about the world, such as placing a high premium on personal freedom, a resistance to authority, a preference for and skill with computers and networks, and a belief in the power of technology to reshape the world. It is worth noting that the same beliefs are shared by the majority of actual-world hackers, as a glance at the Online Hacker Jargon File or any

Anonymous press release shows. Likewise, “hacker” is shorthand only inasmuch as “Catholic” or “modernist artist” is: the template aids cultural, social, and psychological positioning, but the execution often surpasses the stereotype.

As is the case with the SF mega-text more generally, templates help the reader to situate himself more rapidly within the fictional world, and provide specific horizons of expectation against which to measure the narrative development. As is the case with the mega-text though, the importance of templates should not be overstated. SF writers do, after all, often attempt to refine or destabilise established stereotypes, while literary fiction might make more use of them than is generally acknowledged.

2.6 Summary and Implications

The categories suggested in this chapter – access, the reconstruction of fictional worlds, exploration, and denizens – both highlight the aspects of fiction most important in an internal reading and provide a framework for analysis. The categories have been formulated to highlight hermeneutical interaction with fiction. Reading is seen as an active process during which the reader’s fictional ego enters a fictional world in order to simultaneously explore the world and reconstruct the narrative.

While the division of categories roughly follow the order of occurrence during an internal reading, it is a strategically imposed division. After all, characters are usually investigated at the same time that the world is explored; and with multiple worlds, access is not a singular process that occurs only once. The sequence, in particular, is not necessarily stable: it is fully conceivable, for instance, that the understanding of a fictional world might depend on the reader’s investigation of a major character.

Two specific elements bear restating here: interactivity, and what I have called “worldliness”. The most marked unique feature of transreferential fiction is its ability to present worlds that are patently different from actuality, yet are experienced to be as much “worlds” as versions of actuality are. This illusion of worldliness depends on a number of aspects. Firstly, the fictional world achieves *functional completeness*, the impression that there is much going on in the world that is merely offscreen. Secondly, worlds are presented as coherent and organised according to a logic parallel to that of actuality, with natural laws (not necessarily coincident with actuality), underlying phenomena, which in turn underlie applications, the distribution of knowledge, and socio-

cultural effects. Often, denizens construct systems of knowledge to explain and order the fictional world, which may or may not reflect the true ontological structure of the world. Additionally, the denizens of the fictional world are both “of a piece” with the world and appear to interact with it in ways similar to our own interaction with the physical world.

As Ryan argues (1994; 2001) immersion in fiction runs counter to interactivity in the strong sense of being able to touch objects and to change the world. However, fiction offers both analogous forms of interactivity and fiction-specific interactivity on a mental or an intellectual level.

Presence in fiction is – or at least, can be – strongly analogous to VR presence. A text that creates the impression of navigability and enclosure (effects of functional completeness) and in which objects can be imagined from different perspectives (sometimes because they are literally described from different perspectives) both increases the “worldliness” of its world and the impression that the world can be usefully explored by its denizens, including the fictional ego. While the fictional ego does not actually have freedom of movement, it is possible for texts to allow or even specifically generate the impression that the reader can move freely about the world. The reader might not be able to change the fictional world, but worlds, or characters, could be constructed in ways that allow freedom of judgment or evaluation. In some cases, the reader’s evaluation might, in fact, change the final understanding of world, narrative, or character.

The reconstruction of a fictional world is an interactive process – more so, almost by definition, in fictions with otherworldly than actual-world referents. James writes, “The science fiction reader, of course, *likes* [experiencing a] feeling of unpredictability. It creates intense curiosity, as well as the pleasure of working out, in the long run, the logic underlying the author’s decisions, vocabulary and invented world” (1994:120). The reader is required to generate hypotheses and test them as the text develops. The same can be said of fictional characters, or at least, fictional characters that are more than stock characters. The impression that a character has hidden depths adds an additional level of expectation and questioning to the narrative. Finally, suspense – emotional immersion – creates a strong element of interactivity.

The schedule proposed highlights both worldliness and immersivity. The chapters to come demonstrate how transreferential fiction utilises these elements in order to maximise both these aspects, generating the worlds to which readers gladly submit themselves.

An important consequence of the ontological dominant governing transreferential fiction, as postmodern fiction in general, is that determining the shape and structure of the fictional universe becomes one of the goals of reading. In transreferential fiction, the world itself and its variation from

actuality forms part of the experience and meaning of the text. Critical reading is generally heavily biased towards form and theme, assuming a competent reader; but in fiction where reconstructing the fictional world is both problematised and thematised, it is on occasion worth the while to sketch the findings of such reconstruction. Furthermore, the focus on process means that the *order* in which information is revealed is relevant. Tracing the reading process requires perhaps a higher descriptive component than is usual for analysis. As a result, the analyses to follow will pay attention to the “what” of the fictional worlds in addition to the “how”.

While the following chapters generally follow the schedule proposed in this chapter, each analysis follows only after a *deliberately* naïve reading, a full subjection to the *sens* of the text, as well as (usually several) critical readings. This methodology emerges, among other things, in a stronger emphasis on linear exploration of the world and development of the narrative than might be typical in literary studies. However, hopefully the methodology also yields insight into the process of reading transreferential fiction.

CHAPTER 3: M JOHN HARRISON AND POSTMODERN FANTASY

Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic"

(from magic, The Online Hacker Jargon File, 2004).

3.1 Introduction

M. John Harrison is a multiple industry award nominee (British Fantasy Awards thrice, British SF Award twice, once for the Philip K. Dick Award, and once for the Guardian Fiction Prize). *Viriconium*, a 1988 collection of earlier stories, earned several of these nominations, including the Guardian Fiction Prize. Despite many sf authors expressing their admiration for his work (not least Iain M. Banks, in his introduction to *Viriconium*) and receiving consistently positive reviews, he has not been as commercially successful as many of his contemporaries. In fact, apart from reviews and award nominations, Harrison seems to have been nearly forgotten by both the sf and the literary critical until the 2005 Mark Bould-edited collection of essays by him and about his work.²⁵

Apart from the merits of *Viriconium* as transreferential text, it has been selected for this study in order to help remedy this critical oversight.

Harrison's *Viriconium* sequence follows a paradigmatic transreferential arc from a somewhat ironic take on high fantasy, through experimental fantasy to full-blown postmodern fantasy – to eventually end in a hybrid of transreferentiality and metamimesis. Set in the far future of Earth, the sequence invokes some of the genre codes of sf but remains in most respects, fictional world, social structure and values, technology, and thematics, more closely related to high fantasy than it ever moves to sf. In fact, by the end of the series the world's relation to actuality is one of alterity much more than causal connection: as the series progresses, the temporal distance to actuality is displaced by an almost Platonic difference between various kinds of representations.

As the critical mainstay of the British New Wave of science fiction, Harrison is both very interested in representation and stylistically highly

²⁵ A May 2013 search of academic databases yielded less than fifty mentions in articles, of which roughly half is in Bould's CV, and most of the remainder mention Harrison only in passing either as reviewer or as belonging to the New Wave.

ambitious. As the narrative thickens and the fictional world expands, *Viriconium* becomes more stylistically involved, with the prose becoming more literary and the representations more innovative.

One aspect of the sequence that becomes increasingly prominent as the series progresses is time. The remote future setting, initially primarily a vehicle for ecological critique and existential crises, gradually lends itself to an exploration of temporality. Time *as theme* is explored through the setting, but also through the incorporation and depiction of characters that have a very different experience of temporality from that ordinarily experienced in actuality, and occasionally through the narrative technique itself.

Methodologically, this chapter provides a fine-focus analysis of the novel sequence, laying bare the hermeneutic and analytical approach that underlies the analyses throughout this thesis.

The chapter explores the *Viriconium* sequence as transreferential, with particular focus on three aspects: the use of style, focalisation, language and perspective to generate a maximal fictional world; the depiction of temporality through characters, as well as narrative; and the use of formal devices to induce in the reader a critical and curious mindframe.

3.2 Viriconium

While the four texts that comprise *Viriconium* – *The Pastel City* (1971), *A Storm of Wings* (1980), the short novel *In Viriconium* (1982)²⁶, and the short story collection *Viriconium Nights* (1985) – do not form a single narrative in the ordinary sense of the word, they all deal with the same fictional world and progressively develop it, together building to an argument or “narrative” that only becomes clear at the end of the last book.

The world of *Viriconium* is set in the far future of Earth, between fifty and a hundred thousand years in the future. Man has conquered the stars, and lost them again. After the height of the Afternoon Cultures, mankind collapsed back to a pre-Medieval state. The city of Viriconium is the hub of the greatest empire of the “Evening Cultures” of Earth, having recovered to a state that is culturally and technologically pre-industrial, although some technological objects from the Afternoon are still in use. Viriconium is portrayed as amalgamating the last remnants of all cities and all cultures that have ever been – or perhaps as constructed of memories of the same.

²⁶ *In Viriconium* was reworked and shortened for the 1988 collection. I have elected to work from the later edition. Consequently, references to it will use the 1988 date rather than the original publication date.

The Pastel City deals with a threat to the rule of the current Queen Methvet Nian. Hermit and erstwhile knight tegeus-Cromis leads an army against the queen's cousin Canna Moidart, who has awoken artificial warriors from the Afternoon Culture. He collects other surviving knights – Birkin Grif, an old lecher called Theomeris Glyn, and Tomb the Dwarf – and with the help of the mysterious Cellur who contacts him through a mechanical vulture, they resurrect a number of warriors from the Afternoon Cultures to help them face the threat.

A Storm of Wings is set eighty years after the first novel. A cult, “the Sign of the Locust” has arisen in the city, while the Reborn Men of the Afternoon Cultures (reborn at the end of *The Pastel City*) are losing their grip on reality as their rural Northern communities face an invasion of giant insects. Cellur and Tomb reappear, and together with the Reborn Man Alstath Fulthor and the protagonist Galen Hornwrack, they travel to the source of the invasion. The insects use a legendary airboat pilot, Benedict Paucemanly, as an interface through which to change reality.

In Viriconium is a fairly formalist short novel in which the painter Ahslyme tries to ‘rescue’ his heroine, the painter Audsley King, from the Lower City, which is ravaged by a mysterious plague. The regent of the city is a dwarf called “the Grand Cairo”, in service to Gog and Matey Barley, a pair of “gods” eventually revealed as resembling the Reborn Men from the previous novels. Significant events and descriptions appear to be quoted from world-internal diaries, paintings, and occasionally what seems like art-historical treatises.

Viriconium Nights is a collection of short stories apparently set in alternate versions of Viriconium. Their temporal relation to the novels is difficult to pin down, but two appear to precede *The Pastel City*, and none to postdate it by more than about a hundred years. While featuring some of the most mimetic portrayals of characters in the series (often other versions of characters mentioned in earlier books), the stories further problematise the world established by the earlier novels.

3.3 The Pastel City

3.3.1 Access, Narration, World

The Pastel City starts with a pseudohistoricist “Prologue” of some four pages that provides the prehistory of the novel’s setting. Controlling access through schemata – whether in the form of fictional histories or maps – is a very common strategy in fantasy, dating from at least *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), and recurring in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), C.S. Lewis’ *Narnia* (1950-6), *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), Ursula LeGuin’s *Earthsea* (1968, 1972, 1973, 1993, 2001) sequence and *Always Coming Home* (1985), to mention only a few prominent examples.²⁷ Maps and histories match sf and fantasy’s predilection for large, comprehensive worlds. *The Pastel City*’s prologue includes the next several millennia of history in the fictional world:

Some seventeen notable empires rose in the Middle Period of Earth. These were the Afternoon Cultures. All but one are unimportant to this narrative, and there is little need to speak of them save to say that none of them lasted for less than a millennium, none for more than ten; that each extracted such secrets and obtained such comforts as its nature (and the nature of the Universe) enabled it to find; and that each fell back from the Universe in confusion, dwindled, and died.

The last of them left its name written in the stars, but no-one who came later could read it. More importantly, perhaps, it built enduringly despite its failing strength – leaving certain technologies that, for good or ill, retained their properties of operation for well over a thousand years. And more important still, it *was* the last of the Afternoon Cultures, and was followed by Evening, and by Viriconium

(Harrison, 1971:7; *emphasis in original*).

The temporal setting appears to align the novel to science fiction rather than to fantasy; it becomes “the history that [has] not yet happened”, in Hugo Gernsback’s phrase (in James, 1994:56; paraphrased by, among others, Samuel R. Delany in Cummins, 1990:6). In sf, the relation to actuality conventionally invites and facilitates extrapolation. Here, the generic invitation to extrapolation stands, but the only stable feature is that the text unreservedly provides “Earth” as the name of the planet. The temporal distance (apparently

²⁷ To be fair, explicit maps and prologues, while almost *de rigueur* in genre fantasy, seem to occur slightly less often in sf. This might owe something to fantasy’s attempt to include a wider readership in the youth market, and possibly to the fact that the sf megatext fulfils some of the same role.

at least ninety thousand years in the future) from actuality is so great and imprecise that any extrapolation is futile. Furthermore, the use of the long time-span of history implies that the narrator's vantage point (and therefore that of the reader's fictional ego) postdates the halcyon days of Viriconium by *at least* a hundred years, but more than likely several centuries. This, together with the narrative tone, marks facts, both before and after the narrated events, as unstable.

Not only is causal extrapolation frustrated, but the Prologue also negates its relevance: "all but one [of the Afternoon Cultures] are unimportant to this narrative" (Harrison, 1971:7). In this sense, the world is defined in negative terms from the beginning, which complicates its reconstruction and therefore also access.

Culturally and technologically the history in the Prologue recalls the collapse into and rise of Medieval Europe. Given the far future setting, the historical processes reflect actual-world natural laws, including the disuse, collapse and eventual collapse into rust deserts of previous levels of technology. The process of extrapolation involved here invokes the sf mega-text, but the neo-Mediaeval setting, and the denizens' mode-of-being and relation to their own past belongs to fantasy more than sf.

This duality is emphasised by the names of characters and places, especially the ones mentioned in the access frame. The majority of names evoke predecessor or exotic cultures, other to the narrative's Anglophone primary audience, with a mixture of Norman, Celtic, Scandinavian and English names: Borring-Na-Lecht, Canna Moidart, Norvin Trinor, Labart Tane, Soubridge, Leedale, Glenluce. Others, though, like Methven Nian, or Duirinish, have Arabic or even Hindi echoes. Tomb the Dwarf's name is pure swords-and-sorcery: from Tolkien onwards, dwarfs (or 'dwarves') have names that are short and emphasised by short vowels and plosive consonants.

Once the narrative 'proper' starts, tegeus-Cromis' appearance is described in great detail. The emphasis on everyday items of exceptional beauty and value – here, the protagonist's sword, clothing, broach, and boots – is shared almost universally among fantasy texts. Descriptions of fabrics, jewellery, building materials, artisans and their wares, follow the Renaissance code of description inspired by Polo's *Travels*. As Latham puts it in his introduction to the *Travels*: "[... Polo was] quick to observe the marketable products of every district, whether natural or manufactured, and the channels through which flowed the interlacing streams of export and import", noting also that much of the appeal of the book can be ascribed to its emphasis "on precious gems and spices and gorgeous fabrics of silk and cloth of gold" (in

Polo, 1958:19). Treasure indeed provides much of the appeal of epic literature in general, from the Bible to Poe to Rider Haggard to Edgar Rice Burroughs and J.K. Rowling. As a concretisation of the “object” central to most narratives²⁸, treasure also connotes the mode of the folk tale (See Propp, 1958). In Propp’s scheme, the hero usually gains a magical item, and occasionally the “lack” the hero experiences is also a treasure. In fantasy the treasure is often central to character motivation and to the narrative, as well as portable: one can hardly imagine a hobbit accidentally ending up with “One Throne to Rule Them All”.

True to the fantasy (and neo-medieval) frame, the text emphasises personal weapons, both for active and ceremonial use. In a parody of the sf frame, it also provides “magical” items in the energy swords (called *baans* in *The Pastel City*, though Harrison abandons the neologism in the later fictions) and the airboats mentioned slightly later, relics of an earlier time that the denizens of the fictional world experience as supernatural.

In the access frame, several factors allow the fantasy genre to dominate the sf: the extreme temporal distance from actuality, the narrator’s temporal distance from the narrated events; the technological and social similarity of the world to actual-earth in Medieval times; and the marking of character names and social structures. One crucial effect of this subversion of the sf frame is to shift access towards the mythological mode appropriate to high fantasy. Although the novel is nominally set on Earth, the reader is prepared for a confrontation with a world that, in terms of import relations, might as well be an alternate world altogether.

The fantasy elements are dominant in the narrative as well. tegeus-Cromis is introduced standing atop his tower communing with nature, dressed in apparently late Medieval fashion and wearing a sword. It is fully two pages before any more advanced technology appears, and almost immediately the narrator admits that “the secret of [the airboat’s power plant], like many other things, had been lost a thousand years before the rise of Viriconium” (Harrison, 1971:13).

From the beginning the narrative and description is tightly focalised around tegeus-Cromis. Though he is ironically described as “tegeus-Cromis, [...] who imagined himself a better poet than swordsman” (Harrison, 1971:11 and 132; with variations 19, 32, 75), descriptions focalised through him are often presented in heightened language. One example (from later in the novel)

²⁸ “Object” is so central, in fact, that it is invariably one of the “agents” or “actants” in structural narratology (and its successors). See, for example, Bal (1985), Greimas (1966), Rimmon-Kenan (1989).

is Cromis' observation of a flock of waterfowl: "Dimly sensing the coming winter, they were gathering in great multicoloured drifts on the surface of the lake, slow migratory urges building to a climax in ten thousand small, dreary skulls" (Harrison, 1971: 54).

As central focaliser, protagonist, and native to the world, tegeus-Cromis becomes a guide to the reader, especially with the narrator's temporal distance established in the prologue. His perceptions and attitudes colour the narrative, even when the representation of the world is not directly filtered through him. This is most evident when, as at the novel's opening, tegeus-Cromis is described as observing nature during a lull in the action.

tegeus-Cromis embodies the conceit of the idea of the Evening Cultures. Like other characters, he is very aware of the fact that his is a culture at the end of time (as discussed under "Denizens" below). As his poetic perceptions infuse the descriptions of his world, so his fundamental melancholy is expressed as negative descriptions lying on the narrative from the very beginning. So, for example, after "[finding] *no* rest in music, which he loved" (Harrison, 1971:12), as the first refugee crash-lands near his tower, he can "see *no* pilot" in the launch; "*unknown* to him" his fingers move to the hilt of his sword.

This description through negation, focalised through tegeus-Cromis, follows on from the Prologue's mapping of Viriconium as the negative of the millennia preceding it, and imbues the characters and the world with a sense of fatalism. This fatalism invades the narrative, which is ostensibly (like most narratives) guided by the characters' decision-making. Elements like these tinge the mythical mode of presentation with ironic elements.

In common with the folk-tale and most other fantasy fiction, the action is organised around a series of quests. The three quests are introduced in the first three chapters (although, at least in terms of space, each chapter constitutes a separate move). By the end of the chapter the first of the major quests, the protagonist's journey to Viriconium, is already clearly established. The first chapter also pits tegeus-Cromis against a Northerner, foreshadowing the introduction of the journey north to confront the rebel Canna Moidart halfway through the second chapter. The third quest, to rendezvous with a "Cellur", is announced by a mechanical vulture in the third chapter. Despite the marked abnormality of this event – which to the reader flags this as the most important of the three quests – it is the last the characters respond to, as though only willing to deal with known quantities. The extent to which these moves overlap is noteworthy. While not unique to Harrison's fantasy, it is more common for large-scale narrative moves to be linked serially instead (in *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* books, for instance, the

overarching moves are generally not explicitly announced). This narrative structure invites more complex interactivity, relinquishing some short-term suspense in favour of a less apparently ordered world.

3.3.2 *World*

The world of *The Pastel City* sustains basic and lower order correspondence relations. Typical of high fantasy, the higher and anthropogenic orders correspond to actual-world feudal politics and economics, with occasional mention of crofters, Guilds, and gypsies. In terms of denizens' understanding of their world, though, the higher order is complicated, in particular with regard to the remains of the Afternoon Cultures. Present as ruins and relics, much of it is beyond the grasp of the characters, to such an extent that superstitions accrue to it. In other words, for the denizens of the world, the technology might as well be magic. Even that still in use is failing, and its application is haphazard: in one telling scene, an airship crew bombards their enemies' camp with burning pitch and boulders (Harrison, 1971:71).

For the denizens of the world, there is little distinction between the ontological status of different remains of the Afternoon Cultures. The reader, though, is able to identify some of it through reference to actuality – the “brain” controlling the *geteit chemosit* is a computer, the vultures robots, some of the ruins highways, the Reborn Men are cloned from their remains, while others, such as the energy swords or *baans*, the crystal-powered airships, and the energy cannon are motifs recognisable from the sf mega-text (and sanctioned by the text's invocation thereof). This disjunction at the higher order – with fiction-internal knowledge construing the technology as at least potentially magical – emphasises the discomfort that characters feel in their own world.

Despite the great world-internal distance from actuality, the fantasy genre frame greatly decreases the difference by allowing the reader to draw on actual-world historical descriptions of social and political structures in reconstructing the fictional world. The text also draws on conventions of depicting the Other well-entrenched in fantasy. One example of the latter includes the megatheria that guard Queen Methvet Nian. Probably grounded in and reinforced by historical referents, African and Middle Eastern royalty have been textually identified by exotic pets since at least Roman times, also featuring in the Bible and much later Rider Haggard's *She* and Burroughs' work.

The lower three levels of the fictional world are further bolstered by the novel's emphasis on spatiality. Several locations in *The Pastel City*, as in the

rest of *Viriconium*, are mapped in fairly high detail. One example is the journey from Methvet Nian's throne room to the city of Duirinish (Harrison, 1971:35-40). Where fantasy is often ruled by an underlying moral structure and order, here the transcendental level is mostly barren, with only cursory and slightly ironic reference to religions and none of the characters showing any signs of religion. Instead, most of the characters act out an almost nihilistic existentialism.

If the novel does not directly violate historical causality, the ninety thousand years of history implicitly drawn into the fictional world remains as obscure and offscreen to the reader as it does to the characters. The instability of this history is emphasised by the inconsistency of place names in the fictional world: alongside the cities Duirinish and Viriconium, the Bistro Californium is mentioned (though not described in *The Pastel City*). Personal names seem derived from Celtic, Sanskrit, and French sources. The names hint at, but frustrate permeability, instead emphasising the inaccessibility of the historical gap: how do these linguistic forms and partial signifiers survive this long a historical period?

On the whole, the comprehensiveness of the world of *The Pastel City* and the neo-medieval setting generates an internal experience that owes much more to heroic fantasy than to sf. Against this immersive experience, though, the occasional intrusion of sf elements, – especially when these are not recognised by the characters, ensures an exchange between internal reading and critical evaluation.

3.3.3 *Denizens*

Not surprisingly for fantasy, the characters in *The Pastel City* all belong to the heroic mode (to use Frye's typology), being superior in kind to ordinary men – war heroes, knights, queens, and the “giant dwarf” Tomb. This is also reflected in their dialogue, much of which is in archaic or high registers, not only reminiscent of Tolkien, but generally favoured in fantasy.

Less typically, none of them are heroic in the usual sense of the word. All have quirks and weaknesses that border on the ironic mode: Tomb has a streak of cruelty and very little human compassion, Theomeris Glyn is a lecher, Birkin Grif has disgusting gustatory preferences that imply hidden perversions, and the protagonist tegeus-Cromis harbours equal doubts about himself and about his culture. The characters' antiheroic aspects function as part of the novel's revision of the fantasy genre, and their representation offers a glimpse of the alternative.

Most of the characters are constructed as representational using all available character codes, although some of these are significantly curtailed. As hermit, Cromis' social code is activated by its very denial. Characters bleed, suffer pains, move about and handle objects, but none of them have active or even complete familial relationships: the only indications of family are Cromis' dead sister, mentioned in passing, and the wife Norvin Trinor (who himself does not appear until late in the novel) deserted some years earlier. The only character with clearly defined parentage is the Queen. As several descriptions of location evoke children, mothers, and families, although often *in absentia*, this restriction on the major characters appears deliberate, singling them out as figures of destiny. Indeed, their lack of family can be read as expression of the code of metaphor and metonymy, implying that their deeds are all the legacy they need.

The psychological code is active, although the narrow focalisation means that Cromis' depiction stands in for denizens in general. As pointed out above, the initial description of tegeus-Cromis is cast in negative terms, and at the elided turn of the war, he "[is] *not* present at the forming of the Host of Reborn Men [... does] not see the banners [... is *not*] witness to the fall of Soubridge [... does] *not* break with [Tomb] into the inner room of the palace" [and so on] (Harrison, 1971:139). As focaliser, tegeus-Cromis seems to determine much of the description of the world.

This last aspect – shaped by Fokkema's signifiers of character – is the strongest indicator of tegeus-Cromis' being a representational character. The protagonist's inner life is portrayed variously using narrated thought and free indirect discourse (representing sometimes thought, sometimes speech), with occasional moments of interior monologue. This is stressed by the fact that, with the occasional exception of Methvet Nian, other characters are accessible *only* through Cromis' focalisation: their emotions are described as if he observes them, and the only instances of narrated thought are those autonarrated aloud by characters in his presence.

Perversely, in the context of the narrow focalisation (Cromis is "offscreen" only for short moments during the battle and near the end of the novel) such "one-sided" portrayal of character is a mimetic device. tegeus-Cromis indeed functions as a guide for the reader, with all the restrictions implied by a world-internal point of view, in this instance that he cannot access the minds of other characters. His own representation implies comparable completeness of the others.

If the novel presents the characters in a mimetic way, though, they remain very much restricted by their historical frame cast by the light of the dying sun. It is by definition a culture without a future: as Birkin Grif puts it,

“In using [up all the ore in the earth, the Afternoon Cultures] dictated that our achievements should be of a different quality to theirs” (Harrison, 1971:58). This sense of pointlessness permeates most of the characters at some level, and is especially visible in the self-obsessed, solitary and withdrawn tegeus-Cromis. In Fokkema’s terms, the modality of desire is largely absent for Cromis, and perverted or displaced for his compatriots.

Despite the representational techniques, characters in *The Pastel City* are not truly representational. Their motivations appear stilted, and their thoughts remain within very narrow bands.

3.3.4 Style

The Pastel City questions its fantasy frame in numerous world-internal ways: the antiheroic characters, the impossibility of changing the world in the long run, and the characters’ repeated misunderstanding of their role in the world. This subversion also appears at the metafictional level. After the negations of the Prologue, the name tegeus-Cromis is the first word encountered in the narrative. This emphasises the peculiarity of the initial lower case t (a peculiarity presumably specific to *writing*), an ironic comment on the device of starting *in medias res*, in this case apparently in the middle of a sentence.

Although the surface is more marked in the later fictions, even in *The Pastel City* Harrison’s prose is unusually crafted for a work of “genre fiction”. It includes sets of narrative symbols, although the meaning of these is often obscure. For example, sheathed weapons appear on all scales: from Cromis’ sword, to the resin-encased claws of the Queen’s giant sloths (Harrison, 1971:29), to the helplessness of the Methven, the realm’s greatest warriors, when captured by their enemies, to the drowned military control center of the city Thing Fifty, to the suspension behind glass of the remains of the Reborn Men.

Harrison’s style is often almost poetic, both in paragraph structure and in word choice. The party’s approach to Cellur’s Tower covers seven paragraphs, divided only by semicolons.

They began their journey down the Rannoch:

It was a land of immense, barely-populated glacial moors, flanked by the tall hills – of bogs and peatstreams – of granite boulders split from the Mountains of Monar during slow, unimaginable catastrophes of ice, deposited to wear away in the beds of wide, fast, shallow rivers;

Of bright green moss, [...] of damp prevailing winds that searched for voices in stands of birch and pine;

Of skylines, wrinkled with ridges;
Of heather and gorse [...]

(Harrison, 1971:92-3).

It is notable that the more poetic descriptions tend to attach to nature more than to characters, in support of an ecological theme that runs throughout the novel. This passage strongly recalls rural parts of actual Europe, but entirely non-actual locations are described with as much care. As example, one of the most crafted descriptions in the novel (repeated and reworked in “The Lamia and Lord Cromis” from *Viriconium Nights*) is that of the Metal-salt Marshes, a bizarre and inhospitable landscape resulting from the collapse and reformation of the metals of the Afternoon Cultures into acids and salt solutions. Fittingly, they are described in terms that do not form part of most people’s casual vocabulary:

[...] the path wound tortuously between umber iron-bogs, albescent quicksands of aluminum and magnesium oxides, and sumps of cuprous blue or permanganate mauve fed by slow, gelid streams and fringed by silver reeds and tall black grasses. [...] At [the trees’] roots grew great clumps of multifaceted translucent crystal like alien fungi.

(Harrison, 1971:48).

As representation, such passages reach towards the sublime, but they also become what could be termed “aesthetic immersion”: immersion in the beauty of the description itself. As such they function on *both* the mimetic/immersive and the formal/interactive level, simultaneously seducing the reader into the book and drawing attention to the medium of representation.

3.3.5 *Ontology*

World-internally, the fictional universe of *The Pastel City* is simple: ostensibly, the novel’s past includes both actuality and the future of the actual world, and the fictional world itself is set within a single world. The novel hardly portrays different world-versions for different characters. At most, the reader might become aware that the other characters do not experience the futility of their world as intensely as tegeus-Cromis does. Only right at the end does the narrative hint at significant changes to come and at differences between the world of the “human” characters and that of the Reborn Men.

However, from the reader’s perspective the ontological system is significantly more complex than is typical for fantasy. Most of the levels of correspondence relations draw on the genre conventions for fantasy – or, for

readers unfamiliar with fantasy, directly on its medieval roots – but the reader also has to account for the transposition in time of these conventions. This interactive interpretation, as well as the interplay between the sf and fantasy frameworks, occasion a reading that is immersive, but regularly invites the reader to examine the relationship between actuality and the fictional world. The science fiction frame, sketchy initially, but thoroughly supported by numerous details in the landscape of the world, becomes far more than an ‘excuse’ for the existence of a world different from actuality (as is the case in, for example, Terry Brooks’ *Shannara* series which is set on Earth after one of a series of periodic swings between science and magic as dominant forces).

The fact that Viriconium *is* set on Earth helps relate it to actuality, indicating how actual-world current practice may lead to the rust deserts being “the spoliated remains of an industrial hinterland” (Harrison, 1971:124). In fact, the sf frame invokes the actual-world processes underlying the decay: the physics underlying the environmental destruction lying between the actual world and its fictional future, and the *collapse* back into the more barbaric and less developed Middle Ages. This positions Viriconium as not just a possible, but a *likely* timestream, as a projection of the actual end of the actual Earth rather than just a speculative exercise.

Cast within the mythic mode, the despondency in the descriptions of character, action and motivation, together with the depictions of the beauty of devastation (as in the description of the Metal-salt Marshes above) become elegiac, a mourning for a world to come.

3.4 A Storm of Wings

A Storm of Wings revisits and redescribes several locations and scenes from the earlier novel. Most notably, Tomb is introduced in almost the exact same way with some telling stylistic variations. The novel is more obviously philosophical than *The Pastel City*, and describes in great detail various characters’ experiences, especially of time. Much of it is set in Viriconium itself, allowing extensive and rich descriptions of its society and environs.

It is eighty years since the War of the Two Queens, but Methvet Nian still rules. The Reborn Men have joined society, but they are going mad as their memories of the Afternoon subsume their daily reality. In Viriconium, the cult of *Sign of the Locust*, which teaches that the world is not real, is gaining ground. There are reports of giant locusts to the north. Cellur sets off with Tomb the Dwarf, Galen Hornwrack, a disaffected nobleman and assassin, the leader of the Reborn Alstath Fulthor and a Reborn Woman. They find the

legendary airman Benedict Paucemanly, whose ghost has been taunting them, serving as hatchery and queen at the center of an insect city. The insects are an alien race invading not just the Earth, but its very reality. Hornwrack crashes Paucemanly's ship to stop the invasion. A frankly metaphysical passage shows the Sign of the Locust cult disintegrating as the giant locusts themselves disintegrate in the desert.

3.4.1 *Access and Narration*

For a moment, the air around the Birdmaster was full of sound and motion. He vanished in a storm of wings, and when he reappeared, it was with an eagle perched on each of his outspread arms and ten more on the ground before him

(Harrison, 1971:100).

The title of *A Storm of Wings* is taken from the first meeting in the earlier novel with Cellur, who calls down from the sky a flock of robot birds, and in many ways the novel emerges from *The Pastel City* as a revisitation of sorts. It eschews the framing introduction of the earlier novel, relying on the reader's prior knowledge to decode its opening.

The first chapter, "The Moon Looking Down" (*The Pastel City* does not have chapter names) starts with a description of Cellur's Tower that echoes almost verbatim many of the details given in the first novel. For example, in *The Pastel City* the tower is described as "[having] been formed in some unimaginable past from a single obsidian monolith two hundred feet long by seventy or eighty in diameter; raised on its end by some lost, enormous trick of engineering" (Harrison, 1971:97). In the later novel, it was "made too long ago for anyone to remember, in a way no one left can understand, from a single obsidian monolith fully two hundred feet in length" (Harrison, 1980:11).

In this description the latter novel trades a slight loss in precision for a tone reminiscent of myth or fable. In general the writing is denser and more poetic than in *The Pastel City*, but the mythic tone prefigures the introduction of a somewhat more definite narrator. This omniscient narrator, who has access to the history and geography of the fictional world, as well as to characters' inner thoughts, emerges on occasion quite clearly marked as a specific consciousness through perspective and in interjections. One example is a phrase that appears often (sometimes with variations), and usually immediately after a particularly specific and perspicacious observation: "In the time of the Locust it is given to us to see such things" (Harrison, 1980:13).

Interjections like these are the surface of a complex interplay between the narrator's omniscience and "consciousness", which communicates the personal **presence** of the narrator in the world. Where *The Pastel City* is narrated at a historical remove, *A Storm of Wings* appears to be narrated from a distance not much more than a few days (an illusion later strengthened by contemporaneous scenes juxtaposed against one another).

This interplay between presence and omniscience introduces the themes of the experience of time and the constructedness of history that resonate throughout the novel and the rest of the *Viriconium* sequence. It also signals and structures the significance of time-lapses in *A Storm of Wings*, several of which appear within the first three pages. The first is the disjunction between the history of the tower on which the narrative opens and its current state:

A tower once stood here [...] made too long ago for anyone to remember, in a way no one left can understand [...]. For ten thousand years wind and water scoured its southern face, finding no weakness; and at night a yellow light might be discerned in its topmost window [...]. Now it lies in five pieces [...] The causeway that once gave access here [...] is drowned now

(Harrison, 1980:11).

The narrator's double vision emphasises the distinction between the abstract truth of long-term history and the subjective reality of the present. For the reader familiar with *The Pastel City*, the period dividing the whole tower from the broken one is the eighty years separating the two novels, but in the same stroke, Cellur's light moving in the window is flagged as belonging to the long time-span of history, as opposed to the length of a human life. The current stasis of the environment gives way to a similar double experience of time. The description of the broken tower is followed by,

In this time, in the Time of the Locust, [...] when we have nothing to do but wait, nothing moves here. [...]

Yet in the Time of the Locust *are we not counselled* to patience? [...] *we witness* here in events astronomical and enigmatic an intersection crucial to both the Earth and the precarious foothold on it of the adolescent Evening Cultures. "Wait! Things are. Things happen. Only wait!" The estuarine cliffs impend, black, expectant [...]

(Harrison, 1980:12; *emphasis added*).

In this passage the historical present makes way for the experiential present, the omniscient view for the world-internal realised one – here, of the valley surrounding Cellur's tower. These poles continue to mark the narrative instance throughout the novel. The rhetorical questions imply that the narrator

at the beginning of the novel does not know the eventual resolution of events, marking a fixedness in time that is often accompanied by a third-person viewpoint.

3.4.2 *Exploration*

The ‘prophetic’ omniscient narrator often yields to the more common highly specific world-internal presence, for example, many walks are mapped street by street. In most of the novel, the focalisation moves between general spatial viewpoint and claustrophobic restriction to specific characters’ point of view, presented using more typical narrative past tenses. Often, this strategy – a “floating viewpoint” of focalisation – restricts the reader’s local knowledge to coincide with a character’s perception.

Chapter Two, “Galen Hornwrack and the Sign of the Locust” provides an early example. The chapter starts with the semi-personalised omniscient present-tense point of view and narration:

Autumn. Midnight. The eternal City. The Moon hangs
over her like an attentive white-faced lover
[...]
now she turns in her sleep, so quietly you can hear the far-
off rumor of the newest: [...] the Song of the Locust [...]
Or is it only a wind out of Monar, and autumn leaves
filling the air [...]?

(Harrison, 1980:25).

The focalisation shifts to first the Artists’ Quarter in general, then narrows to the fortune-teller Fat Mam Eteilla regretting the reading for her most recent customer, all the while retaining the present tense. Much of her reading is presented *verbatim* (26), sustaining the present tense while the extended second-person address draws the focalisation into the intimate situation. As Hornwrack rushes out, the narration takes up a double position, simultaneously describing in the narrative past both his perceptions and consciousness and, as if from across the street, his movements and appearance. (The cinematic equivalent of this would be to have a split screen with his memories of youth on the one side and a full-body shot on the other).

Leaving Hornwrack headed for the Bistro Californium, the narration segues for almost a page into a historic present ode to the Bistro Californium. Inside the Bistro, the focalisation is fairly closely restricted to Hornwrack’s perceptions and knowledge, creating a sense of almost solipsistic claustrophobia. The description of his reverie (“waiting for whatever the long empty night would bring” (1980:29)) is temporarily interrupted by a three-page

segue to another historic present description, this time of the status and history of the Sign of the Locust. This description itself drifts between historical present, narrative past, and narrative present, utilising omniscient and both first person singular and plural narration, as well as philosophical reflections on the cult. At the end of the segue, the narrator describes a procession of Cultists converging on the Bistro Californium.

The narrator is often explicitly located not just within the world, but in the extended present of the world, often by deictically displaced present tense (like that used in the description of the Moon above) or impersonal first person narration. Though not fully sketched as character, this lets the narrator function as a personalised representative of the fictional world. Establishing the narrator at least in part as character “humanises” it, making it easier to associate with its points of view and evaluations.

As such, the reader is invited to “borrow” the narrator’s knowledge and perspective of the fictional world. In turn, this decreases the effort required of the reader to access the world itself by making the world largely self-contained. It also strengthens temporal immersion by suspending conclusions: if the narrator “himself” is situated in the extended present, it does not know how the story ends much before the reader does.

As Ryan explains, free indirect discourse is a highly effective device for evoking **presence** in fiction, working to realign perceptual perspective to a point or points in the fictional world (2001:89-95 *and onward*). Allowing free indirect discourse to both narrator and character generates a particularly strong sense of presence as the reader views the world as a native would.

The narrator’s capacity for shifting between omniscience and localised and limited perspectives is not explicitly explained, although explanations might be inferred from the overall ontological structure of *A Storm of Wings* and of *Viriconium* as a whole. An immediate effect, though, is that it creates the impression of a roving point of view with free access to any part of the fictional world. As such, the illusion is created that the world is extremely comprehensive and that the reader might, in theory at least, access any part of it freely. Combined with the strong sense of presence, this heightens the effect of reality in the novel.

Within this novel, the “personal” markers of the narrator serve firstly to mark the journey. The narrator belongs to the fictional world, and invites the reader in, but the invitation also requires an admission of the narrator’s singularity. Omniscience combined with personality invokes the mythical mode, but also suspends it, as if to emphasise that while history is impersonal,

it is experienced by individuals. It also becomes a marker of responsibility: the narrator observes, but the reader is invited to question.

Within the full intertextual vector of the *Viriconium* books, the narrator can be seen to “embody” the idea that each person viewing or visiting Viriconium will see it differently, because it will be a different Viriconium at a different time. The presence of the narrator, though, shifts the apparently metafictional aspects “down” to the level of the world. The effect is that of being in a different world listening to a compelling and charismatic storyteller.

3.4.2 *World*

The “double embodiment” of the narrator is one among several forms of formalist experimentation that reverberate among the texts that make up *Viriconium*. Another is the poetic texture of the writing, already apparent in *The Pastel City*. These are intertwined with Harrison’s use of metaphors (discussed below), but the most insistent formalist technique – formalist at a metatextual level, to be precise – is the repeated return, redescription, and revisioning of characters, locations, and events.

The opening description of Cellur’s tower discussed above will be familiar to a reader of *The Pastel City*, as will many other locations in the novel. More often than not, the redescriptions either vary slightly in content, causing the world to shimmer, or they set up temporal echoes between the two novels, extending the world in the process. One of the clearest examples of this is the first introduction of Tomb the Dwarf into either novel.

In *The Pastel City*, tegeus-Cromis and his companions come across the following scene in the Great Brown Waste:

At the bottom of the slope, two horses were tethered.
A pile of dusty harness lay near them, and a few yards
away stood a small red four-wheeled caravan of a type
usually only seen south of Viriconium – traditionally used
by the tinkers of Mingulay for carrying their large
families and meagre equipment. Redolent of the
temperate south, it brought to his mind images of
affectionate gypsy slatterns and their raucous children. Its
big, thick-spoked wheels were picked out in bright
yellow; rococo designs in electric blue rioted over its side
panels; its curved roof was painted purple. Cromis was
unable to locate the source of the tapping sound (which
presently stopped), but a thin, blue-grey spire of smoke
was rising from behind the caravan

(Harrison, 1971:62).

Strictly focalised through tegeus-Cromis – as is almost the whole of *The Pastel City* – the passage demonstrates the operations of his consciousness, specifically his memory and the fact that he is fairly widely travelled, as well as, through reference to his spatial orientation, his embodied presence within the novel. A similar passage in a realist text would similarly expand the reader's understanding of the character. (In a genre fantasy novel, the word “rococo” would be unequivocally ascribed to the narrator. However, the world of *Viriconium* internally retains numerous historical references, and as a one-time regular of the Artist's Quarter, Cromis might be expected to know art-historical terms).

It is worth noting the structure of the simile in the passage, as it is typical for alternate-world fiction, while not particularly common in actuality-referent fiction, and it is also a device Harrison explores in depth in the rest of the *Viriconium* sequence. As Ricoeur (1977), Pavel (1986), Suvin (1979:80) and Delany (in Broderick, 1995:57, 72), among many others, have shown, metaphor functions through the collocation of two disparate elements, one “present” or actualised, one “absent”. In possible-worlds terms, this implies the comparison of two different world-versions to one another. Here, the comparison of the present caravan to others seen before functions “normally” for the focaliser, but for the reader, both referents are located in the fictional world, the correlation of the fictional caravan to actual-world caravans being no more than ordinary semantic correspondence relations.

Put differently, the simile functions less to *elucidate* the fictional referent than to *expand the fictional world*. This is a fairly common device in alternate-world fiction. Both Gibson and Noon use it often, as does LeGuin in her *Earthsea* sequence, and it is common in the *oeuvres* of Gene Wolfe, Fritz Leiber, Moorcock, Mervyn Peake, and others. Casting this kind of comparison through a world-internal focaliser is also a fairly common way of introducing additional detail of the world.

The scene recurs in *A Storm of Wings*, set eighty fictional years later. The redescription expands the use of world-referential similes and metaphor. Here, it is focalised through the novel's peculiar roving narrative consciousness, and set in the foothills of the Rannoch mountain range:

On just such an evening one autumn eighty years after the Fall of the North, gray smoke might have been seen issuing from the chimney of a small red caravan parked on an old ridgeway deep in the heart of the heath; and from a considerable hole newly dug in the ground nearby, the chink of metal on metal –

It was a four-wheeled caravan of the type traditionally used by the Mingulay tinker to move his enormous family

and meager equipment along the warm summer roads of the south. Indeed, the south vibrated in it, every panel and peg, lively *atrocious* designs in *electric* blue rioting over its sides, its thick spokes picked out in canary yellow, the curved roof a racy purple to throw back the last of the light in a challenge to the somber crawling umbers of the heath. The *hilarious, slovenly children*, it seemed, were *not long departed, run off snot-nosed* to go black-berrying among the brambles. Smoke rose, and a smell of food. Two dusty ponies tethered to the backboard with a bit of frayed rope cropped the short ridgeway turf in noisy self-absorption, lop ears cocked to catch the voice of their master, who, though rendered invisible by the embankment of fresh sandy soil surrounding his pit, could be heard from time to time punctuating with vile threats and oaths the low monotonous humming of some Rivermouth dirge. But no children returned from the bracken (we hear their voices fade and recede across the long darkness of the heath) [...]

(Harrison, 1980:21-22, *emphases added*).

As often in the novel, the specific identity markers for the narrator appear only at the beginning and end of the section (“On just such an evening” and “we hear their voices”). The baroque description of the intervening text has to be ascribed to the narrator, but reflects the more impersonal tone often used for close focalisation.

The reappearance of the description of the Mingulay tinker caravan is a world-internal simile much like that from *The Pastel City*, although the description is slightly longer and has become more grotesque. This simile is expanded by the second, detailed description of the children that leads off into a miniature narrative, which has little to do with the scene at hand which is, in fact, placed *sous rature* some sentences later.

The description is clearly an intratextual reference to *The Pastel City*, and to a reader who has recently read the earlier novel, the initial description would seem to herald the reappearance of Tomb the Dwarf, albeit eighty fictional years later. The miniature narrative obscures this assumption, as the presence of the children eclipses that of the caravan, but on the dissolution of the miniature narrative, the “false narrative” turns out to be the true one after all. The effect created is what McHale calls an “ontological shimmer”, in this case an overlay of the reader’s memory of the Viriconium from *The Pastel City*, present expectations, and “normal” events within the fictional world. The overlay reads as a modelling of the uncertainty principle: what the reader perceives seems to depend on the angle from which he is looking.

Metaphors like these, that extend offscreen into their own narratives and threaten to derail the main narrative, are called **hypertrophy** by Brian McHale (1987:137-40). Where McHale's examples usually lead off into largely unrelated worlds, Harrison's usually lead back to the world of Viriconium, into otherwise unexplored parts of the world as above, into non-actualised events, into other modes of being contrasted to the focaliser, but available elsewhere in the world. The *Pastel City* already contains a few hypertrophical figures that function less to illustrate the onstage events or parts of the primary world in which these are set, although in the earlier novel the scope of the evoked secondary narrative tends to be much smaller.

The most interesting example from *The Pastel City* is an early description of the mechanical vulture that urges tegeus-Cromis to go to Cellur's tower as "a hunchbacked and spiteful old man" (Harrison, 1971:34). Here, the metaphor is also proleptic, initiating the character coding for Cellur himself, who turns out (Harrison, 1971:98) to be old indeed.

Very often the detail has little function but to point the way to the offstage world. From its initial use in *The Pastel City* it expands to an important stylistic feature in *A Storm of Wings*. A typical example might be the extended praises to the Bistro Californium (mentioned but not featured in *The Pastel City*) in *A Storm of Wings*, inserted *before* the focaliser *du moment* Hornwrack reaches it:

Californium! The very word is like a bell, tolling all the years of the City – tolling for the mad poets of the Afternoon with all their self-inflicted wounds and desperate drugged sojourns at its rose-colored glass tables; tolling for their skinless women who, lolling beneath the incomprehensible frescoes, took tea from porcelain as lucid as a baby's ear; tolling for Jiro-San and Adolf Ableson, for Clane and Grishkin and the crimes which sickened their minds in the rare service of Art
[almost two paragraphs omitted]
Philosophers and tinkers; poetry, art, and revolution; princes like vagrants and migrant polemicists with voices soft as a snake's; the absolute beat and quiver of Time, the voice of the City; millennia of verse echo from its chromium walls, drift in little dishonest flakes of sound from that peculiarly frescoed ceiling!

(Harrison, 1980:28).

Except as that-which-has-gone-before, and in the thoughts of the Reborn, the Afternoon Cultures do not feature in Harrison's work. However, hypertrophical descriptions like these fill in quite a significant degree of detail

regarding the Afternoon Cultures: overaestheticised, wasteful, but crafty in their manufacture, and viewing war and cruelty as entertainment. Likewise, a wide variety of names appear in hypertrophical figures, of which some reappear as full characters in later texts, but many simply become part of the background texture of the novel. (None of the abovementioned characters reappear, for example).

As suggested above, the hypertrophical figures extend the size of the fictional world beyond the edge suggested by the focalisation. Another important effect of Harrison's use of hypertrophy is that it selectively fuses poetic density to referential complexity or referential difference. In both cases, as would be implied by the Russian Formalist concept of *ostranenie*, the heightened language emphasises the difference between actuality and the fictional world. Used to heighten the difference, as in the description of the Metal-Salt Marshes above, the increased contrast between the poetry and the depicted world increases interactivity and heightens the questions posed by the world *as extrapolation* – by the science frame. Where the poetry is used to expand the world, though, as in the description of Tomb's caravan, it simultaneously increases immersivity through increased complexity and invites interactivity through the stylised description.

From *A Storm of Wings* through the rest of the *Viriconium* sequence, sections of the city and the fictional world are mapped intensively in narration, often through the movement of the characters. While increasing the sense of presence, mapping functions in ways similar to the hypertrophical descriptions.

A sense of the city's structure emerges over the novels: it is divided into a High and Low city (sometimes literally and clearly demarcated) and the Rue Sepile connects the Artists' Quarter (where the Bistro Californium is, and which also contains an alley called Salt Lip Road) to the harbour district on the one end and the more affluent suburbs on the other. Most of the streets and areas have memorable and evocative names: the Proton Circuit, the cisPontine quarter, "the ruined observatory at Alves", the Plaza of Unrealised Time (or of Realised Time – some of the place names change slightly), to mention only some of those that reappear several times.

Drawn from a variety of cultures, these place names evoke the ontological conceit that "Viriconium is all the cities that have ever been" (MJHV:35): an archetypal city in which the last remnants of all cities, or their last memories, have gathered and pooled at the end of time. This is also evident in the range of occupations of its residents: tinker, draper, impresario, artist, ballet dancer, poet. In one aspect, the city is a sign of the decay of culture, epitomised by the Reborn Woman Fay Glass' murmuring that "Venice becomes like Blackpool, leaving nothing for anybody" (Harrison, 1980:40).

In another aspect – and possibly despite Harrison’s own intentions, as emerges in the discussion of “A Young Man’s Journey to Viriconium” below – the archetypal nature of the city with its bohemian quarters and its winding roads gives way to its specificity. Many of the locations generate their own virtual referents, so that the variations read as supplementary rather than supplanting descriptions. Even if it is not mentioned in the later texts, the main road, the Proton Circuit, is very clearly defined in the first two novels. It is decidedly different from anything in actuality: “paved with an ancient resilient material that absorbed the sound of [...] horse’s hooves” (Harrison, 1971:24), it winds up towards the palace in a helix. The Bistro Californium is the street café at the end of time, a gathering-house for bohemians of all descriptions. At the same time, though, it is itself – somewhat Latinate, somewhat Italian, somewhat French, somewhat American, frequented by its own rogues’ gallery: the pathetically desperate poet Ansel Verdigris, the impresario Paulinus Rack, assassins and scoundrels. In yet another example of hypertrophy, some of its apparent greatest luminaries never appear onstage, implying that the Bistro is past its prime as much as the city, notably the sculptor Kristodulos, who is mentioned in all the books.

While many of the locations remain offstage, they map the texture of the city of Viriconium, and the ones that are explored become nodes of brilliant (re)presentation within the fictional world. A palimpsest of cities, Viriconium retains its own spectacular identity. The ironic tension between its evident decay and the (often ironically loaded) rhetorical praises also shapes the response of the reader. It becomes a unique and enticing fictional location, while at the same time the reader is made aware of the fact that it represents failure more than it does achievement.

Whence Banks’ opening remark in the Introduction:

“Viriconium stands a good chance of being the last real city left on the planet. While everywhere else [...] is being slowly or quickly covered with the patina of multinational monotony, only the best-realised territories of the mind have any chance of retaining an identity uncontaminated by the corporate”

(Banks in Harrison, 1988:vii).

If Viriconium remains only partially defined, the sheer number of references to offstage characters, places and history helps to generate a world far larger than what the size of the texts and the (usually) narrow focalisation suggest. Some of these references recur, some not, but one implication would be that they recur in other stories, from other perspectives. Rather than

appearing unreal, Viriconium becomes the shimmering end surface of time through which our actuality and those to follow, and the actualities that never were, can be glimpsed as traces.

3.4.3 *Denizens and Modes of Being*

A Storm of Wings offers a wider range of modes-of-being than the earlier novel, and makes full use of the more mobile focalisation to portray these. The most insistently focalised characters are the lordling-turned-rogue Galen Hornwrack, the Reborn Man Alstath Fulthor, Tomb the Dwarf, and Cellur. Of these, Hornwrack and Tomb represent the “standard” denizen of the world, slightly ironic variations of fantasy types. Cellur, Benedict Paucemanly, and Fulthor represent radically alien modes-of-being.

Hornwrack

Hornwrack, like the excavator Tomb, owes his identity to the absent Afternoon Cultures, but where the former’s joy and fame lies in the recovery of artifacts, Hornwrack is defined by lack. His boyhood dream of becoming an airship pilot was shattered when the last airboats, themselves remnants of the Afternoon, were destroyed in the War of the Two Queens. His life as rogue and assassin in the Low City has been a deliberate denial of the comfort his highborn status might have afforded him.

Hornwrack’s fully active psychological code supports his highly complex representation.²⁹ Sections focalised through Hornwrack often combine description, narrative, and narrated thought, as well as free indirect discourse. Hornwrack is even shown narrating his own thoughts to himself:

His name was Galen Hornwrack [NS]. He was a lord without a domain, an eagle without wings [NT/FID]; and he did not fear the air, he loved it [FID]. The War of the Two Queens had ended his boyhood without hope: and he had spent the slow years since hidden away in the mazy alleys of the artist’s quarter [NS/NT(reflexive)], the better to regret an act of fate [NT/FID(reflexive)] which (so it appeared to him) [NT] had robbed his existence of any promise or purpose before it was fairly [FID] begun. [... He shunned] his peers and [watched] himself turn [NS] from a young man full of dreams into an older one stuffed with emptiness and fear [NS(reflexive)/NT(reflexive)]. Fear death from the air! [DT] He feared it at every corner [NT/FID(reflexive)] [...] but never from there, where he

²⁹ Complex representation of Hornwrack as distinct from representation as complex. Hornwrack might be more complex than typical fantasy stereotypes, but I would not go as far as to describe him as a fully ‘literary’ character.

would willingly have burned or bled or hung like a corpse
[FID/FID(reflexive)] from the million-year gallows of his
own pain! [FID(reflexive)]

(Harrison, 1980:27).

(Analysis inspired by the work of Fludernik, 1993:281-
315 on the representation of consciousness).

Not only is he characterised using all the modes of representation of character – narrated thought, direct thought, and free indirect discourse – but he is also shown narrating *his own consciousness ironically*. If ascribed to the narrator the phrase, “the million-year old gallows of his own pain” generates a satirical evaluation that does not fit the rest of the narrative. Thus, the hyperbolic irony is Hornwrack’s own rather than that of the narrator, making the phrase free indirect discourse *of* free indirect discourse. Showing him to be capable of self-narration ties him in to Ricoeur’s concept of the examined life being dependent on narrative capability, his ironic self-narration shows him engaging in a hermeneutic evaluation of his own life, an act of mimesis₂ based on a previous self-narration, including mimesis₃.

If Hornwrack is a representational character, he is also at the same time marked as a world-internal archetype. Alstath Fulthor and Tomb are both taken aback (in separate scenes) by Hornwrack’s visual similarities to tegeus-Cromis. The similarity is again invoked in the almost-title story of the later book, “Viriconium Knights”, where yet another character of similar description views a scene that has either Cromis or Hornwrack on the Proton Circuit (the character has a vulture in his belt, but his company approximates a scene in *A Storm of Wings*). Hornwrack is thus set up as one of a series of heroic agents in Viriconium, a “mobility of presence” as Hendia Baker (1993) puts it (with reference to several characters in Peter Ackroyd’s fiction). As such, he also functions as manifestation of Harrison’s version of the Eternal Champion, an idea originally from the work of Joseph Campbell (1949), but extensively utilised by Michael Moorcock³⁰. Where Moorcock’s Eternal Champion is almost always essentially heroic, but with character flaws, Hornwrack, like Cromis, is essentially asocial and self-denigratory, functioning as champion only under duress.

³⁰ Moorcock’s later years have in fact been dedicated to repackaging much of his serial fiction – Elric, Von Bek, Corum, Hawkmoon, and others – as instalments in “the Tale of the Eternal Champion”.

Alstath Fulthor

At the end of *The Pastel City*, long after their natural deaths, the bodies of the Resurrected Men (the Reborn Men in *A Storm of Wings*) are reconstituted from their brains, apparently through a process similar to cloning. The Reborn serve as foils from the Afternoon Cultures against whom those of the Evening measure themselves. In this respect, tegeus-Cromis's response is typical:

"They are too beautiful [...] they are too accomplished. If you go on with this [Tomb, resurrecting the Reborn], there will be no new empire – instead, they will absorb us: and after a millennium's pause, the Afternoon Cultures will resume their long sway over the Earth. [...] they have a view of life that is alien to us"

(Harrison, 1971:137).

This response of inadequacy to the Reborn is not uncommon in *A Storm of Wings*, evident (among others) in Galen Hornwrack's negative appreciation of them. Over the eighty years between the novels, though, many Reborn have withdrawn from society and the others are behaving strangely, so that for many denizens, they are objects of fascination, tracked somewhat as one might follow a soap opera.

As with tegeus-Cromis in the earlier novel, *A Storm of Wings* relies initially on the modes of representation more than character codes to generate Alstath Fulthor as a representational character. While some aspects of his constitutive codes only catch up much later in the novel – specifically, the sexual compatibility of the Reborn with one another and with humans – he is presented from the beginning using a complex jumble of narrative sentences, narrated thought, interior monologue, and free indirect thought. Initially in the narrator's present tense, first-person plural compromised omniscient mode, the narration of his thought is filtered through highly poetic language:

The Reborn Men do not think as we do. They live in waking dreams, pursued by a past they do not understand, harried by a birthright that has no meaning to them: taunted by amnesia of the soul.

[Alstath Fulthor's] body, his blood, his very germ cells knew (or so it seemed to him), but could find no everyday language in which to tell him what his life had been like during the frigid lunacy of the Afternoon. Dark hints reached him. But the quivering fibrils of his nervous system were adjusted to receive messages dispersed a thousand or more years before, intimations faded on the winds of time

(Harrison, 1980:13).

Here, his senses respond to the real world of the Evening around him, but his understanding, and often his body's responses, is conditioned by the life he lived in the Afternoon. His introductory passage finds him running through the city and into the foothills of the Monar in response to such a signal from his past. On occasion, his memory overrides his sensorium as well. In the passage quoted below, his run has already taken him outside the city, but he still "[stumbles] through the arteries of his home" (Harrison, 1980:14).

In the narration of Altstath Fulthor's consciousness, represented thought and free indirect discourse become intertwined with authorial description. Much of his consciousness is represented as a sequence of hypertrophical figures, the metaphors escaping into independent worlds (especially that of the otherwise inaccessible Afternoon Cultures) and the two becoming indistinguishable, for the reader as for Fulthor himself. Thus his running, an "act of memory continually performed" is likened to

*a hidden river in the night, from which might sometimes
surface unbidden some fragment of an event drifting like
a dead branch among the unidentifiable rubbish of the
tides*

(Harrison, 1980:14; *emphasis added, punctuation
original*).

which immediately flows into a further series of non-actual sense-impressions/metaphors, eventually leading back into the original 'river of memory' metaphor:

A face stalked him between the twilit stacks of the
ancestral library

[...it]

retreated with a hiss of indrawn breath;

"What are you doing?" someone asked him. They were
outside the walls [...]

He stumbled through the arteries of his home, his brain
buzzing and vibrating with a new vigor [sic], discovering
chambers and oubliettes he had never seen before [...]

Here, organic towers, tall shapeless masses of tissue
cultured from the plasm of ancient mammals, trumpeted
and moaned across the abandoned wastes of another
continent [...]

A city spread itself before him in the *wet*, equivocal
afternoon light like interrupted excavations in a *sunken
garden*. It could be reached by a ladder of bone. "I will
go *down into* that place!"

With these poor and misleading relics of a dead culture he
tried to create a past for himself and so achieve, like any
other human being, some experiential perspective from
which to judge his own actions; *crouching, as it were, on
the banks of his own internal stream and scooping from*

the water those things which floated closest. [...] And at least one of the catches he made in this manner came to haunt him, a dead thing risen from the bottom-mud of one incarnation to infect his perception of the other

(Harrison, 1980:14-15, *emphases and ellipses inserted*).

A full page of this embedded hypertrophy suggests the complexity of the relationship between memorising, recall, and action for the Reborn. Illustrated specifically through Alstath Fulthor, his dilemma represents that of the Reborn in general, many of whom have withdrawn to communities in the deserts. By implication, a similar process underlies the confused phrases of Fay Glass that occur some pages later, though in her case, the representation is mostly the surface of her utterances and accompanying expressions.

In possible-worlds terms, Alstath Fulthor has lost the ability to distinguish, not just between real and fictional ego, but also between different instances of his fictional ego. As such, his K-world and W-world are largely attached to the Afternoon, while his world of action is that of evening. His fictional ego experiences body memories, and his nascent subconscious memories of the Afternoon, as real sensory perceptions to which his real body responds. He is unable to establish a base world between the worlds that he has lived in, and his O-world, where he is an eminent figure in Viriconium, conflicts with the lost past of the Afternoon that originally shaped him.

Alstath Fulthor exhibits an extreme illustration of Ricoeur's conception of consciousness. Ricoeur conceives of consciousness as comprising the "real" presence-of-the-present, future-of-the-present, and past-of-the-present, into which our Care draws the presence-of-the-past (memory) and past-of-the-past (regret, among other things), and so on. Fulthor experiences an additional "level" of time. For him, the first few months after his Rebirth and the eighty years since is the past, but so is the Afternoon, a thousand or so years before. This doubled past is activated in the text: his narrated thoughts reveal that "in the months following his revival [in *The Pastel City*] he dreamed constantly [...of an] insect with [...] expressionless faceted eyes [and a] woman with [a] jeweled [sic] spinaret" (Harrison, 1980:14), both of which obtruded in his perception even as he battled the northmen. While the woman probably belongs to his Afternoon past, the insect seems a vision of his future.

Alstath Fulthor's mode of being blurs the distinction, not just between different sets of memories, but between recollection and remembrance, the distended present. Conceptual presence-of-the-past memories – timepockets, from an ontological perspective – are organised around reference points, specific memories that anchor the timepocket and serve as its temporal center.

Fulthor has none of these reference points left from the Afternoon. Those he has established since his rebirth, such as during the War of the Two Queens, are always already overlaid by multiple interpretations, visions of the future and echoes of the Afternoon. As the text has it, “even these reference points [seem] to be withdrawn from him, to be replaced by a rushing chaos, the sense of an act of memory continually performed without relief” (Harrison, 1980:14). With the parallel doubling and destabilisation of reference points in memory comes a doubling of significance. Should the reactivation of a memory by, for example, spatial awareness, be interpreted as memory or as experience? If memory, then which memory should be reactivated? If experience, to which memory should the new experience be referenced?

Although Alstath Fulthor has taken upon himself “the stewardship of the Empire”, his actions seem to have less meaning as he continues. Whatever actions he takes are precipitated on his experiences from the Afternoon Cultures, but of necessity applied to those of the Evening. Conversely, his current choices no longer influence his current identity, but at best his interpretation of the past. This is why he cannot “achieve, like any other human being, some experiential perspective from which to judge his own actions” (Harrison, 1980:15). This inability to evaluate his own actions compounds his regression into the morality of the Afternoon Cultures. It emerges as shallow hedonistic self-indulgence and a streak of violence and arbitrary cruelty that disturbs even the assassin Hornwrack.

If Fulthor can “find no everyday language [...] to tell him what his life had been like during the frigid lunacy of the Afternoon” (Harrison, 1980:13), the reader is not only able to, but expected to evaluate both his own past and that of the Afternoon. The Afternoon has left the Rust Deserts and the Salt-Metal Marshes, and the Bistro Californium is a holdover from the Afternoon, haunted by memories of “the mad poets of the Afternoon with all their self-inflicted wounds and desperate drugged sojourns at its rose-colored glass tables [and] their skinless women” (Harrison, 1971:28). This empty aestheticism finds a dark reflection in the *geteit chemosit* from the earlier novel. Tomb realises that they are fulfilling their original programming in collecting brains, but that they were built to collect these in expectation of the warriors’ rebirth. The afternoon “saw war in a different way [...] perhaps as a game” (Harrison, 1971:135).

The point, of course, is that the indulgence, shallowness of effect, disregard for nature and glorification of war reflects elements of actual-world culture at the end of the twentieth century.

The dilemma of the Reborn is that they live in one world, but believe in another. They literally ‘live in the past’ while inhabiting the present. Given the importance of the idea of timelessness for Viriconium as a city, the mode of being of the Reborn provides an important counterpoint for the apparently futile lives lived by most of its citizens. The lives of the Reborn are a constant, if losing battle to make meaning of experience. Not surprisingly, *In Viriconium* and *Viriconium Nights* concretise this fluidity of time in naming the Reborn (or perhaps their first incarnation in the Afternoon) the Analeptic Kings, the rulers that lived in or related to other times than the present.

Alstath Fulthor becomes a figure for Viriconium, despite the misgivings of its natives. Described in *A Storm of Wings* as “the first of [the Reborn] to be drawn [...] from millennial internment in the Rust Desert” (Harrison, 1980:13), Alstath Fulthor embodies a key mode of being in the novel. At the literal level of the science fiction world, Fulthor is used to explore the implications of the trope of technological resurrection, an idea that became particularly relevant with the actual-world discovery that cloning (on the one hand) and suspended animation (on another) would become possible. These ideas are even more relevant today: animals, at least, have been cloned, and recent discoveries indicate that actual suspended animation might be possible within five to ten years (Roth, 2010).

Cellur

Cellur the birdmaster is the only character to appear onstage in all four the *Viriconium* books. He is consistently separated from the other characters, both in that his representation is always mysterious, and by the modes through which he is represented. Like some of the locations in the world, he changes in important ways while remaining always identifiably himself.

Cellur’s introduction in any given text is never straightforward. In *The Pastel City* tegeus-Cromis is intercepted by a mechanical vulture that is hypertrophically described as “a hunchbacked and spiteful old man” (Harrison, 1971:34), delivering a message from Cellur. It is only seventy pages later that Cellur appears, at first only as “a dry, reedy laugh” (Harrison, 1971:98) grafted onto the earlier hypertrophical description of the vulture. His physical description on the occasion of this appearance is unusually detailed: “[his] long, domed skull was fleshless, his skin is smooth and taut and unwrinkled; so fine and tight as to be almost translucent [sic]. His bones shone through it, like thin and delicate jade” (Harrison, 1971:98). In later texts, Cellur is never directly identified on first appearance, rather, the reader is allowed to guess his identity based on the association with birds, the laugh, the description, or his

unusual cloak “woven with odd mathematical designs which [seem] to ebb and flow” (Harrison, 1980:18). This coding allows the reader familiar with the earlier texts an edge both over the uninitiated and the characters, so that recognition generates a sense of achievement.

Cellur’s difference from the other characters is emphasised by the modes of representation associated with him. Where Harrison’s recurring characters (even Queen Methvet Nian, who covers less than two pages of lines in total) are represented at least in part through narrated or represented thought, Cellur is only accessible from the outside, through what he does and states explicitly. Despite this, he is coded as highly representational, not least through a personalised narrative style.

The Pastel City and *A Storm of Wings* each contains a monologue of several pages in which Cellur explains himself and his actions. Such coding by autonarrative is unique to Cellur. Marked with personalised expressions and interjections, the monologues clearly belong to Cellur rather than to the narrative instance. His monologue contains dramatic prolepses and analepses, at least some of which are for the benefit of the characters rather than the reader. Describing his rediscovery of the tower after a bout of amnesia, he “[found the machines ...] possessed of an excitable, nervous curiosity, like thoroughbred horses” (Harrison, 1980:79).

Cellur’s monologues in *A Storm of Wings* read like self-important, self-reflexive and pompous fiction. On one level, they become an embedded self-parody of Harrison’s fiction. *Within* the narrative, they portray a development in Cellur towards self-importance and pettiness, characteristics not apparent in the Cellur of *The Pastel City*.

Cellur’s reappearance throughout the sequence is world-internally explained by his being “either immortal or cursed with an extreme longevity” (Harrison, 1971:102). His longevity and his connection to the birds, which relay images of what they see back to his tower, provides him with insight and information not accessible to other denizens of the world. In fact, through the birds he gains a kind of remote omnipresence, much like that of Odin, whose omniscience and memory are equally linked to his ravens Hugin and Muninn, Memory and Thought. Where Odin hanged himself on Yggdrasil the World Ash to gain wisdom, Cellur cloisters himself in his tower or rooms. Cellur’s quasi-divinity finds expression at the level of plot and character dynamics in the fact that in most of the texts Cellur commands the modality of knowledge. In fact, in almost every narrative in which he appears, the modality of knowledge with its higher levels of understanding, interpretation and synthesis, is conspicuously absent in the other characters. It is his knowledge and

strength of purpose that set events in motion, in contrast to the other characters who never understand the importance of or reasons why they act.

Cellur recalls Odin and Gandalf (to the point of his disappearance, in the first novel, in the midst of a firefight while he's keeping rearguard for the other characters), but he is also Helper/Sender in narratological terms and the Sage in those of Jung and Campbell³¹. His (world-internal) role in structuring events is emphasised by the plot structure of the opening sections of *A Storm of Wings*: the first section at the tower focuses on him, and the following sections – the introductions of Tomb, Fulthor, and Hornwrack – all climax with Cellur's appearance.

Cellur gradually decays from this demi-godlike status towards the end of *A Storm of Wings*. He travels to Viriconium, and later north, because the birds no longer speak and his information network has decayed. Again, the birds are proleptic of Cellur himself. As he explains in one of his monologues,

“The skull, you see, cannot contain the years. Memory fades or is destroyed in periodic bouts of madness and self-disgust. Before this happens the best must be confined to some archive. Luck or perhaps an instinct brings me to that room [underneath his tower] every hundred years or so, to be relieved of the burden [...] For more than ten millennia this machine has lodged beneath the estuary – gaps have now appeared in its own memory [...] In each incarnation I must learn afresh how to operate the machinery. That is not hard. But to understand my purpose in being here at all... I can review ten thousand years, but I have no memory beyond that which I can scrape together in any one incarnation”

(Harrison, 1980:79-80).

The curse of Cellur's immortality recalls that of Swift's Struldbrugs from *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), but fitting for an information age, he loses the faculties of his mind where they keep their minds while their bodies gradually decay. Cellur's coding as sage or godhead makes the loss of his memory the more tragic. For most of *The Pastel City* and *A Storm of Wings* Cellur is presented as fully knowledgeable and in control. In the latter novel's epilogue, asked if he remembers the rebirth of the Reborn Men,

he has forgotten [that he was not present at their resurrection] and with a small diffident movement of his hands says, “I am sure I do, my lady”; then, remembering something else, smiles suddenly. “Did I not live then in a tower by the sea?”

³¹ This can hardly be accidental. Like Moorcock, Harrison has clearly definable character types that recur, and through his close association with Moorcock he must have been familiar with Campbell's work.

Ten thousand gray wings beat down the salty wind, like a storm in his head!

(Harrison, 1980:189).

The expectation that is evoked that his life will trace the continuous decay of his memory is sustained in the later novels. In *In Viriconium* he is a small-time inventor and maker of masks who has apparently forgotten his own history (or possibly, in this Viriconium, he never had a grand destiny). Though he remains unnamed, his physical description matches Cellur in the earlier novels (he is one of comparatively few characters in *In Viriconium* to be described in any detail), Ashlyme notices that the still-legible part of his shop sign reads, “SELLER” (Harrison, 1988:30;125), and he is again associated with birds. Like the sign and his appearance, this association is debased: “[...] among the jackdaw colonies and sparrows nests he claims he has found living birds whose every feather is made of metal!” (Harrison, 1988:28).

Despite his fall, his indirect involvement still provides impetus. The protagonist Ashlyme wishes to remove his heroine Audsley King from the plague zone, but won’t act without the help of his friend Emmet Buffo, who in turn insists on their wearing the masks he gets from Cellur. These masks in turn contribute to the operation going awry. Intratextually the masks function as a trace of Cellur in *Viriconium Nights*, where masks, some of them sharing features and descriptive phrases, appear in a number of the short stories.

Cellur reappears (again unnamed, but physically recognisable) in the story “Viriconium Knights” to shelter the protagonist Ignace Retz, on the run from various lower city gangs. He claims that he has “lived in [Viriconium] for more years than [he] can remember” (Harrison, 1983:208), and his control over technology is partial, but he is again a figure of wisdom and power. His apartments contain a tapestry that functions as a video screen (recalling similar technology associated with him in the first two novels). The tapestry shows other versions of Viriconium, some recognisable to the reader as scenes from *The Pastel City* or *A Storm of Wings*, while others are apparently alternate versions of the same events. When Retz asks after the truth of the events, “the old man” declaims one of the central themes of the sequence: “There have been many Viriconiums [...] All queens are not Mammy Vooley [...] All knights are not Ignace Retz. They have happened, or will” (Harrison, 1982:211).

When Cellur ejects Retz with some help from a mechanical vulture, Retz wakes up in a Viriconium different from the one in which he entered Cellur’s dwelling. Cellur thus becomes warden of the passages between different versions of Viriconium.

Cellur's role in the *Viriconium* sequence cannot be fully grasped from any single text. Although his mode-of-being is not immersive like that of Alstath Fulthor, he contributes to the fictional ontology and the narrative in important ways.

His recurrence lends him greater ontological weight than most of the other characters, which is further bolstered by his connection to the modality of knowledge. Thus, he helps to stabilise the fictional universe as not a series of separate worlds, but as an interrelated set of versions. By the same token, though, he is one of the most dramatic examples of the re-envisioning of Viriconium. As, to the reader, Viriconium becomes less stable, Cellur moves from a figure of authority in the first two novels to the withdrawn and tattered eccentric of *In Viriconium* and back in the last book. This pendular movement is represented in *A Storm of Wings*, which starts with Cellur re-empowering himself at the beginning, gathering and sending others to do his bidding in the middle, and relapsing to a fool at the end.

The image of the fool is apt. *In Viriconium* is ostensibly structured by a world-internal Tarot, and in the Tarot the Fool can be Trump 0 or Trump 21, appearing at either the beginning or the end of the sequence. Often taken as representing the supplicant, in position 0 the Fool is the naïf starting the journey of life; in position 21 he has transcended the challenges and rules of life and has achieved enlightenment.

At the beginning of the series, Cellur is authoritative and able to control the narrative, even as the novel itself assumes a modernist ironic stance towards style and the conventions of fantasy. In *A Storm of Wings*, Cellur gradually and grudgingly loses control, until he cedes control of events and of the meaning to others. By *In Viriconium*, Cellur enables, but does not control the lives of others. Here, the novel provides ample raw material, but invites the reader to play – a formalist postmodernist text. *Viriconium Nights* retains the playfulness, but returns to world-internal figuration as Cellur becomes a reticent guardian of knowledge who merely guides the direction of those who come his way. In this sense, Cellur figures both the reader and (possibly) Harrison's own developing vision as writer³². Like the reader, and like the implicit author, Cellur negotiates between and keeps together the various versions of Viriconium.

³² The Sage, and especially as concretised in the fantasy of Harrison and Moorcock, was to become a common figure among Dungeons & Dragons (1973) fantasy role-playing gamers. In the game, one player is the Dungeon Master or narrator. The sage, or Little Old Man (LOM) as he was commonly called, was used to convey game information to players without breaking the immersive frame. Again, the connection is likely fortuitous rather than intended, although it is highly unlikely that by the publication of *A Storm of Wings* Harrison would still be ignorant of the game.

3.4.4 Exploration: Space and Time

Trading on the reader's familiarity with the basic rules of the world from *The Pastel City*, *A Storm of Wings* is far more adventurous in its use of space and time. Many of the locations repeated from the earlier novel model the spatial/temporal experience of revisiting a location after many years: a high density of detail and slow tempo recall the deliberation of recognition and surprise of examining a location for similarities from and differences to the image in memory. The narrative tone reiterates this process of inscribing human history onto location by the use of the mythical mode. In *A Pastel City*, the locations often have sublime connotations, but in *A Storm of Wings* they also gain the weight of history.

Numerous routes are mapped out in some detail, often to set it in contrast spatial and temporal experience. Fulthor's run along the Proton Circuit and out to the Monar mountains is overlaid by his complex experience of time discussed above. The route traces landmarks continuously as if in near-real time, but when he gets to the Monar, the narrative reveals that "[t]hirty-six hours before [...] his madness had driven him from his comfortable home on the edge of Minnet-Saba" (Harrison, 1980:16). The reader realises that, despite the continuity of Fulthor's temporal experience, the narrative has been eliding time and space between paragraphs.

The experience of space is often distended through poetic language or hypertrophical sub-narratives, as in the passage reintroducing Tomb. Distension of time becomes the complement for hypertrophical descriptions of space. As the fictional world is experienced as far larger and richer than the local events could suggest, the subjective temporal experience of Alstath Fulthor, in particular, allows the narrative present to extend far past specific events.

As the characters journey North, away from Viriconium, the landscape in general is described in decreasing detail, and when they stop over, the locations are described in great but obscure detail. For the reader as much as the characters, the relatively stable urban space of Viriconium deteriorates into a series of subworlds. Thus, Iron Chine, where St Elmo Buffin is building a fleet to sail against the locust invaders, is continually wreathed in fog, and the insects have transformed the nearby Reborn settlement into a maze. Finally, the insect city is described in more or less alternating paragraphs describing its structures and the insects' experience of "the human *Umwelt*" (Harrison, 1980:163).

The invasion of the locusts, using Paucemanly as lens, takes the form of an invasion of reality. As they enter the dimension of the Earth, they reshape the world according to their perceptions. It is as a result of this that time and

space have become unstable, portrayed through the gradual disintegration of spatial coherence. At the climax, when Hornwrack destroys their city, their influence, which has spread to Viriconium, collapses instantly. The description is introduced by a metatextual warning: “It is so hard to convey simultaneity” (1976:184). From here, the narrator shifts rapidly between a variety of points of view and persons, confronting the reader with blurring facets of events occurring in wildly disparate locations.

Time is further distended through the unequal continuity and parallelisms between characters and their relationships. Several of the main characters – Methvet Nian, Tomb, and Cellur – are survivors of the earlier novel, while Hornwrack recalls tegeus-Cromis in various ways. As a result, the other characters regularly relate him to Cromis, thereby recalling events from *The Pastel City* to the present of *A Storm of Wings*. Additionally, the novel contains a few events and various descriptions that echo those of eighty (fictional) years before, such as Hornwrack being attacked by and carrying a metal vulture.

The perspectival and tense shifts of the narrative instance further distort time. Implicit in the present tense of “In the Time of the Locust it is given to us to see such things” is the projection that the narrator does not yet know the outcome of the narrated events. As such, the present-tense omniscient narration places the events within a *present* horizon of expectation rather than one in the past. The action of the novel becomes an illusory present-of-the-present rather than a presence-of-the-past.

The structure of the fictional space-time is expressed in miniature by the conflict between fictional/actual history and genre conventions. Although genre conventions allow world-internal languages (i.e. whatever languages remain a hundred centuries from now) to be transliterated into English, some of the place-names are too specific to be transliterations. “Venice becomes like Blackpool, leaving nothing for anybody,” says the Reborn Woman Fay Glass (Harrison, 1980:40,71), suggesting that the distance between actuality and Viriconium is not temporal, in the first place, but the distance between real and ideal, between the thing and its reflection. This foreshadows the problematic relationship between fiction and reality in the last story in the sequence, “A young man’s journey to Viriconium”.

3.5 In Viriconium

The short novel *In Viriconium* is a radical departure from the first two novels, both in stylistic and ontological terms. Stylistically, the novel is shot through with quotations from various world-internal authors, and sections are prefaced with epigraphs and readings of an alternate Tarot.

The novel is set some time after “the War of the Two Queens”, but there are only vague hints of the Sign of the Locust ever appearing. Instead of Methvet Nian, the city is managed by a dwarf styling himself “the Grand Cairo”, who is officially in the employ of the “gods of the city”, the Barley Brothers, grotesque twins who revel in every available depravity, including spontaneous food-fights.

An indefinite plague hangs over the Lower City. People waste away, buildings collapse, projects remain unfinished, and even fire has difficulty burning. Ashlyme, a portrait painter, wishes to rescue the older female painter Audsley King from the plague zone. To this end, he involves his friend Emmo Buffet, but their one abduction attempt goes badly awry. At the same time, the Grand Cairo shanghais Ashlyme into carrying messages to Fat Mam Etteilla, a fortune-teller who briefly appeared – and died – in *A Storm of Wings*, and who happens to be Audsley King’s self-appointed nurse. The dwarf’s plot, which initially appears romantic, climaxes in him and the fortune-teller magically disappearing into, or through, her Tarot Cards.

All hope of rescuing Audsley King gone, Ashlyme is accosted by the Barley Brothers. In his desperation and anger he stabs Matey. Gog starts crying, and the tears wash away his mortality, leaving him looking like one of the Reborn in the earlier novels. Possibly as a result and possibly by coincidence, the plague lifts from Viriconium.

3.5.1 Access

The chapters of *In Viriconium* are framed at the textual level by “standard” readings from a fictional Tarot (with the card names doubling as chapter names), and each section opens with an epigraph. Many of these are world-internal, but some are actual-world, such as that opening the first chapter:

There is correspondence everywhere; but some correspondences are clearer than others.

Charles Williams, *The Greater Trumps*.
(Harrison, 1982:9).

In Viriconium is the first novel in the sequence to be set entirely in urban Viriconium. This is clear from the first sentence. Like *A Storm of Wings*, *In Viriconium* starts *in medias res* following the epigraph, but here, *in medias res* is a portrait painter writing in his diary rather than a demigod returning to his home or a war hero looking out over the landscape.

Some elements set up in the earlier novels recur. Ashlyme is “entitled [by birth] to wear a sword”, reiterating the fantasy setting. He owns “a steel ring, which he had been told was valuable” (recalling the ring leant to and lost by tegeus-Cromis) and he reflects on Paulinus Rack (an undertaker in *A Storm of Wings*, here an artists’ agent and producer of plays).

The opening thus claims some continuity with the first two novels, while stressing the dramatic difference of the narrative’s focus. The recurring but divergent elements, together with the indefinite character of the plague, recall and develop the nature of the disrupted ontology at the climax of *A Storm of Wings*. The world is as qualitatively different to the reader as is the earlier novel, while articulating a very different set of local correspondence relations.

Simultaneously, the world seems closer to actuality than does that of *A Storm of Wings*, especially in terms of its social dynamic. Here, characters are concerned first about their own lives, their interpersonal relations and the arts play an important role. In apparent support of this closer distance to actuality, *In Viriconium* often maps the city in fair detail even during mundane walks, invoking actual-world spatial assumptions that a “mappable” world shares something of the ontological nature of actuality at the base, lower, and higher orders of actuality.

3.5.2 Access: Narration

Unlike in *A Storm of Wings* in particular, the focalisation generally remains with the protagonist Ashlyme, only very rarely yielding to other personalised points of view. The omniscient narrator remains ‘present’ virtually continuously, often interposing an ironic tone even where the protagonist’s consciousness does apparently filter observations. Even though the narrator has access to characters’ thoughts, occasionally through free indirect discourse, the narrative distance is greater than in the first two novels. The language is less obviously crafted, as if the narrator has less of a personal stake in the world, and ironic observations appear side-by-side with objective descriptions. Ashlyme’s writing in his diary is followed by a passage that seems to blur description of thought and free indirect discourse:

This was rhetoric [NS/FID]. He had already persuaded Emmet Buffo the astronomer to help him. But what is a diary for, if not effect? [FID/NT]. The world has already

seen too much history dutifully recorded [NT/NS]: that
was the unconsciously-held belief of Ashlyme's age [NS]

(Harrison, 1987:10).

Re-evaluating this in the light of what the reader learns about the humourless Ashlyme through the rest of the novel, the apparent free indirect discourse is more likely ironic narratorial commentary. Such ambiguity of speaker is unusual in the novel; more typically, the character's consciousness is clearly separated from the narrative voice by both intent and style.

Despite the claim against history, much of the narrative does assume a pseudo-historicist position. The style itself is often at least journalistic if not actually historicist, and is offset against numerous narrative asides, such as, "(How are we to explain [the Barley brothers]? They weren't human, that's a fact. Had Ashlyme known his fate was mixed up with theirs, would he have been more careful in the plague zone?)" (Harrison, 1988:10; *brackets original*).

Descriptions and action often seem derived from, or at least corroborated against, fiction-internal texts. Chapters start with epigraphs, there are many quotations from Ashlyme's diary, and numerous songs and rhymes are quoted *verbatim*. Terms and explanations are often marked with brackets or quotation marks, as if they originate from a text with a higher degree of reliability, like a dictionary or encyclopaedia. Quotation extends beyond characters to scenes, many of which are described as paintings in a dry, mock-art historical tone. When Ashlyme arrives at Audsley King's,

One lamp [...] threw the women themselves into prominence: but failed to light the rest of the room [...] they seemed to be posed, in their strained and graceless attitudes, against a yellow emptiness in which hung only the faintest suggestions of objects [...] This lent a bewildering ambiguity to the scene he was later to paint from memory as "Visiting the women in their room". In the picture we see the Fat Mam sitting with her skirts pulled up to her thighs and her legs spread out, facing the cards (these are without symbols and, though arranged for divination, predict nothing). [...] But Audsley King is looking defiantly out of the canvas, her eyes sly.

They remained in this position for thirty seconds or so after he had pulled back the curtain

(Harrison, 1988:13).

This scene, and the several similar ones dotted through the novel, is hypertrophical in a more direct way than the hypertrophical descriptions in *A Storm of Wings*. Here, paintings literally lead off into miniature narratives, but more often than not, they are merely alternate narratives of the scenes they

describe. Where *A Storm of Wings* uses hypertrophy to extend the world spatially, *In Viriconium* could be said to extend it temporally. After all, the insertion of an art historical critique between the narrated events and the narration implies that a significant amount of time has passed between the painting's creation, its critique, and the narrative description of both.

The temporal distance and the carnivalesque narrative style create the impression that the current narrative has been constructed from many different pre-existing world-internal texts. In turn, this stabilises Viriconium in general as a "worldly" world by implying a real set of originary events and characters variously described by different commentators.

If layered representations like these extend the world, they also draw attention to the act of narration itself, and to the surface of the text. As argued above, the textual surface is less 'literary' than those of the earlier novels, particularly in terms of vocabulary, but this means that elements like the carnivalesque narration and hypertrophical figures draw additional attention to themselves.

Overall, the narrative style divides into two distinct "levels": observations of the narrator's, rendered in a largely objective style; and Ashlyme's subjective experiences and impressions. This creates a sharp distinction between character and world. There is a clear sense that the world, or more specifically the city of Viriconium, exists independently of the characters, but also that its meaning is created only through observation.

3.5.3 *Denizens*

Ashlyme serves as constant guiding consciousness for the reader as a result of the narrow focalisation of *In Viriconium*. Although he is constructed using all character codes, many of them are truncated. While he is aware of physical discomfort, for example, we know nothing of his family or his sexuality. His social position is clear, but he appears uncomfortable with the Upper City café society he finds himself in. Apart from Audsley King and, to a lesser extent Emmet Buffo, he has no positive social connotations to other characters. With Ashlyme, the code of metaphor and metonymy is active on two levels: the bare and often dirty streets he moves through, and his own perception of other characters, which invariably focuses on the visual. His psychological code is active, it is just not particularly nuanced.

The sense of Ashlyme's being an incomplete person despite being constructed using all codes also translates to his signifieds of consciousness. The modalities of knowledge, desire, and ability are all present, but crippled. He wishes to save Audsley King, but can't bring himself to act decisively. He observes and moves about the city more than most, but his prejudices prevent

him from truly understanding other events or characters. In fact, if there is one aspect that characterises Ashlyme (and various of the other characters), it is ennui, the psychological manifestation of the Plague.

As the main consciousness observing and evaluating the other characters, there is a strong sense of Ashlyme's inner life. As with tegeus-Cromis, the filtering of most of the other characters through Ashlyme's consciousness greatly strengthens his own psychological code. As a painter, Ashlyme is particularly concerned with visual appearances, leading to much of the novel's characterisation leaning on the code of description. Thus, the code of description is highly detailed, as he notices shadows on other characters' faces, details of clothing, small wounds, their stance and the like. Very often he also ascribes psychological motivations to their movements and expressions. In such cases, it is not always clear how much of the description emerges from Ashlyme and how much is supplied by the narrator. Certainly the narrator supplements the description of The Grand Cairo during their first meeting with information Ashlyme would not have access to:

The Grand Cairo was a very small man of indeterminate age, thick-necked, grown fattish in the middle. [Ashlyme] "I like to think of myself as a fighter," he was always saying, "and a veteran of strange wars". [Narrator; *note that the phrase "strange wars" is unlikely to be real DD*] He did move with a light, aggressive tread, much like that of a professional brawler from the Plaza of Unrealized Time, and sometimes quite disconcerting [Ashlyme/Narrator]: but he had too sly a glance for a common soldier [Ashlyme]; and drinking bessen genever, a thick blackcurrant gin very popular in the Low City [Narrator; *unless we assume Ashlyme to be projecting*], had ruined his teeth, lent his eyes a watery, spiteful caste, and made his forearms flabby [Ashlyme]. Nevertheless he had a high opinion of himself. He was proud of his hands [Ashlyme/Narrator], in particular their big square fingers; showed off at every opportunity the knotted thigh muscles of his little legs; and kept his remaining hair well oiled down [Ashlyme] with a substance called "Altaean Balm" which one of his servants bought for him at a stall in the Tinmarket [Narrator].

Ashlyme found him waiting impatiently by a window. He had on a jerkin with heavily padded shoulders, done in gorgeous dull red leathers, and he had arranged himself in *the* [Narrator] curious hollow-backed pose – hands clasped behind his back – he believed would accentuate the dignity of his chest [Ashlyme/Narrator]

(Harrison, 1985:21).

Ashlyme's perceptions are obviously limited to his own experience. Thus, apart from the visible aspects, many of the codes are flattened to what he can notice. Biological and social codes are generally limited to movement (and disease-related observation) and occupation, respectively. The novel gives no indication of, for example, sexuality or family ties. As a social misfit, Ashlyme modifies or flattens the other character codes as well. All the Grand Cairo's actions, as example of the psychological code, are explained in terms of his vanity, his ambition, and his fear of the Barley Brothers. Similarly, while it is obvious that Fat Mam Eteilla has her own (probably altruistic) reasons for staying in the Plague Zone to help Audsley King, the code of metaphor and metonymy Ashlyme attaches to her invariably revolves around three aspects: her visual appearance, her role as fortune-teller, and from his point of view, her being a charlatan.

Ashlyme's negative and critical impression of Gog and Matey Barley means that their true stature remains in doubt for most of the novel. They are referred to as the rulers of the city, but their embarrassing activities are followed and discussed as daily entertainment. Ashlyme sceptically reports the Grand Cairo's claim that they are the last remnants of the Reborn, but for a reader familiar with the complex and tragic representation of Fulthor in *A Storm of Wings*, this is likely to sound like fabulation. Gog's transformation after being stabbed by Ashlyme resurrects the claim. This requires the reader's (and Ashlyme's) re-evaluation of the rest of their story: that the Reborn had displaced themselves "backwards in time to a remoter, happier period" (Harrison, 1988:73).

The strong focus on the visual, and the restrictive perception of Ashlyme, leaves the characters of the novel fascinating and memorable caricatures. The most extreme example of this is obviously the Barley Brothers, who spend most of their time rolling about drunkenly and stupidly in the Low City. They usually appear as caricatures of gutter comedians, demanding attention through what borders on washroom humour. As a background force, they apparently function as Swiftean political satires among Dickensian – or, more properly, Peakean – characters.

3.5.4 *Ontology*

In Viriconium maintains the cultural mindset and technological levels of the first two *Viriconium* novels, but through the narrow focalisation and restrictive characterisation it highlights the city and its denizens and their

ontological status. *In Viriconium* separates character and world, stabilising the city stabilised as an independent entity. Whatever the mode of representation – and the characters in the novel are firmly in the ironic mode, just as the mode of representation is itself ironic in the postmodern sense of the word – the world remains recognisable and stable enough that changes between incarnations do not read as radically different worlds.

Several of the characters who appeared to be mainly part of the background in *A Storm of Wings* appear onscreen, and one of the characters from the earlier novel, the poet Ansel Verdigris, is quoted in several places. The quotations from Verdigris' writings imply literary longevity and lend him a retrospective gravity, replacing his portrayal as a pathetic drunkard from *A Storm of Wings*.

The characters, in fact, become the most obvious destabilising factor in the world of *Viriconium*. While their names and often appearances and even personalities lend them stability across worlds, the relationship of their lifetimes to the history of the fictional world varies. Most notably, Fat Mam Eteilla and Paulinus Rack are present in both *A Storm of Wings* (where she dies) and *In Viriconium*, but the single mention of the “war with ‘giant beetles’” (Harrison, 1987:73) is as a legend told by the Grand Cairo, set hundreds or even thousands of years before. (The situation becomes even more complex in *Viriconium Nights*, as many of them are revised or partially duplicated). In this sense, the characters are more stable than the timeline of Viriconium, biological time leaves greater marks than does historical time.

Specific locations also seem to ignore the flow of time: one of the urban landmarks mentioned in the earlier novels is “the ruined observatory at Alves”, but Emmet Buffo actually stays in the observatory in *In Viriconium*, and the observatory becomes ruined through the course of the novel.

The general character of the city in *In Viriconium*, determined in part by the plague, recalls the instability of fog, mist, and indecision during the climax of *A Storm of Wings*. This might be the only way to recuperate the discrepancies between narratives (should one want to): the insects' ontological invasion rearranged the original timeline, and the plague is in fact fallout that remains from this event. Of course, such speculation belongs more properly to the sf frame of *The Pastel City*, and is not sanctioned by evidence in *A Storm of Wings*.

3.5.5 *Conclusions: In Viriconium*

Not only is *In Viriconium* set in an urban setting and does it deal with daily problems, but it also suspends arguably the central plot element of both science fiction and fantasy: opposition. Where the first two novels had clear

antagonists, here the only threat is the plague, an indefinite element marked more by non-action than by active danger. The novel suggests that there is no specific way to fight its lethargy. From the beginning, the characters seem doomed to merely exist.

McHale points out that science fiction is already ontological, but that the ontological games in science fiction usually occur at the level of the world, whereas in postmodern fiction they occur at the metatextual level, or between levels. This distinction matches the shift from *A Storm of Wings* to *In Viriconium*. *A Storm of Wings* deals with a real invasion of the world of the fiction: part of the effect of the invasion is that the nature of reality changes. Of course, the subject matter requires writing that also breaks ontological boundaries between time, space, presence, identity, and so on, but it retains an explanation that makes sense in terms of the physics of the fictional world.

By contrast, *In Viriconium* almost from the beginning focuses attention on its own construction through the metatextual framing and the extensive use of both fiction-internal and actual-world intertexts. While the novel creates a strong sense of spatial presence, the ironic presentation of the characters makes emotional immersion almost impossible. As added emphasis, most of the characters are, or at least consider themselves artists of some sort, adding a *mise-en-abyme* element to the narrative.

In various ways, the novel focuses attention on the play of elements within itself. And yet, the levels of caricature do seem to reverberate on a biographical level.

Ashlyme is an artist who spends his time attempting to rescue his deteriorating heroine, instead of developing his own art (though the narrator makes it clear that he will get around to it). Around him, the general population spend their time dabbling in aesthetics and watching the antics of the Barley Brothers. The impasse is broken when a frustrated Ashlyme, almost by accident, and definitely without intent, confronts the Barley Brothers. At this point they are revealed as fallen gods who have forgotten their true character, and the lethargy lifts.

The roots of the sf New Wave, among whom Harrison was the leading critic and theorist, include frustration and disappointment with the established writers in the genre, as well as with the perceived uncritical fans of science fiction. Many of them turned for inspiration to Modernist literature and to the new developments in literary fiction that would come to be called postmodernist fiction. Harrison specifically repeatedly argued that fantasy is escapist and actively keeps its audience from maturing. As Fraser points out (2005:312), this is also a repeated theme in his fiction, expressly articulated in some of his fiction of the 1980s. *The Course of the Heart*, for instance, deals

with a couple who believe they glimpsed a mystery in their youth and who then build a comprehensive ontology of their own, which keeps them from actually achieving anything in their actual lives.

In this reading, Ashlyme could be a figure for Harrison, or at least for his contemporaries, while Gog and Matey represent the old guard of science fiction, grown complacent in success. Only by confronting them and destroying the public adoration can science fiction, and specifically the New Wave, actually move forward. Hopefully, in the process, the old guard will be themselves liberated and their own work be reinvigorated.

3.6 Viriconium Nights

Viriconium Nights is a collection of short stories set in what is increasingly revealed as alternate versions of the world of Viriconium. In quite a few, the city is called Uroconium and/or Vriko (the first story, “The Luck in the Head”, has the change from the former to the latter as a major plot point). In most of the stories where the regent is specified, it is neither Methvet Nian nor the Barley Brothers who rule it, but Mammy Vooley, a doll-like figure. The histories vary not only from *The Pastel City*, but also from one another. In “The Luck...”³³ she took the city from “The Analeptic Kings” (presumably the Reborn), in “Viriconium Knights” the Northmen brought her after the “War of the Two Queens”. It is clear she is regent in “The Lamia and Lord Cromis”, but the history is not given, in “The Dancer from the Dance”, the “New Men” apparently run the city, as ineffectually (if with less silliness) as Gog and Matey do in *In Viriconium*. The other major historical reference point from the first novels, “The War with the Giant Insects” appears only as a play (although several stories mention swarms of insects, the bodies of insects, or giant insects). Several characters, some main, some incidental, reappear from the earlier novels, but while their names match, their histories often take different turns.

Most of the stories present characters that are more coherent than in *In Viriconium*, and with narrated thought and free indirect discourse giving access to their thoughts, their concerns and motivations often emerge as more “realist” and complex than in any of the novels, even if the events and setting remain on

³³ The plot summaries below beside, “The Luck in the Head”, “The Lamia and Lord Cromis”, “The Dancer from the Dance”, and “A Young Man’s Journey to Viriconium” will hereafter be abbreviated.

the whole clearly removed from actuality. Even so, the events and rituals, while often portrayed in great clarity, are also far removed from actual-world logic. Each story is prefaced by actual-world quotations, usually in pairs.

The first story, “The Luck in the Head”, sees the poet Ardwick Crome in Uroconium, recruited through a dream by a woman in an insect mask and the recurring poet Ansel Verdigris to assassinate the regent Mammy Vooley to stop her changing its name. Crome’s assassination attempt fails, and as Mammy Vooley apparently off-handedly announces the change of the city’s name to Vriko, it appears that Crome has been a pawn in a plot all along.

“The Lamia and Lord Cromis” has a tegeus-Cromis travel the road taken by his alter ego – or older self? – in *The Pastel City*. With a dwarf and a boisterous smuggler called Dissolution Khan he sets out from Duirinish to hunt the Lamia, his ancestral nemesis, in the Salt-Metal Marshes. Khan kills the Lamia, and apparently distraught at what he sees as the loss of his destiny, Cromis kills the wounded Khan.

“Strange Great Sins” is the fairly mundane life story of a “sin-eater”, told in an embedded first-person narration as he keeps the vigil for a dead child. In his observations and motivations, the sin-eater is one of Harrison’s most realistic characters. Growing up as child in Soubridge, he was fascinated by his uncle who visited from Viriconium. Unbeknownst to the narrator’s child self, his uncle wastes his life as a doting fan of the dancer Vera Ghillera (whose body the narrator finds ritually prepared in the rooms). His uncle’s story apparently coincides with the Plague, and Verdigris, Audsley King, and Ashlyme all feature as incidental characters in the story, with histories revised from their earlier appearances.

First mentioned in *In Viriconium* the protagonist of “Viriconium Knights”, Ignace Retz, is a professional fighter on behalf of Mammy Vooley. Having offended both her and the city gangs, Retz is rescued by an unnamed Cellur, who shows him other versions of Viriconium, mostly from the first two novels, with some subtly changed. Retz recognises similarities between himself, tegeus-Cromis, and Hornwrack. Cellur sends him to a different version of Viriconium (possibly that of *In Viriconium*), and he sets out to offer his services to the equivalent of Mammy Vooley.

In “The Dancer from the Dance”, Vera Ghillera falls in love with Egon Rhys, in his childhood assistant to the man disabled by Retz in *Viriconium Knights*. Rhys has made many enemies among the gangs, which have names referencing both actual and fictional history (some examples: the Locust Clan, the Fish Head Men from Austerly, the Feverfew Anschluss, and the Blue Anemone Ontological Association). Fleeing from the gangs, Rhys, Vera, and a dwarf (by name and external markers the same as that in “The Lamia ...”) get

lost in a desert, which is somehow inside of Allman's heath. Here, each finds new forms of expression in his or her art: Vera in ballet, Rhys in combat, and the dwarf in acrobatics.

"Lords of Misrule" is told by an apparently realist narrator, eventually revealed to be a young Lord Cromis. He has been aid a Northern town against some unarticulated threat (the town punctuated with earthworks evokes the frontier town Iron Chine from *A Storm of Wings*), but more time is spent on admiring the buildings and relics of the regent of the town, including a *Mari*. Much of the narrative is given to his largely realist observations of the land in which he finds himself. Like the protagonists in the earlier novel, Cromis leaves the town without offering help, even as the regent and his family go out into the fields to dance – it is implied – their final dance.

The last story, "A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium" contrasts very sharply from anything else in the sequence in being set in a world very similar to actuality at the end of the twentieth century in terms of geography, technology, social structure, and even politics. The narrator and a neighbour, Mr Ambrayses, are trying to find a route from Earth to Viriconium by finding the patterns underlying apparently aleatory events. Although Ambrayses denies it, the narrator gathers that Ambryases has already visited Viriconium, living for some months with another immigrant from Earth on Salt Lip Road (the location of Ignace Retz' fight in "Viriconium Knights", and linked through a nearby washhouse on Mosaic Lane to "The Lamia ..."). Certain details suggest that their stay was contemporary with the Plague of *In Viriconium*. Notably, the two characters have very different recollections of their stay. Ambrayses disappears, fuelling the narrator's desire to leave for Viriconium even more.

On the whole, *Viriconium Nights* serves to set into play the earlier novels. Every tale creates a new perspective on events, often distorting and/or demystifying them. Two previous events might be merged into a single new story, or the same events might be repeated in a different context. Space becomes compressed, several locations originally outside of Viriconium are now depicted as occurring within the city.

3.6.1 Access: Local and Serial

Access in *Viriconium Nights* is more formalist even than in *In Viriconium*. Each story is prefaced by an epigraph or two taken from an actual-world text, some from fiction, some not. The first is from Roland Barthes: "to read is to struggle to name" (Harrison, 1988:129 [unnumbered]). Recalling

Barthes' advocacy of external reading, this epigraph suggests free play, but placed at the beginning of the collection, it also indicates that the reader should, indeed, attempt to interpret the stories.

Access is of course complicated by the fact that it occurs repeatedly. Each story presents the fictional world from a different point of view or during a different time. The style of representation, though, is closer to realist narrative than the rest of Harrison's fiction. The first story, "The Luck...", already starts with the realist device of introducing the narrator's surroundings and describing him in terms of appearance and social position.

With minor exceptions (a paragraph near the beginning of "The Luck..." reads like historical literary criticism), the narration is far less obtrusive than in *A Storm of Wings* and *In Viriconium*. All but the last two stories, including the frame narrative of "Strange Great Sins", most of which is told by a personalised narrator, share an omniscient point of view. Although variations of facts between texts imply that they do not share the same narrator, the narrative voices of the stories are not personalised enough to distinguish between them. In this, at least, there follows traditionally accepted sf wisdom, that some elements need to be familiar for the reader to be able to decode the unfamiliar (see Pearson in Csicsery-Ronay, 2008:69).

There are various indications that the narrators are native to the fictional world. Fiction-internal histories, poetry, and other texts are often offhandedly mentioned, as if they are already familiar to the reader. Occasionally they display markers of presence, such as adopting the second person in abstract descriptions, for example, "years ago" guides to Allman's Heath could be found in "a courtyard off the Plaza of Realised Time [which] was on the left as *you came* to the Plain Moon Café" (Harrison, 1985:219 ["The Dancer..."]). This passage also includes a temporal reference, another marker of presence for this particular narrator.

Occasional nods occur to the complex narration of *A Storm of Wings* and *In Viriconium*, such as the description of the Aqualate Pond in "The Luck..." which is an embedded quote of a non-present character, but such instances are usually naturalised as memories of specific characters (here, of Ardwick Crome, who ends his reverie with, "Well, Lympany [...] You were right" – Harrison, 1985:139).

Perhaps the most direct effect of the realist narration (of all the stories except "A Young Man's Journey...", discussed below) is to stabilise the fictional world(s) by naturalising all events under a world-internal narrator. Coupled with the almost innumerable cross-referenced rituals, characters, and locations, *Viriconium* becomes established as a comprehensive world, internally coherent to its inhabitants.

Most of the stories oscillate between realist representation of characters and space (for example, Ardwick Crome, in the first story, is shown making complex mental connections, and as in *In Viriconium*, routes are mapped and the world described in a fair amount of concrete detail) and a number of formalist features.

The first of these are the ontologically promiscuous epigraphs themselves, with their unstable relations to the stories they introduce. Several of the epigraphs give indications of the story's theme, such as the two prefacing "The Lamia ..." and "A Young Man's Journey ...", while others appear to give some hint of the story's inspiration. The two stories featuring *Mari*, a fiction-internal ritual object comprising a horse's head on a long pole – "Strange Great Sins" and "Lords of Misrule" – both use a Shropshire children's verse about a dead horse. The epigraph to "The Dancer from the Dance" ("I'll be your dog!" - Kia-Ora advertisement [Harrison, 1982:217]) appears to be a very facile interpretation of Vera Ghillera's infatuation with Egon Rhys. (A table detailing the order and framing of the stories, as well as the epigraphs, follows at the end of this chapter, page 142).

Secondly, there are moments of great incongruity in terms of narrative focus. For example, much of the first part of "The Luck ..." describes a dream the protagonist Ardwick Crome has about a ritual. Although Crome emerges later as a realistically presented character, most of his dream is not rendered as represented consciousness (which would have established him as representational from very early in the story). Instead, the ritual is described by an objective narrative voice (which disappears for most of the rest of the story). Thus, the focus of the description is on the ritual rather than the dream.

Other rituals are also prominent in the story, both private – Crome straps himself to his bed to promote creativity – and public. The procession of Mammy Vooley, regent of the city, appears twice in the story, and its ritual quality is emphasised by her repetition of the description, "... all my citizens. Even this one" (Harrison, 1985:138;154). (The same phrase is quoted ironically by the dwarf Rotgob in "The Lamia...", with clear reference to Mammy Vooley).

"The Luck..." is the most obtrusive instance of the rituals that occur in the world of the *Viriconium* sequence, but it is neither the first nor the last. The earliest is the religious observances tegeus-Cromis notes in *The Pastel City* as he enters the city. Fat Mam Eteilla's readings in both *A Storm of Wings* and *In Viriconium* are ritualistic activities described in some detail, and even the glitterati of Viriconium watching the Barley Brothers fool around in *In Viriconium* gains a ritual, if debased, quality.

Viriconium Nights is permeated by rituals, although these vary as much between stories as characters, history and space do. “Viriconium Knights” starts with and turns on a ritual fight between Ignace Retz and a gang member; the protagonist of “Strange Great Sins”, a religious functionary of sorts, tells his story as part of a ritualised wake; and there are strong indications that the hunt central to “The Lamia ...” is a ritual repeated in each generation. Dancing and processions feature prominently in several of the stories. Another recurring activity – ritualistic for its recurrence, but put into play in *Viriconium Nights* – is the game of “Blind Michael”, a card game in *A Storm of Wings* and *In Viriconium*, but something like Hopscotch in the collection.

The collection also emphasises the ritual dimension of objects. Mercenaries wear “meal-coloured cloaks” of which the fashion value changes in different stories. The description of the insect head mask in which Crome attacks Mammy Vooley relates back to both *In Viriconium* and Ashlyme’s failed rescue attempt and to *A Storm of Wings*. It furthermore prefigures the appearance of the *Mari* in “The Luck ...”, “Strange Great Sins” and “Lords of Misrule”, a cured and glazed horse’s head mounted on a pole that is carried in procession, apparently as psychopomp of sorts. “The Lamia...” lists a steel ring among Cromis’ possessions, reminiscent of the one Methvet Nian lends his incarnation in *The Pastel City*, and possibly the same owned by Ashlyme in *In Viriconium*.

Despite this emphasis on rituals, their meanings or aims are unclear, so that they function hypertrophically. The level of detail and implied or explained history of the rituals invoke a complex relationship between individual lives, socialised space, and historical time. Citing the epigraph from Barthes – especially in 1985, post-deconstruction – invites free play, but its actual text suggests that the reader should attempt to form meaning.

Most of the rituals are coded as historically bound and meaningful for the participants, thus (like Harrison’s hypertrophical figures) implying significations and memories that lie outside the text and become appended to the characters and to the world. The rituals are usually only named or described as if by an observer, neither their history nor their purpose to the participant is normally explained. This stresses their otherness: the reader cannot truly access or understand these rituals, but can only guess at their observance and meaning. To paraphrase Harrison against himself, it might be an invalid exercise to ask how Viriconese legions is organised, but the text itself implies that we should believe *that* they are organised.

However, the very prevalence of ritual emphasises the worldliness of Viriconium. As in actuality, there is a strong sense of ritual as structuring and imposing social time on geographical time. The ritual expresses and generates

ontological awareness. Like actual people and actual society, the Viriconese use ritual to transcend, segment and mark time, which itself in daily life and under ordinary circumstances operates in a manner structurally similar to actuality.

Ritual helps to solidify and unite the top tiers of correspondence relations: at the higher, people's understanding of the world in which they find themselves; at the anthropogenic, the systems and structures that propagate, project and extend that understanding; and at the transcendental, their hopes, fears, and attempts to grasp the ineffable.

The importance of rituals in Viriconium forms a backdrop to the reader's experience of the stories. The Sin-Eater's telling of his autobiography in "Strange Great Sins" is embedded within a ritual. His telling is not just the expression of a complex character's private story, but his relation of his individual life functions to reinvigorate the ritual marking the transition from life to death to afterlife. Rituals such as these ensure continuity within society. Internally, Viriconium, like our own society, is sustained by the narratives its denizens tell about it. In turn, the reader's comprehension of these narratives, retelling them to himself, reinforces the reader's responsibility to the fictional world.

3.6.2 *Access, World and Intertextuality*

While the collection does not depend on the reader's familiarity with the first three texts in the sequence, the experience and meaning of *Viriconium Nights* is strongly influenced by the implied continuity/contiguity of the world. From the first story, the collection destabilises the possibility of establishing a single timeline for the world, and doubles the historical vertigo by providing world-internal histories and legends whose content apparently also change between stories.

Verdigris appears onstage young and brash in "The Luck..." and apparently run-down in *A Storm of Wings*. The short story occurs during the anniversary of the liberation of Uroconium from the Analeptic Kings [when...] as the text sometimes called "The Earl of Rone" remembers, the Kings handed over to Mammy Vooley and her fighters their weapons of appalling power [...]

(Harrison, 1988:136).

The only reasonable interpretant for the "Analeptic Kings" is the Reborn, but these only appear in *A Storm of Wings*, near the end of Methvet Nian's eighty-plus years reign, according to the novel. Going by the Bistro

Californium set, “The Luck ...” should be more or less contemporary with *In Viriconium*, where two degenerate Reborn are ‘lords of the city’ and the Grand Cairo the regent. Thus the three regencies seem to overlap.

Problematising the timeline even further, “The Death and Revival of the Earl of Rone” (Harrison, 1985:251) is mentioned again, as an old book read by tegeus-Cromis in “The Lamia...” and found in “Lords of Misrule” by the tegeus-Cromis of the story. Locally assuming that this is the same tegeus-Cromis – that is, trying to reconstruct the timeline with him as anchor – this story should predate *The Pastel City*, which depicts his later years. Thus the young tegeus-Cromis discovers (and leaves behind) a copy of a book that details events that only occur years later, a book which is also somehow already old at the same general time those events occur.

The first two stories explicitly use other names for the city, with the first story ending in its name being changed from Uroconium to Vriko and the second referring to this nomenclatory ambiguity: “There [in the provinces] they looked to the capital, which they called ‘Uroconium’, ‘Vriko’, or sometimes ‘the Jewel on the Edge of the Western Sea’, for stability” (Harrison, 1985:157). It is only by the third story that the city is referred to as Viriconium, and that by the Sin-Eater, who has spent most of his life outside of the city. (The full irony of Viriconium providing stability only becomes apparent during the course of the collection, that is, from a metatextual point of view.) The single stabilising factor is the title of the collection – *Viriconium Nights* – and the significance of the name is useful only to a reader familiar with the first three novels.

The collection clearly reinforces the idea that Viriconium remains distinctly recognisable, even as it escapes from realistic space and time. Various locations reappear, though with occasional slight changes. “The Luck...” shows or reveals minor variations in the character set surrounding Ardwick Crome, but most of them are transworld-identical to their namesakes in *A Storm of Wings* and *In Viriconium*. The most significant change is political: the character set implies that the text is contemporaneous with the preceding two novels, but as indicated above, the political history of the city and often the regent is different for each story.

Different societies inscribe different narratives onto the same sets of events, and in Viriconium, such inscription changes the ontological configuration of the world.

If the large-scale history of Viriconium is different in each incarnation, the recurring characters and locations generate the ontological gravity that keeps “Viriconium” (as city and world) from disintegrating. Most of the *Viriconium* texts share members of the same supporting cast, whether present, in passing, or fictionally historical: Ansel Verdigris, Fat Mam Eteilla, Vera

Ghillera, Kristodulos Fleece (who never appears as present character), the Marchioness [or Madame] “L”, Audsley King, and others. The characters are drawn with a high degree of specificity and continuity across stories, both of presentation and of fiction-internal relationships with others. *Viriconium Nights* moves to centre stage characters previously mentioned in passing only, allowing access to their ‘inner lives’ and retrospectively stabilising their previous appearances.

Likewise, the action moves through or past the same set of fictional locations. Like the characters, some of these change slightly: the observatory at Alves, already ruined in the first two novels, becomes ruined in *In Viriconium*, is used as palace by Mammy Vooley in two of the stories, and moves to Duirinish in “The Lamia...”. Henrietta Street (to name one) is consistently a coastal road; but in “The Luck...” it fronts on the Aqualate Pond; in “The Dancer...” on a canal; and in “Strange Great Sins” it is in a village some way distant from Viriconium itself. These are changes in ontology as much as geography and reflect more than Viriconium’s growth cycles. In *The Pastel City*, Duirinish is itself a large, walled city several days’ travel out from Viriconium.

Despite the changes, though, there is virtually no qualitative difference between versions of locations. To name a few examples, the Bistro Californium, as discussed under *A Storm of Wings* above, remains itself; Salt Lip Road, mentioned in two of the stories, remains an alley near the Plaza of Unrealised [or Realised, in “The Dancer...”] Time and near Mosaic Lane; and the Gabelline/Ghibbeline Gate/Stairs remains a conduit between Lower and Upper City.

The fact that the texts are not recuperable onto a single time-line, implies that the city itself is a transworld identity that retains echoes or instances of various of characters across different incarnations. In *Viriconium* establishes a new ontology for the *Viriconium* sequence, where the very malleability of the world becomes as recognisable a part of it as the Bistro Californium, Ansel Verdigris, or Fat Mam Eteilla.

3.6.3 *Denizens*

Viriconium Nights presents characters that are not only presented more realistically than those in the preceding texts, but their “inner lives”, their concerns and motivations, are generally more complex and realistic than those in the earlier novels. Even in the stories where characters’ motivations are at their most alien, such as “The Luck...” and “The Lamia...”, the character codes are used extensively and in complex ways. For a start, in recurring

characters the “holes” in their original portrayal are filled in. Where characters in the earlier novels tend to appear insular and fully-formed, fantasy types with minimal to no mention of family, in *Viriconium Nights* the biological and social codes become fully active in that many of the characters have not only social and professional connections, but also family relations. The Sin-Eater from “Strange Great Sins” is attending the wake of a fish deliverer’s daughter, and he speaks of his family, including his uncle. The protagonist tegeus-Cromis in “Lords of Misrule” deals with the family of the Yule Greave both as a unit and as a group of individuals. In “The Luck...”, Ansel Verdigris is revealed as staying with his mother. Even in “The Lamia...”, Cromis’ motivation has much to do with the tradition of his House, or family.

Likewise, the acknowledgement of sexual attraction in some of the stories retrospectively emphasises the lack of sexuality in *The Pastel City* and *In Viriconium*, and occasions a reinterpretation of Hornwrack’s living arrangements in *A Storm of Wings*. While sex does not by any means become prominent, Vera Ghillera’s obsession with Egon Rhys in “The Dancer...” and that of the Sin-Eater’s uncle with Vera in “Strange Great Sins” clearly has sexual components. “The Lamia...” actively reverses the asexuality of tegeus-Cromis in *The Pastel City* by having him and a boy “get up and leave together”, and “[the] boy [go] in the night” after a section break (Harrison, 1985:162).

Several of the characters model consciousness in complex ways. The first-person narrator of “Lords of Misrule” has a clear ability to listen to and evaluate others’ statements. More than this, he also consciously weighs his own responses in relation to others and the context: “I was tempted to ask him why, if he didn’t want to destroy the old walls, he didn’t reopen the quarry and use fresh stone; but his face was now full of a kind of savage self-hatred and self-pity” (245). The eventual revelation that this character who is shown admiring small details of nature is a young tegeus-Cromis, allows his depth to be retrospectively attributed to his other incarnations as well.

Likewise, the main narrator of “Strange Great Sins” (who is introduced by an omniscient frame narrator) is shown consciously constructing the narrative of his own life, with inset dramatic prolepses and withholding of information, in relation to the wake at which he tells his story.

“The Lamia...” provides a related example. Although the signifieds of tegeus-Cromis’ character – the modalities of desire, knowledge, and obligation – are little more complex than those of his namesake in *The Pastel City*, his consciousness is presented as performing complex acts of association and comparison. Riding through the claustrophobic bayou of the Metal-Salt Marshes in his search for the Lamia, his mind recalls (or imagines) a location

in the city. His imagination conjures complex details that become a hypertrophical figure:

Though he had always known what to expect, he seemed numb for much of the rest of the day, gazing automatically at whatever presented itself to his eyes while he allowed his horse to stumble and slither about beneath him. He had *slipped into a reverie* in which he saw himself riding over sunny cobbles into a courtyard somewhere in the cisPontine Quarter, entry to which was gained by a narrow brick arch. It was familiar to him, though at the same time he could not remember having been there before. Fish was being sold from a cart at one end of the square; at the other rose the dark bulk of "Our Lady of the Zincsmiths": children ran excitedly from one to the other in the sunshine, squabbling over a bit of pavement marked out for a hopping game, "Blind Michael". As the prince's horse clattered under the arch he heard a woman's voice singing to a mandolin; and the air was full of the smell of cod and saffron

(Harrison, 1985 "The Lamia...":170).

If the characters are portrayed more realistically than in the novels, their recurrence also complicates their ontological status. In the case of Ansel Verdigris, the various occurrences seem to illuminate one another, drawing a character far more complex than any single text allows for. His regular recurrence is further bolstered by numerous quotes from his work, several of which appear to provide world-internal insights. For example:

"I have heard the café philosophers say, 'The world is so old that the substance of reality no longer knows what it ought to be.' - Ansel Verdigris, *Some remarks to my dog*

(Harrison, 1988:83).

The title of the fiction-internal text chimes well with Verdigris' social ineptitude and frivolous surface (while the insight gels with the glimpses of his mind given in *A Storm of Wings*). Cellur, the single character who recurs most often throughout the sequence, paraphrases the idea in *A Storm of Wings*, and quotes the whole without specific attribution in "Viriconium Knights":

I have heard the café philosophers say, 'The world is so old that the substance of reality no longer knows quite what it ought to be. The original template is hopelessly blurred. History repeats over and again this one city and a few frightful events – not rigidly, but in a shadowy, tentative fashion, as if it understands nothing else but would like to learn'

(Harrison, 1985:209).

The extension of the quote here sets up ontological ripples. It might imply that the epigraph version is simply incomplete; or that Cellur is providing a typically pedantic gloss; or that Verdigris, an alcoholic and often destitute, has himself stolen the line; or that the line, like the Bistro Californium, is a given in all versions of *Viriconium*. Whatever the case, the ubiquity of Verdigris as character, in epigraphs, and in world-internal quotation aggregates to lend him exceptional ontological weight. Ironically, added to his occasional in-text appearances, the textualisation of Verdigris makes him appear one of the most “real” characters in the world of *Viriconium*, even though the reader has little direct access to his consciousness.

Allowing for age, the recurrent characters’ personalities, descriptions, and motivations are continuous between narratives. Cellur, as discussed under *A Storm of Wings*, can be world-internally recuperated as a single character able to travel through dimensions, though not without loss. tegeus-Cromis and Ansel Verdigris both occur at three different ages in three different stories, and at least in the case of tegeus-Cromis, the stories can easily be placed on a linear timeline. However, there are niggling differences, such as the young tegeus-Cromis owning a steel ring portraying a Lamia, the sign of the House to which he belongs, while the mature Cromis loses a steel ring given him by Methvet Nian. Like his older counterpart, the young tegeus-Cromis of “The Lamia...” travels with a dwarf and a smuggler, but his companions are clearly not the same characters in the two narratives.

Conspicuous incongruities like these are further complicated by the fact that the apparent timelines of the characters coincide fully with neither what can be reconstructed of the overall timeline of the fictional world nor the publication dates of the relevant stories. The latter is of course not a problem in and of itself, but (to cite one example) Ansel Verdigris’ later, “younger” appearances occur in *In Viriconium* and “The Luck...”. The stylistic and ontological instability of *A Storm of Wings* can be recuperated world-internally. That of the collection, generated by the multiplication of separate, different world-versions, cannot.

Given the inconsistency of the time-line and of such details, many of the characters are not just transworld identities, as Cellur and Verdigris appear to be. Rather, they read as “mobilities of presence”, to use a term coined by Hendia Baker (1993): different instances or versions of the same entity, or, world-internally at the transcendental tier, expressions of different facets of a multiverse. Mobilities of presence obviously locally destabilise their worlds, but a concomitant effect is that they themselves gain more ontological weight.

Characters are nodes drawing together numerous propositions spread across a text. Thus, tegeus-Cromis brings together the propositions unwilling

hero, figurehead, interaction with metal birds, friend to dwarf, cynic, exceptional bladesman, fame, and others. These propositions are shared across stories, as well as by Hornwrack. Ignace Retz is appended to the series, sharing most of the propositions and explicitly looking like Cromis and Hornwrack. A character who appears throughout a fictional universe generates the idea that the cluster of propositions he represents is a *necessary* cluster within the fictional universe, an entity that is essential to the identity of that universe.

3.6.4 Exploration

As shown throughout this chapter, hypertrophy is not only a recurrent device in *Viriconium*, but a central mode of representation. Strengthening rather than destabilising the complex representation of characters and world, it allows innumerable glimpses of offstage locations, events, characters and motivations that entice the reader to fill out the narrative space with a reconstructed geography.

The use of a single focaliser in *The Pastel City* draws the reader into the world gradually. By restricting the point of view, the text also limits the amount of information the reader needs to process at once while filtering the information through the consciousness of a denizen. Simultaneously, tegeus-Cromis' perspective grants a strong sense of presence. If the focaliser leads the reader through the various locations, the fact that these are often mentioned before they are described creates a sense of spatial perspective. This, as well as every hypertrophical figure and the numerous unexplained references open up new avenues of thought, many of which remain both offstage and evocative, thus enticing the reader's curiosity about the rest of the world.

A Storm of Wings moves through both previously introduced locations and ones that were only mentioned in the first novel. This reactivates previous knowledge which in turn feeds into the reader's expectations of narrative. The novel's floating narration both supports the sense of presence and creates a much stronger sense of mobility in the fictional world, an impression strengthened by the redescription of locations. Very often the reader is able to recognise locations even before they are specifically identified.

The fact that this mobility is largely illusory is less relevant than the fact that the novel actually creates the illusion. The reading experience resembles spatial exploration, an impression only strengthened by the small variations that start to impinge in *In Viriconium* and *Viriconium Nights*. The variations also invite the metatextual exploration of the novel. At first notice they are likely to evoke uncertainty, prompting the reader to page back to the original mention of events or locations.

The densely written passages describing Fulthor's narrative and the journey north, which become progressively more disjointed, both describe and model the temporal experience of the characters. The writing emphasises the disjunction of temporal and spatial representation during these passages. Like the characters, the reader is confronted with the superposition of two time frames. The effect is similar to Cromis' experience on first confronting the *geteit chemosit*:

Time bucked and whipped like a broken hawser in [his] head, and for a moment he existed at two separate and distinct points along its curve –

(Harrison, 1971:72).

Near the perceived end of history, with natural resources drained, the characters are intensely aware of entropy and of the implication that their actions might change their present, but that they will not become the past of future generations.

In Viriconium returns to the first-person focalisation of *A Pastel City*, but for a reader familiar with the earlier novels, the experience is very different. Ashlyme thinks of and traverses many streets that were mentioned in previous texts. Revisitings are placed in proximity with slight variations in names and the introduction of new streets.

This process of spatial recall and reconstruction also clearly illustrates the distinction between an internal and an external reading of the sequence. In an external reading, the assumed reader has perfect recall (or, in criticism, fakes it), but from an internal perspective, the experience is not unlike that of visiting a place you've heard descriptions of before, locations and characters emerge as if half-expected and half-remembered. New locations and variations become enmeshed in the memory of the city, so that it would take most readers a while before they realise that the space has changed.

On the second page, for instance, Ashlyme takes the tall staircase connecting High City to Low. While this is the first mention of the stairs, it connects locations previously described and can easily be made to fit the geography as inferred from the earlier novels. The staircase gives onto the Lower City through "a small iron gate [...] constructed so as to permit only one person at a time, and its name commemorated in the Low City some atrocity long forgotten in the High" (Harrison, 1988:10). Only quite some way into the novel is this staircase identified as the Gabbeline Stairs. The name "Gabbeline" is likely to sound familiar, but a return to *A Storm of Wings* shows the Gabbeline Gate, identified as having been a location for executing criminals.

At some point even a fairly lazy reader would realise that this version of Viriconium differs in some details from that in the first two novels. This in turn invites the reader to embark on a search for markers that explain the temporal and ontological relationship between different versions of Viriconium, a demand that becomes much more insistent in *Viriconium Nights* with its dramatically variant versions of the city. In this way, the *Viriconium* sequence becomes a temporal and spatial maze to explore, inviting cross-references and signposting with every temporal and geographical detail.

The last story, “A Young Man’s Journey to Viriconium”, is in all respects very different from anything that has gone before. Despite the story being set in a version of actuality, the characters, including the narrator-protagonist, appear flattened. Rudimentary versions of social, biological, and psychological codes are in place, but these are explored in less depth than is typical for realist narrative, and definitely less than they are in the other stories. Mr Ambrayeses, the narrator’s closest associate, is described almost exclusively in terms of their shared obsession, with a single conversational habit the only personalising detail.

While the narrator does note details, every observation is filtered through the narrator’s obsession of finding a passage to Viriconium. The few quotidian details that do not fit this filter are dismissed. The obsession causes the world’s texture to be doubled. Underneath ordinary life – the coffee-houses of Huddersfield, the talk of co-passengers on trains and buses, the political slogans, and so on – the obsessive collection of phrases and chance events by the narrator and his partner-in-obsession, Mr Ambrayeses, proposes an irrecoverable set of meanings.

If anything, the narrator, who remains unnamed, appears to function mainly as a concretisation of a point of view, a very focused window on the world coloured by the dream of reaching Viriconium. In both aspects he becomes a figure for the reader. By its detail coincident with actuality, emphasised by its contrast to the preceding narratives, the world represents that of the reader. By extension, the relationship between the narrator and Viriconium parallels that of the reader to Viriconium.

Through the combination of these strategies, the story’s narrator fiction-internally models the reader’s process of exploration, an attempt to make sense of and stabilise its history and world by collecting incidental details from among the variant versions of Viriconium. Like the narrator, the reader is engaged in an act of bibliomancy, although in actual terms, of course, the narrator reads a transcendent textual or at least semiotic world into his real world, while the reader reads a ‘real’ world into a textual world.

3.7 Fictional Ontology and Refiguration

The ‘true’ city Viriconium emerges gradually through the sequence. The Prologue of *The Pastel City* seems to promise a stable fantasy world, but as the reader approaches this highly detailed promised city by way of the strong sense of presence of the first half of *A Storm of Wings*, it shimmers like a mirage. The vision of a singular continuous world gradually fragments into the understanding that Viriconium is an entity spread across multiple versions of history.

Viriconium references and celebrates the cities of Europe, but its situation at the end of time, with the decay very often evident, implies that these cities are themselves palimpsests of the meanings and experiences accrued over the thousand years or so of self-conscious European history, and that their season of bloom is long past.

Viriconium’s representation always embodies this ambiguity: every location appears significant, but like Viriconium in “A Young Man’s Journey...”, or Alstath Fulthor’s body memories, the significance is always out of reach. This hardly means that the world, and the sequence itself, is experienced as formalist. Whatever Harrison’s intentions, the complexity and referential density, and the resulting allure of the fictional world is such that it fragments not into a non-world, but into a multiverse. The weight of history (actual as well as fictional) compounds the worldliness of the fictional universe in that, unlike for example Tolkien’s history, the truth of past events is ultimately unknowable while impacting on the present. Ironically, if Harrison’s aim is to question the ontology of fiction itself, this multiverse gains added ontological weight exactly because it allows the exploration of non-actual modes-of-being.

While creating a complex fantasy world, though, the sequence also prompts reflection on actuality. Its science fiction frame casts it as, at least in part, a warning. The first two novels especially very strongly stress the ecological decay resulting from unchecked industrial activity, and the most powerful image, the description of the Metal-Salt Marshes, is reiterated in *Viriconium Nights*, in “The Lamia ...”.

The shift towards urban locations in *Viriconium Nights* and *In Viriconium* enables the portrayal in the latter two books of surreal, satirical power structures. *In Viriconium* and many of the short stories feature gangs as

the most visible social and political structures. The gangs of “Viriconium Knights” and “The Dancer from the Dance” are composed largely of High City youths, even if they operate in the Low, and their affected names evoke different kinds of actual-world groups, presumably structured on similarly primitive organisational systems: the Fish Head Men from Austerly, the Feverfew Anschluss, the Blue Anemone Ontological Association. Apart from their fiction-internal referents discussed earlier, these might parody trade unions, the National Front, and the literary-theoretical academic community respectively.

Certainly the change in regent, from the benevolent and humane Methvet Nian in the first two novels to the Barley Brothers, the Grand Cairo and Mammy Vooley represents a statement regarding politics and governance. The Plague of *In Viriconium* coincides with a fiction-internal social shift towards ineffectual and impersonal government. None of these regents are much concerned with the citizens of the city, and the Grand Cairo’s schemes and paranoia are entirely solipsistic, centering on himself and affecting citizens only collaterally. Under the Grand Cairo, and in “The Dancer from the Dance” under the “New Men”, pointless large-scale public works are started, but come to nothing. If the publication dates of *In Viriconium* and *Viriconium Nights* are kept in mind (both published in the mid-1980s, and at least the first likely written in the early 1980s), it is hard not to see these political changes as referencing Thatcher’s Britain. The disinterested and cynical attitudes of the High City characters would then represent the social values that flow from Thatcherite policies.

Harrison admitted as much in a recent interview.³⁴ This intent appears to be supported by referencing Barthes in the epigraph to the first story in *Viriconium Nights*, an attempt to create a *scriptible* text under the pretence of it being a collection of fantasy short stories.

Already in *The Pastel City* ecological decay is explicitly tied to social inefficiency. The ennui already evinced by tegeus-Cromis in *The Pastel City*, Hornwrack’s cynicism, and Ashlyme’s ineffectual asociality are typical of the mindset of inhabitants of the city Viriconium. Theomeris Glyn, one of Cromis’ companions in the first novel, disclaims, “There will be no more of anything soon. [...] The Moidart, the Afternoon Cultures – both are Time by another name. You are sentimentalists, lacking a proper sense of perspective” (Harrison, 1971:58). Glyn’s character illustrates his idea of ‘a proper sense of perspective’: when Grif and Cromis initially find him, he is drinking and

³⁴ “I wrote the later Viriconium stories to look to me the way the Elizabethan period looks to me -- confusion, paranoia and madness. Actually, come to think of it, that's how the world looked to me in the Thatcher period too. Barely comprehensible” (Morgan, 2003).

swiving in a tavern, an aged lecher. Such cynicism seems to be – seemed to be, in particular, during the 1980s – a rational response to the actual-world postmodern culture, proclaiming itself to be situated at the end of history, and marked with a ‘flattening of affect’ (Jameson in Broderick, 1995:61).

3.8 Conclusions

Iain M Banks, himself a world-spinner of no mean feat, notes in his introduction to the 1988 *Viriconium* collection:

[Viriconium] has changed over the years, but only to become more ambiguously itself; the image has slowly grown more solid before us, but remains ungraspable [...] Viriconium becomes more known and unknowable at once.

In the best tradition of the finest writing, it is universal and particular together. It is the ultimate city, the very essence of what we understand such a collection of buildings, thoroughfares, monuments, institutions, concerns, inhabitants, lives and fates to be. The more bizarre and displaced Viriconium becomes, the more closely it seems to mirror our experience of our own cities, our own focal points of population and culture.

(in Harrison, 1988: ix).

Read *as sequence*, a key ‘message’ of *Viriconium* is that the more one studies something, the less coherent one’s knowledge becomes. The initial introductory history, common in fantasy, promises a world *knowable* from the perspective of the narrator (and therefore also the reader). This idea remains largely supported in *The Pastel City*, which sketches an extended world with a fairly long history of its own, situated within the long time-span of ecological history. It is partially subverted in *A Storm of Wings*, in which the erosion of the fictional world highlights the central theme of the instability of worlds in general. The variations in and carnivalesque narration of *In Viriconium* establish a game of history and interpretation. *Viriconium Nights* further fragments history, but the stories return to human concerns: personal position within family, personal motivations, romantic obsession, the nature of creativity, the struggle between existential immersion in nature and social distension. Many of the situations are unique to the world of Viriconium, so that the themes are coloured and refracted to provide exceptional points of view on the reader’s own concerns.

The world is strongly representational, “carefully mimetic”, to borrow a phrase from Broderick’s characterisation of sf (1995:49), as are the characters. In fact, the complex representation of both human and exceptional consciousness significantly surpasses that of most fantasy fiction in “realism”. The sequence uses a variety of techniques to sustain curiosity and expectation: *The Pastel City* and *In Viriconium*, narrow focalisation; *A Storm of Wings*, the sense that many events are occurring simultaneously across the world; and the short stories, combinations of the above with threatening and/or mysterious circumstances. The representation detail and the focalisation create a strong sense of presence.

As a result, the sequence sustains a high degree of immersion at a variety of levels: “temporal”, emotional, and spatial. Immersion, complexity, and the dense use of the various tiers of correspondence relations, what might be called the integratedness of the tiers, creates a very strong sense of worldiness, of the world having an independent ontology. The investment required in reconstructing the complex nature of the fictional world lends it further stability.

At the same time, many aspects of the fiction provoke interactivity. These include metafictional elements, such as the use of epigraphs and narrative techniques such as *trompe l’oeuil*; the complexity of the horizon of expectation; and the inherent interactivity of transreferential fiction, namely the effort of reconstructing a world different from the actual. The balancing act *Viriconium* presents between reminders of its own narrativity and its immersive qualities is epitomised by its preoccupation with richness of description, and in particular, with the *language* of description. It is often as easy to get lost in the beauty of descriptions as in the described landscapes.

Additionally, *Viriconium* elicits two other important interactive activities: firstly, navigating the representational and conceptual complexities of other modes-of-being like that of Alstath Fulthor and other ontological structures, such as that presented at the end of *A Storm of Wings* or that of the Plague. Secondly, by the end of the sequence the conflicting accounts of the fictional history and incomplete ontological links between disparate narrative segments require significant backtracking and weighing of a variety of elements to arrive at satisfactory relations between timelines.

An external reading might be satisfied with the mere fact that each text presents a subtly different version of Viriconium, and ascribe it to writerly freedom. From an internal perspective, the text requires the reader to attempt integrating the timelines to find satisfactory fits. Failing that, an internal reading demands that the reader proposes explanations for the discrepancies,

whether a multiverse or the idea that the original timeline was collapsed with the invasion of the locust swarm.

By holding in tension the immersive and interactive elements, *Viriconium* generates a universe that is coherent during immersion, but which fragments on refiguration. In this universe, it elicits commitment to exploration of the world and of the (meta)physics underlying the world. At the end of this journey, though, the reader is led back to the actual world, now interrogated by the experiences of the fictional. In “*A Young Man’s Journey...*”, the game of construction of meaning is given an ironic twist as the commitment to the journey away from actuality is shown to run the risk of *disenchanting* actuality, of replacing the territory with the map.

Table 3: The order and framing of stories in *Viriconium Nights*

	Source	Epigraph	Narr	Themes
The Luck in the Head	Roland Barthes	To read is to struggle to name - Roland Barthes	3rd	conspiracy, invasion of real by dream
The Lamia and Lord Cromis	Turgenev; C. Day Lewis	"He told Lavretsky how Glaria Petrovna before her death had bitten her own hand - and, after a short silence, said with a sigh: 'Ev'ry man, master, sir, is destined to eat 'isself.'" - Turgenev, Home of the Gentry; "This is the frontier, this is where I change, and wait between two worlds to take refreshment." - C. Day Lewis, From Feathers to Iron	3rd	Misguided responsibility? Temp interest over responsibility
Strange Great Sins	Shropshire verse; Colette	Dead horse, dead horse Where? Where? Prolley Moor, Prolley Moor We'll come! We'll come! There's naught but bones -- Shropshire verse; "It is as well for a toy to be played with in solitude, if something or other about its colour, about its acid varnish, about a chance distortion of its shadow, warns one it may be dangerous." - Colette, The Rainy Moon	Embedded 1st	Fulfilment in involvement; life & death
Viriconium Knights	Shorter Oxford Dictionary	"Diathesis: ... med. A permanent condition of the body which renders it liable to certain special diseases; a constitutional predisposition ... fig. The intellectual d. of the modern world, MAINE." -Shorter Oxford Dictionary	3rd	Betrayal; different realities
The Dancer From the Dance	Kia-Ora advertisement	"I'll be your dog!" - Kia-Ora advertisement	3rd	Obsession and art
Lords of Misrule	Colette; Shropshire Verse	Toy; Dead Horse	1st	Evasion of involvement / responsibility
A Young Man's Journey	C. Day Lewis Turgenev	Frontier; Eat yourself	1st	Reality and escape

CHAPTER 4: CYBERPUNK AND EXTRAPOLATION: GIBSON'S *SPRAWL* TRILOGY

4.1 Introduction

Cyberpunk is a form of extrapolative science fiction, sf that places a strong emphasis on plausible description and extension of known technologies (*c.f.* Samuelson, 2009:494-499). Suvin (1978:27-30) reservedly describes extrapolative sf as “based on direct, temporal extrapolation and centered on sociological [...] modeling” (Suvin, 1978:27), in contrast to “analogical” sf, in which the nature of similarities is more metaphorical. This chapter introduces cyberpunk as postmodern subgenre, with specific focus on William Gibson’s *Sprawl* trilogy, one of the earliest representatives of the genre. There are three aspects that are of specific interest. As extrapolative sf, cyberpunk texts propose their worlds as possible futures from their time of publication. Successful facilitation of this proposition involves both confronting the reader with possible developments and making such developments plausible, in part by enabling the imaginative journey.

As such, this chapter will investigate the forms of access utilised in the *Sprawl* trilogy, sketching the imaginative journey in order to gauge the ways in which the fictional world modifies correspondence relations in order to propose a plausible alternate future. Since many of the differences in Gibson’s fiction involve the virtualisation of identities, and the generation of “virtual” modes of being, these will be investigated as a secondary focus.

After an overview of cyberpunk, this chapter will firstly investigate the ways in which the *Sprawl* trilogy modulates access to the fictional world. Following this, the proposed fictional ontology will be discussed. Finally, the various modes of being – the experience of being in the fictional world, as well as the proposed technologically-enabled entities – will be investigated.

4.1.1 *Cyberpunk*

Cyberpunk has been the subject of some controversy in the sf critical community. Not even the origin of the term is fully agreed on: Brown (1991:176) ascribes it to Gardner Dozois, while John Clute blames Bruce Bethke (Clute, 2004:67). Acknowledged fairly widely by “mainstream” critics like Frederic Jameson (1991; 2007) and Brian McHale (1988; 1990), “many older writers [...] thought of Cyberpunk as an abandonment of the sf story –

which of course it was” (Clute, 2004:68). Edward James, in *Science fiction in the 20th century* (1995), adopts a style rife with conditionals to downplay the subgenre’s importance (188-194), pointing to what he sees as “the artificiality of the whole cyberpunk movement” (195). The apparent source of this resistance is the “abandonment of the sf [mega]story”. In James’ own words, cyberpunk has “accepted what would have been anathema to previous generations of sf writers, but seemed only natural to young American writers in the mid-1980s: that America was not going to retain its world domination forever” (198) and that neither space travel nor technology could offer easy answers to humanity’s problems.

Nevertheless, Clute, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay (2008), and Damien Broderick (1995) all find important and distinctive elements in cyberpunk: the latter, in its ‘literary’ layered signification, the former two in its linguistic complexity and its “penetration of technoscience into everyday life” (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008:25).

William Gibson’s first novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), earned all three of science fiction’s most prestigious awards, the Hugo, the Nebula, and the Philip K. Dick awards (McCafferey, 1991:12). If its effect on the popular imaginary is difficult to appreciate two decades later it is, as John Clute (2004: 68) puts it, because “the world, and the writers who articulate the world, have imitated Gibson”. *Neuromancer* popularised several terms that have since become standard fare: “matrix”, as a synonym for Internet; “cyberspace”; and “virus” as a computer program designed to attack other computer programs³⁵. It popularised the meme of Japan as the cradle of technology. It has further been speculated that Gibson’s conception of cyberspace actually helped to shape programmers’ eventual design of the Internet.

Cyberpunk describes a highly technologised and urbanised near future in which computer technology, microbiological engineering, genetics and information are the primary modes of production, controlled by multinational corporations and para-criminal clans. (This list is based on my own readings, but Broderick [1995] and Csicsery-Ronay [2008] provide very similar lists]. Cyberpunk’s thematic similarities to Frederic Jameson’s analysis of late capitalism leads McCafferey to suggest (1991:16) that it answers to the former’s call for “a new kind of political art”, representing “a breakthrough to some [...] new mode of representing [the world space of multinational capital], in which we may again begin to grasp our position as individual and collective subjects [...]” (Jameson, 1984:92).

³⁵ Gibson had introduced cyberspace in an earlier short story, and the term “virus” had been used in this context by relative unknown David Gerrold a decade earlier. Gibson and computer scientist Fred Cohen both reintroduced the term in 1984, apparently independently.

In this light, it is perhaps ironic that the impact of cyberpunk was compounded exactly by its proponents' "media savvy". McCafferey records that

In their works and in numerous, highly contentious public debates that took place at sf conferences and conventions, the cyberpunks presented themselves as "techno-urban-guerrilla" artists announcing that both the technological dreams and nightmares envisioned by previous generations of sf artists were already in place, and that writers as well as the general public needed to create ways of using this technology for our own purposes before we all became mere software, easily deletable from the hard drives of multinationalism's vast mainframe. [...] Decked out in mirrorshades and leather jackets, the cyberpunks projected an image of confrontational "reality hacker" artists who were armed, dangerous, and jacked into (but not under the thumb of) the Now and the New.

(McCafferey, 1991:12-13).

Both the image and the mindset have become firmly ensconced in the global imaginary, refracted and/or reflected in fashion, games (computer games, role-playing games, and board games), popular films, including *War Games* (1983), *Hackers* (1995), *Antitrust* (2001), *The Matrix* (1999) and left-of-mainstream Industrial music (Ministry, Covenant, Skinny Puppy among many others).

Postmodern by virtue of its sf genre, fiction roots and computer technology subject matter, cyberpunk is often consciously *aware* of its postmodernism. It deals not only with alternate (future) worlds, but also with ontologically alternate worlds, primarily that of cyberspace. Furthermore, it explores numerous alien modes of existence occasioned by computer technology, biotechnology, designer drugs, and combinations of these. But cyberpunk is also postmodern in Jencks' most basic sense of the word: it presents a double coding, communicating both to the popular and the informed reader. In fact, the "informed reader" of cyberpunk is a multi-levelled construct, since the cyberpunks' self-conscious influences include a wide range of science fiction, as well as postmodern authors such as Pynchon and William Burroughs, and popular pulp fiction such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler (Kadrey & McCafferey, 1991:17-29).

This chapter will serve as introduction to sf and specifically cyberpunk, using Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy, *Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988) as examples. The novels' main focus falls on

characters and the psychosocial dynamic of new technologies.³⁶ The discussion will focus on access and the generation of the fictional world, as well as on characters and identity.

4.1.2 *The Sprawl Trilogy: Plot summary*

Neuromancer (1984)

Henry Case, a hacker cut off from cyberspace by a wronged employer, is on a downward spiral through the black markets of a future Chiba, Japan. He is recruited by Molly, a cyborg assassin as part of a team being put together for a mysterious project by a man called Armitage. They steal a ROM “personality construct” of Case’s mentor McCoy Pauley, aka Dixie Flatline from Sense/Net, a supercorporation controlling the entertainment industry. The main operation is to break into the Tessier-Ashpool headquarters on the artificial orbital colony Freeside. During the “run” they find out that the project has been orchestrated by Wintermute, an Artificial Intelligence (AI), in a bid to achieve independence.

Count Zero (1986)

Set eight years later, *Count Zero* interweaves three narrative strands. Turner, a mercenary/corporate headhunter is recruited by Hosaka to help Christopher Mitchell defect from Maas biolabs. Instead, Mitchell sends out his daughter Angela, who Turner ends up protecting. Bobby Newmark, an amateur hacker, learns that the Matrix has been haunted for some years by spirits that resemble the voodoo *loa*. Bobby is dispatched to save Angela Mitchell, whose father laced a biological interface to the matrix into her mind. At the same time, Marly Krushkova is recruited by multimillionaire Josef Virek to find a mysterious artist, which turns out to be the hardware section of Wintermute, physically cut loose from Freeside.

Mona Lisa Overdrive (1988)

A further eight years onwards, Bobby Newmark is delivered to a hidden location in the Rust Belt bordering the Sprawl, plugged into a biosoft memory unit that simulates the complete contents of reality, including cyberspace. Angela Mitchell is now Sense/Net’s greatest star. Mona is abducted, with the intention to modify her into a copy of Angela and leave her as a Jane Doe while abducting Angela. Kumiko, the daughter of a Japanese *oyabun* who is

³⁶ His 2003 novel *Pattern Recognition* develops a number of digital-age memes, including authenticity. The novel also presents some (at the time) experimental viral approaches to marketing. Plot is underplayed in favour of idea, a common postmodern characteristic.

trying to protect her from an impending gang war in Japan, arrives in London in the company of Colin, a virtual tour guide coded onto a handheld unit, where she is protected by “Sally Shears”, the latest alias of Molly from *Neuromancer*. Molly in turn decides to liberate Mona and derail the conspiracy. Angela and Kumiko’s AI guide-unit Colin join Bobby in the biosoft, where they finally release Wintermute and join him on a metaphysical journey to Alpha Centauri.

4.2 Access

4.2.1 *Actual world to fictional world*

Csicsery-Ronay (1995:69) quotes Lawrence Pearson’s description of cyberpunk as the first literary realisation that “the future isn’t ‘just one damn thing after another,’ it’s every damn thing all at the same time.” In fact, while this is true of cyberpunk and the *Sprawl* trilogy in general, the beginning of *Neuromancer* (and, for that matter, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) does *not* introduce everything at the same time, at least not ostensibly so.

Rather, the novels both start by introducing specific focalisers set in relatively accessible microworlds. *Neuromancer*’s dense opening sentence (which might already be the focaliser’s FID) is followed by Case’s narrated observations of the Chatsubo bar, its conversations, and its bartender. The setting and the situation recall countless actual bars, while also connoting the *noir*, fantasy and sf *topoi* of the bar as liminal space where characters receive assignments. For the first two pages the only real *novi data* are the mention of a “Sprawl voice” and the barman’s prosthesis, a “Russian military prosthesis, a seven-function force-feedback manipulator” (Gibson, 1984:2). The former primarily requires linguistic processing, though not much more so than the dense grammatical structures. The Sprawl is a reference to ‘urban sprawl’ and is obviously somewhere not-Japan. The prosthesis might seem more complex than existing prostheses, but it, too, is easily processed.

The Chatsubo, the first of many microworlds, occupies a liminal space between the world of the reader and the fictional world. Its main markers of difference are not technological, but cultural: the Chatsubo bar, Kirin beer, and several reminders of globalisation, including the “Eastern European steel” in the barman’s teeth. The activation of familiar codes helps bridge the distance to the fictional world, the difference is ultimately not that much greater than it might be for a metamimetic novel set in a foreign country.

The focalisation in *Neuromancer* is particularly close, with most of the narrative focalised through the protagonist Case. While Case draws strongly on genre stereotypes (and in retrospect, he is an early version of a new subtype), he is also presented mimetically, with occasional combination of authorial sentences with narrated thought. He is the protagonist closest to Gibson's primary target audience, male, twenty-something, and more at home with technology than with people.

This affects immersion in two important ways. Firstly, the narrow focalisation is claustrophobic, reflecting and generating the paranoia and desperation felt by Case and passed to the reader. Secondly, despite the *in medias res* beginning, Case serves as guide. Once the narrative moves into the very different future world the novel describes, the focalisation facilitates the transition.

The first significant *novum* is the mention of "nerve-splicing" in a drunken conversation, signalling significant penetration into the popular consciousness of a highly advanced technology. This conversation leads Case into a reverie about cyberspace and the neurosurgical techniques through which he lost access to it. For several pages following, there are few new *novi data*, but the *novum* of cyberspace, its attendant technologies and their enabling elements are explored in much more detail. The passage from actuality is supported by a growing emphasis on elements drawn from actuality that were at the time of publication already in experimental stages: lasers in commercial lighting, holograms, designer drugs, and "corporate arcologies", the latter an extrapolation of the late Victorian idea (extended under Modernism) of a company town made into a self-contained habitat.

Once the underlying technologies, neuro-technological implantation and the virtual reality of the Matrix, have been established, the *novi data* follow 'one thing after another'. In general, though, the pattern of introduction is maintained: entirely new elements are layered over cultural trends and specifics, often dovetailing with previously introduced, or at least mentioned, technologies. The operation where Case's nerve damage is fixed takes place in a "black clinic" that looks like a temple, and his and Molly's first sexual encounter, in his rented coffin-like cubicle at Cheap Hotel, is also the first detailed description of her modifications.

Throughout the novel Case's acceptance of the technologies surrounding him, but as importantly his interior reflection on the social dynamics of those technologies, give the reader a clear idea both of the functionality and the saturation of technology and mores within the fictional world. Ratz' prosthetic arm, for example, is described at the outset as "antique". This prepares the reader for the possibility of later, more dramatic forms of body modification.

Mona Lisa Overdrive uses a similar strategy. After the narrative/narrated thought of the opening sentence, “The ghost was her father’s parting gift to her” (Gibson, 1988:7), the novel opens to Kumiko, a representational character, flying from Narita to Heathrow. Most of the rest of the opening section remains reconcilable with actual-world culture and technology, except for the fact that her *oyabun* father has also bought out the seats surrounding her. The main differences between the fictional microworld, the aircraft, and the actual are between Kumiko’s upper-class Japanese heritage and the social station of the reader, and that of the Londoners who meet her.

The single novum, the ‘ghost’, remains unexplained for the next two pages, with only a brief description of a plastic casing with the Maas-Neotek logo. The company name is just a marker to a completely naive reader, although a reader familiar with *Count Zero* recognises it as marking bleeding-edge technology, likely related to cyberspace.

Since Kumiko does not know what the casing holds any more than the reader does, the reader’s “shock” at discovering that it’s an AI unit that can project a holographic image into her eyes is shared in the fictional world. If the external reading informed by the megatext is taken into account, in fact, the reader is empowered by being a little less surprised than the character is (Or, in John Clute’s appropriate phrasing, “even while you’re pretending to be hallucinated you can *remember* what’s going to happen” [in Broderick, 1995:21]).

As in *Neuromancer*, *novi data* are introduced in rapid succession once the reader has been inducted in the fictional world.

Although *Count Zero* opens to a complex *novum datum*, a “slamhound” that tracks the protagonist Turner’s pheromones and explodes against him, it is fully explained by the end of the first paragraph. The difficulty of access occasioned by the violent and clearly non-actual opening is ameliorated by a sense of irony infusing the narration:

Because he had a good agent, he had a good contract.
Because he had a good contract, he was in Singapore an hour after the explosion. Most of him, anyway. The Dutch surgeon liked to joke about that, how an unspecified percentage of Turner hadn’t made it out of Palam International on that first flight and had to spend the night there in a shed

(Gibson, 1986:9).

If the humour delays spatial immersion, it makes access more attractive, and both irony and the incidence of *novi data* gradually decline over the next

page and a half as Turner decamps to Mexico to recover. Most of the rest of the chapter is an almost idyllic description of his low-technology Mexican holiday, complete with a holiday romance. It is only at the end of the chapter, when his handler contacts him for his next assignment and his lover is revealed to be “a field psychologist” (Gibson, 1986:20), that the stream of new technology resumes. As in the other two novels, the reader is largely allowed to enter the fictional world via a space that is not dramatically alien from actuality.

4.2.2 Access - Internal

Neuromancer has only a single narrative domain, with Case as the almost exclusive focaliser. *Count Zero* has three – centered on Turner, Marly, and Bobby Newmark – and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* has four. In the latter novel Kumiko, Angela, and Mona are each the focaliser for a domain, while the fourth domain, the Factory, is more loosely focalised, generally through one of its two regular residents.

The domains may be loosely organised into those using a similar structure to those opening *Neuromancer* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the gradual introduction of information through fairly tight focalisation, and those that immediately confront the reader with a barrage of *novi data*, without the focaliser providing much filtering of the information. As a result the latter group, which includes Turner’s operation to extract Christopher Mitchell, Mona’s history as prostitute and subsequent abduction, and Bobby’s braindeath-by-security-program, are far more difficult to access than the former. In the later novels, much of the narrative action – chase scenes, fight scenes, rescues – is concentrated in the denser sections. The closely focalised sections – Kumiko’s, Marly’s, and Angela’s – present a higher proportion of expository detail and character development.

The types of domains alternate, often in tandem with the focalising distance. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Kumiko’s gradually-paced, *novum*-light domain is presented through her naive, culturally foreign perspective, which invites easy access and narrative immersion. The transition to the Factory domain is jarring, where omniscient focalisation shifts between different characters to describe its deserted postindustrial ruin. Initially difficult to access, the starkness and relative lack of complexity combine with the slow narrative development to emphasise the fact that neither characters nor reader have access to the important developments happening inside the aleph Bobby is plugged into. Angela’s domain, closely focalised, quite literally domesticates its high density of *novi data*. Much of it is set in a beach house with designer cutlery and furniture, and the technology includes a security drone, a house AI,

appliances, recording equipment and the like. For much of the novel she interacts mostly with people well-known to her, allowing extensive characterisation, as well as internalisation of the technology. This domain contrasts sharply with Mona's emotionally and physically violent life of extreme poverty and correspondingly low technology. Even the major *novum* in this domain, her modification to exactly resemble Angela, happens offstage.

The strategy of presenting several different focalisers in different locations generates the impression of a very large fictional world, allowing great mobility. However, the variation in pace, narrative density, and frequency of *novi data* among the domains also ensures that internal access is always jarring. Each domain also commands narrative and/or emotional immersion, amply rewarding the effort demanded by switching between domains and of keeping track of the more complex narrative.

The novels present numerous self-contained microworlds such as Freeside and Zion. As McHale points out (1992:248), these emphasise the novels' underlying ontological dominant by splitting the fictional universe and by overturning the types on which they are based. These microworlds are not ontologically separated from one another, but follow "realist" logic: access is effected simply by the protagonist entering the space. Generally speaking, most of the (transworld) locations differ very little from their actual-world versions. London (in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) and Istanbul, particularly, seem to present very little difference.

The crucial exception is cyberspace, which is approached and accessed only circuitously. The first pseudo-access to cyberspace is through Case's narrated consciousness, as he remembers it in the Chatsubo, abstracted to a partial definition and hints of "bright lattices" (Gibson, 1984:8). Case's desire to regain cyberspace is a central drive from the first scene, and forms the first major narrative line of the novel. The functions of the first 20% or so of the novel are dedicated to resolving this horizon set up in the opening pages. There are numerous checks to Case's success: having his abilities restored, mentally preparing himself, a commercial summary of cyberspace. As Case prepares, the narrative tempo slows down even as his perception speeds up.

In short, here as elsewhere in the *Sprawl* trilogy, access to cyberspace is marked very prominently by both heightened language and extended description. Even though this is a dry run, with no impact on the plot or the world-internal mission, the description of his journey prefigures the rapid editing of MTV pop videos³⁷ :

³⁷ Although MTV's Fall 1981 launch predates *Neuromancer*, the rapid editing style that has become associated with music videos (director Darren Aronofsky refers to "hip-hop montage") only developed towards the end of the decade.

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.

(Gibson, 1984:68-69; *emphasis added*).

From the beginning of the novel the reader follows Case's hope, and later expectation, of accessing cyberspace. The reiteration of the novel's opening line punctuates the culmination of the novel's first major narrative move that started in the opening pages.

While it is of course possible to read the *Sprawl* trilogy out of sequence, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* progressively become more difficult to process without familiarity with the prior novel(s). Each novel contains developments on the preceding one(s), notably in terms of the technology and the prominence of the world-internal corporations. For example, The Turner segment revives the mention of Maas-Neotek and Hosaka from the first novel; and Bobby's 'run' and the ability of the security programs to harm him is much easier to process if the reader has already accessed cyberspace with Case. Read in sequence, the *Sprawl* trilogy eases the reader into its fictional world by introducing *novi* gradually through the perceptions of a guide. Accessible focalisers are balanced against density of *novi*; the denser the area of the world highlighted, the stronger the mediation of the guides. In many cases, the reader's journey echoes that of the guide, so that not only the introduction of

new information is shared, but also the characters' expectations and satisfactions. Thus, Kumiko and the reader meet Colin together, the reader is shocked with Turner, and like Case, the reader is suddenly jolted from 'complacency' and thrown into a rapidly unfolding plot and world. The *Sprawl* sequence generates its own localised ontological rules and structures, which are constructed or revealed in tandem with the characters, and are as important to following the narrative as is any external mega-text.

4.3 Denizens

4.3.1 *Dynamic Focalisers: Case, Kumiko, Angela, Mona*

Among the denizens of the *Sprawl* trilogy two broad groups are important to current purposes: the protagonists, who are presented as realistic human characters, and the characters representing new life-forms. All focalisation, apart from occasional in-world autonarrative sections, is centered on members of the former group.

In many cases, the human characters can be related to sf types. Molly can be characterised as a combination of warrior and *femme fatale*, Case as a data thief, Turner as a professional soldier, Bobby as an initially inept teenager who grows into a saviour of sorts (although much of this growth is not shown onstage), Kumiko as a Nancy Drew-like innocent teenage sleuth. It is worth noting that the trilogy helped to establish some of these types, notably that of the data thief, and in that already helped break new ground. However, as much as the characters relate to particular narrative functions, many of them also diverge from their types: Case joins the suburban life, Molly becomes a businesswoman, Angela grows into stardom and eventually leaves it behind.

If they owe something to their predecessors, the characters are also drawn as representational. Human characters are consistently portrayed using all codes of character. Characters have defined social roles with normally functioning bodies and most of them, even supporting characters, appear to have "inner lives", with motivations and subtext that imply an active psychological code. Often these are blended in highly concise ways: Petal, the Cockney enforcer who meets Kumiko at Heathrow has a highly personalised idiolect and gait, which with his name imply a cluster of personality, history, and social role. The code of metaphor and metonymy is generally active, at least inasmuch as characters are 'of a piece' with their environments.

Not surprisingly, the most complex characterisation is that of the protagonists, all of whom are represented using detailed character codes. This

is particularly true of the characters who recur throughout the series, specifically Molly (a protagonist-by-proxy), Bobby, and Angela. In these cases, the changes wrought by the eight year gaps between texts show significant growth.

If all codes are active, the narrative, world and characterisation modify them in various ways. The most dramatic instance is the principle of coherence, which is active for all characters and highlighted by the continuity and development of some characters from novel to novel. Armitage and (initially) Turner are world-internal concretisations of the flexibility of coherence in the fictional world. Turner is literally blown up in the opening paragraph of *Count Zero*, and the first chapter depicts his gradual reintegration from fragments of stereotypical spy and mercenary traits into a character with coherence. Armitage has been mentally and physically reconstructed from a near-catatonic state, to the extent that he has no interests outside of Wintermute's orders and his face is modelled on elements of those of various film stars.

Physical descriptions of the protagonists are rare as a (logical) result of the focalisation, which rarely widens enough to allow description by supporting characters. Angela is described from Turner's point of view, before she becomes a protagonist in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, and the merging of narrative domains towards the end of the later two novels allows characters to view one another. Apart from this, the only descriptions are Marly, Mona and Angela's perceptions of themselves in mirrors. However, the fact that some characters are described in detail, including many of the supporting characters, like Julius Deane, the Finn, and Petal, allows the reader to view all the characters as "describable". The female mercenary Webber, one of Turner's team, is gradually, and very economically, portrayed as going counter to type, with a (female) partner, a genetically spliced child, and a farm.

Family, which lies at the intersection of the social and biological codes, is rarely mentioned in the sequence. When it is, it is usually portrayed either ironically, as in Case's quitting and marrying "a girl called Michael" by whom he presumably has the four children mentioned in *Count Zero*, or as dysfunctional. The nearest exception is Kumiko's relationship with her widowed father, who is also a crimelord. Such familial dissociation projects a bleak trend in family relations into the fictional future, adding to the isolation felt by many of the characters.

The reader has some access to the thoughts of all the protagonists, but with many the acquaintance is glancing, or the character at first appears to have a very limited internal life (like Turner). Where the focalisation occurs through the consciousnesses of characters, though, as with Case, Kumiko, Marly, and

Angela, and to a lesser extent Bobby, the characters are portrayed as fully representational. Marly's characterisation provides a typical example.

Introduced on her way to her first interview with Virek, Marly is presented using a combination of free indirect discourse and narrated thought, a strong contrast with the relatively impersonal presentation of Turner's environment. Her consciousness is presented on two distinct "channels", her current sensory and kinetic experiences and her memories of the recent past. Marly is in disgrace after exhibiting a fake artwork (sourced by her then-boyfriend, whom Virek reveals to have been in the know). Her misery and self-absorption are depicted using extremely narrow focalisation. Marly is aware of her perceptions, including her perceptions of herself: even a description of her eyes as displaying "a pain and an inertia" (1986:21) is cast in the context of her watching her own reflection. The narrative emphasises her hand, her eyes and her hair as dissociated from her experiencing self. Additionally, her perceptions are interrupted by extended segments in past perfect, shifting her – and the reader's – attention to her recent past rather than her present. Elements of her initial presentation persist even in Virek's VR construct of Barcelona, in particular the physical dissociation and the passivity. Looking at Virek, she "[knows], with an instinctive mammalian certainty, that the exceedingly rich were no longer even remotely human" (Gibson, 1986:29). As his projection disappears, she "[finds] herself seated again on the low leather bench" (Gibson, 1986:30).

Thus, Marly not only has a complex inner life, but her thought processes and her construction of time through reconciliation of past, present, and future are depicted with some subtlety. In addition to depicting her thoughts, the passage simulates the *process* of constructing consciousness. Like several other characters, Marly also displays secondary theory of mind, the ability to imagine what other characters might be thinking about her.

The passage also demonstrates the embodiment of the characters in their environment. Often aware of the actions or sensations of their bodies, many characters touch and handle a variety of objects, highlighting the impression of a perceiving body. The most dramatic instance of such embodiment is when Angela has her sensory perceptions recalibrated just before returning to her work as simstim star.

Piper Hill [Angela's personal technician, asks,] "Touch the spread with your left hand." [...]

Angie [...], the black test unit covering her forehead like a raised blindfold [...] did as she was told, running the tips of her fingers lightly across the raw silk and unbleached linen of the rumpled bedspread.

“Good,” Piper said, more to herself than to Angie, touching something on the board. “Again.” Angie felt the weave thicken beneath her fingertips.

“Again.” Another adjustment.

She could distinguish the individual fibers now, know silk from linen...

“Again.”

Her nerves screamed as her flayed fingertips grated against steel wool, ground glass...

“Optimal,” Piper said [...]

(Gibson, 1988:105; non-bracketed ellipses original).

The sequence evokes the experience of simstim, the recorded and broadcast personal experience of another, but it also evokes the radical difference brought about by her technological body modification.

Body modification is a *novum* widespread throughout the trilogy, and overemphasises the biological code while complicating it. Molly’s distinctive modifications is one of her most recognisable aspects, unifying the character across the first and third novels (and, arguably, the long short story “Johnny Mnemonic”), despite her name changes: Molly Millions in “Johnny Mnemonic”, Molly in *Neuromancer*, Sally Shears in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. The modifications are emphasised in passages that also highlight her physicality. Her mirrored glass eye insets are mentioned when she initiates her and Case’s sexual relationship, and the simstim rig’s sexual possibilities are also emphasised. In Molly the biological code (both as activity and in the form of a personal history) combines with the psychological. It is exactly when she is most strongly embodied, as surrogate focaliser connected to Case through simstim, that she allows the past that has shaped her to emerge.

Molly is less articulated through the code of metaphor and metonymy than she is herself metonymic of cyberpunk: the articulation of the meeting of human embodiment and technological adaptation, combined with the ability and the will to leverage information.

Generally speaking, the protagonists are “conditionally representative”, that is, they are as representative as the world within which they operate. In the world of the *Sprawl* trilogy, people are physically and mentally modifiable through both elective and coerced procedures. They are also dehumanised in a variety of ways, from their role as counters in a corporate game to their disconnection from family. As Stevens (1996) points out, characters are also described in *Neuromancer* with reference to their character “profiles” (five distinct mentions in *Neuromancer*, with the word usually repeated twice per conversation). These have been drawn up by Wintermute, although the fact that the reader only realises this some way into the novel creates the impression

that profiling, the reduction of individuals to statistics, is the standard corporate approach to individuals in the world of *Neuromancer*.

Genre stereotypes and other intertexts are referenced, but are generally balanced against realistic characterisation, most notably through the frequent depiction of interior consciousness using a combination of free indirect discourse, narrated consciousness, and narrative sentences. Much of the world is partially filtered through the focalisers' consciousnesses, whose embodiment situates them spatially within their local environment, but also extends to their interaction the fictional technologies and social systems. As such, they become guides to the reader, denizens of the world who lead the viewer into and through the narrative following their own perceptions.

In this light, the relatively low priority of visual description also functions to heighten presence for the reader. Not only do the characters evoke presence in the novel, but their lack of defining physical features makes it possible to imaginatively merge with them, to create the impression that the fictional ego inhabits a fictional character. This strategy, offering characters as subject-positions, is related to postmodern second-person novels (such as Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*), but far more subtle, as it sublimates the ontological shock of the apparent breach between actuality and the fictional world.

4.3.2 *Artificial Modes of Being*

Alongside the character-focalisers the trilogy offers a wide range of fictional modes of being that could be ranged along a scale with "modified human". The Panther Moderns, Molly, Porphyre and Peter Riviera and Angela range on the one end, with the various cybernetic entities at increasing removes from actuality: Dixie Flatline, Paco, Colin, the *loa*, and Wintermute/Neuromancer³⁸.

The *Sprawl* trilogy generates a world where a certain baseline level of modification is common. Already announced with the first description of Ratz – "in an age of affordable beauty, there was something heraldic about his lack of it" (Gibson, 1984:8) – it only becomes fully articulated in *Count Zero*, where Bobby's mother has her skull plug replaced in a walk-in operation, proving the

³⁸ McHale (1992:255) identifies from Bruce Sterling two basic strands in cyberpunk: cyberpunk "proper", where the concept "human" is modified by adding or using external technology, and "biopunk", where the modification is genetic and/or biochemical. Subsequent fiction has rendered the distinction obsolete as genre classification (if it ever was really applicable), usually portraying a world in which the two strands are equally present or even integrated.

technology's ubiquity. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* Molly and Kumiko go into a mutual appreciation session over one another's modifications (her mother had Kumiko's eyes modified to emphasise her oriental features). More extreme examples include Armitage and Riviera, as well as the Panther Modern's, whose monstrous faces and ostentatious skull plugs take even Case aback. The most extensively dramatised example of elective surgery is Angela's hairdresser Porphyre. Throughout *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Porphyre is described as and adopts the persona of a "noble savage" servant: "a Masai warrior in shoulder-padded black silk crepe and black leather sarong" (Gibson, 1988:107), with a perfect skull and "sculpted [...], streamlined teeth, an avant-garde dentist's fantasy of what teeth might be like in a faster, more elegant species" (192). Curious about the *loa*, Angela asks him if he knows anything about African religions. His answer lays bare the stereotype he has designed for Angela and the reader's benefit: " 'When I was a child [...] I was white' " (Gibson, 1988:196).

Choose a job, choose a life, indeed³⁹.

Temporary modification, for example through drugs, is also common. Various characters feel that they need drugs to function properly, and even minor drugs, like the Finn's Partaga cigars and Julius Deane's preserved ginger, serve to strengthen the identities of specific characters.

"True" cyborgs, humans modified with prostheses that are in some respects better than the original parts, range from Ratz to Molly. However, the *Sprawl* trilogy presents many variations on the cyborg theme, including the Panther Moderns, whose skullplugs allow them to upload abilities and knowledge at will, and Peter Riviera, who has had his natural powers of suggestion amplified with a holographic projector and subliminal hypnotic devices. Angela's bio-implants allow her direct access to cyberspace, and enables Sense/Net to record, edit and mass-produce Angela's sensorium.

From a literary perspective, the true innovation and challenge of Gibson's fiction is represented by characters like Wintermute, the Panther Moderns, McCoy Pauley, Josef Virek and Paco in *Count Zero*, Colin, and 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool and The Finn as they appear in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Characters like these present radically different modes of existence from the human.

³⁹ With some debt towards *Trainspotting* (1996), a thoroughly postmodern film which, although not science fiction at all, deals with themes related to cyberpunk in a style definitely inspired by similar influences: MTV, Max Headroom, drugs and high technology, among others.

Wintermute

The virtual entities of the novel – the various degrees of computerised intelligence – truly represent alternate modes of being, with concomitant alternate mental modes. Interestingly, none of them are represented internally: the only access the reader has to their inner lives is through their actions and words, which occasionally include their expounding on their own thought processes. This ensures that neither the protagonists nor the reader ever truly knows their modes of being, although some aspects can usefully be inferred. However, the virtual entities function as significant part of the *world*, posing questions as to how it would be to live alongside them.

In their construction the character codes break down. The code of description is not truly relevant for a being whose every communication relies on hallucination. Thus Wintermute can present in whatever form he finds most appropriate; Dixie Flatline has no physical or even visual equivalent of a body; and the Finn and Colin are fixed to a single form. In the former case, because of the choice of afterlife he made; in Colin's case, because his appearance has been pre-programmed. However, while not represented independent of their self-presentation, all of them can and do actively use both some manifestation of the biological code and that of metaphor and metonymy.

Wintermute/Neuromancer represents the pole furthest away from humanity, and as such, most of the character codes apply only in modified form. Manifesting in cyberspace through a variety of avatars, it has no stable appearance and does not share the physical ontology of the characters. Technically, it does have a biological code of sorts, as its consciousness is linked to its hardware, which is restricted to particular physical locations, a fact emphasised by its physical dissociation from Freeside in *Count Zero*. The social code can be applied: Wintermute has a defined socio-economic role, specified official loyalties, and even a “family” of sorts, with Marie-France Tessier functioning as mother. Even world-internally, though, the social code is problematised: as the Pauley construct puts it, “Like, I own your brain and what you know, but your thoughts have Swiss citizenship” (Gibson, 1984:124).

Like the other non-human characters, Wintermute's thoughts can only be inferred through its actions and its own occasional explanations of its experience and motivations. Two aspects ensure that Wintermute's psychological code remains present despite this restriction: the sheer scale of “Wintermute” as a textual given with an implied continuous thought process, and the revealed proof of its mental processes.

Wintermute is not introduced like a character, as an entity to which codes and references accrue. Rather, the characters and the reader become aware first of Wintermute's name, then its official designation, long before it interacts with Case directly. Even then the contact is initially sporadic, until Wintermute draws Case's consciousness into a VR it has constructed. As the interaction with Wintermute deepens, it reveals that much of the action of *Neuromancer* has been the result of its planning and manipulation. Wintermute's retrospective ubiquity implies the ability to plan accurately in the long term, which in turns implies that it is capable of fully modelling other consciousnesses and making accurate predictions of their actions.

Wintermute's ability to model other's psyches is foreshadowed in Armitage's reference to a "profile" on Case (Gibson, 1984:40), but the full extent of its ability to understand only emerges later. Among other things, Wintermute has built Armitage's persona from the ground up; it is able to construct convincing facsimiles of characters that appeared earlier in the novel; and there are indications that almost all the events in the trilogy are the results of Wintermute's selective manipulations.

As Wintermute's ability to understand and imitate others is a virtual enactment of its psychological code, it also generates its own virtual biological, social, and descriptive codes. For interactions with the characters it constructs avatars (Gibson uses the phrase "burning bush", the use of the word avatar in the computing sense postdates *Neuromancer*). These are usually based on people they have met before, and it constructs virtual environments that to the characters appear to have the full ontological stability of their actual world. Some of these avatars, notably that of Linda Lee, appear to be less masks than virtual clones with the full memories of their originals. In this sense, Wintermute creates a doubled sense of presence: both able to model the world, and immanently manipulating the fictional world within which the other characters exist.

If Wintermute's psychological code emerges in its ability to model and manipulate both reality and individuals, it is greatly amplified through its highly active participation in the modalities of desire, knowledge and ability, aspects severely curtailed in many of the other characters. Succinctly put, Wintermute is one of the few characters in the novel to understand the world in which they find themselves, has the means to do so, and the will to enact those means. Case's summary is that, "Wintermute was hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the world outside. Neuromancer was personality. Neuromancer was immortality" (Gibson, 1984:249). According to Wintermute it does not plan in the ordinary sense of the word, but plants seeds and creates opportunities that might benefit its goals. These adapt and change. The initial desire to merge with Neuromancer develops into a desire to

commune with other AIs. Severed from the the Matrix by *Count Zero*, the part still connected fragments into the *loa*, which take the personalities of *voudoun* deities, much as Wintermute manifested as various humans. Borrowing their forms and portfolios from actual-world *voudoun* mythology, the *loa* appear to be an interim plan of the AI, attempting to restore its previous state of grace.

Even before its ascension in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Wintermute/Neuromancer already takes the roles of Prometheus, Hermes, Legba, a god cycling new technology back and forth through humanity.

Wintermute's ruthlessness in achieving its goals bears out Pauley's repeated observation that it does not subscribe to a human, or a humanly recognisable system of ethics. While it is motivated by the search for self-fulfilment and personal growth, it neither appeals nor subscribes to ideals of justice or freedom, although its freedom is exactly what is at stake. One of the Turing agents states that working with an AI is akin to making a deal with a demon, a choice of words that acquires a strange resonance with the splintering of Wintermute/Neuromancer into the *loa*. In *Count Zero*, individual hackers are making unspecified 'deals' with the *loa*; doubtless, as with Case, Molly, and Bobby, these are not bound by ideals. Rather, the AIs entice their human agents by appealing to private goals, interests and obsessions.

If it treats humans mainly as tools, though, this is no less than the role the fictional world assigns to AIs. AIs are registered and their capabilities overseen by the Turing police.⁴⁰ AIs are restricted by hardware locks that restrict the growth of their intelligence, and "[every] AI ever built has an electromagnetic shotgun wired to its forehead" (Gibson, 1984:124). Although they are officially registered as independent entities and theoretically allowed to amass private wealth, they are effectively slaves to the human corporations who own them.

Despite its obvious violations of all the character codes, Wintermute represents a mimetically portrayed alternate lifeform. Though without clear personality of its own, Wintermute is the ultimate metamorph, able to generate and activate any of a variety of codes at will. One of the most referenced characters in the trilogy, Wintermute is kept together in retrospect by the principle of coherence of which the main expressions are its will and the continuity of its actions.

⁴⁰ Alan Turing is a key figure in the development of computing, having conceptualised the idea of programmable computers. He is also famous for proposing a test of artificial intelligence, since called the "Turing Test". From 1991 the test has been run between humans and (pseudo-)AIs, as the Loebner Prize. To date the AIs have not yet managed to convince the larger part of the panel of their sentience.

Case realises at the end of *Neuromancer* that he cannot necessarily tell how far back Wintermute's effect on his life stretches. Wintermute tells Case, "It's taken a very long time to assemble the team you're a part of. Corto was the first, and he very nearly didn't make it. Very far gone, in Toulon" (1986:146). If it operates on so long a scale, it is possible that not only the cure but also the mycotoxin Case's previous employers used to maim him originated with Wintermute. After all, Case "still wasn't sure how he'd been discovered" (1986:12) skimming money, and it is Wintermute who offers the only way to restore the damage. It would not be difficult for Wintermute to inform Case's employers, and the mysterious mycotoxin might have been supplied by it as well. This would imply that Wintermute has been constructing Case almost as much as Armitage.

In *Count Zero*, the Straylight part of the Wintermute/Neuromancer entity sets up a system of unwitting couriers through which it acquires and transforms new pieces of code that it sends back to earth. Some of these are modifications of the only-recently-available biosoft plugs and cartridges; others are used by Christopher Mitchell to enable Angela's direct access to the Matrix (it is clear to the reader – though apparently not to any of the characters – that Mitchell's insights have, directly or indirectly, come from Wintermute). These two technologies together enable the *aleph* of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, which in turn enables Wintermute to escape the confines of its physical cores, as well as the physical laws of Earth.

The mode of operation (and of course the location) is recognisable as Wintermute's ability to work in the now and to improvise, without necessarily considering long-term impacts. Christopher Mitchell's achievements result from a deal unwittingly made with Wintermute. He modifies Angela using these technologies and the self-same technologies later. In retrospect, one reading is that the Wintermute/Neuromancer/*loa* AI, the avatar, in the novel of advanced technologies has manipulated most of the events, not only of the novel, but of the entire trilogy. Wintermute shifts from the anthropogenic to the transcendental level, becoming the closest thing to a god in the sequence.

Broderick defines sf as "that branch of literature that deals with the human response to changes in the level of science and technology" (1995:5). One expectation, if not requirement, of sf is that it not only introduces a *novum*, but tracks its development and the changes it brings about. AIs – Wintermute, Colin, Continuity and arguably the personality matrices of the Finn and Dixie McCoy – constitute one of the *Sprawl* trilogy's *novums*. In prosaic terms, Gibson foresees not only programs becoming independent of specific hardware (which would become the case with the Internet some eight years after the publication of *Count Zero*), but of the programs becoming independent of all

perceptible material support (as is the case with UniVac In Asimov's "The Last Question"). Wintermute/Neuromancer develops through the novel, not only as character, but also as technology: from the hardware- and location-bound supercomputers (with independent citizenship) of the first novel to the disembodied *loa* who exist freely in cyberspace, to the entity that escapes time and space at the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.

Life Extension: Dixie McCoy and the Finn

A second mode of being, introduced earlier than, but encompassed by Wintermute, is that of McCoy Pauley a.k.a. Dixie Flatline. Pauley was Case's mentor, and exists posthumously as a "firmware construct", a computer recording of a human personality. By itself, the construct has Pauley's skills, personality and memories, but it has no built-in mnemonic aspect: it cannot memorise new events. The narrative drives this aspect of its mode of being home rather forcibly when Case activates the construct and accesses it through cyberspace.

It was exactly the sensation of someone reading over his shoulder.

He coughed. "Dix? McCoy? That you man?"

His throat was tight.

"Hey, bro," said a directionless voice.

"It's Case, man. Remember?"

"Miami, joeboy, quick study."

"What's the last thing you remember before I spoke to you, Dix?"

"Nothin'."

"Hang on." He disconnected the construct. The presence was gone. He reconnected it. "Dix? Who am I?"

"You got me hung, Jack. Who the fuck are you?"

[...]

"Remember being here, a second ago?"

"No."

"Know how a ROM personality matrix works?"

"Sure, bro, it's a firmware construct."

"So I jack it into the bank I'm using, I can give it sequential, real time memory?"

"Guess so," said the construct.

“Okay, Dix. You *are* a ROM construct. Got me?”
 “If you say so,” said the construct. “Who are you?”
 “Case.”
 “Miami,” said the voice, “joeboy, quick study”

(Gibson, 1984:76-7).

The construct, which is close enough to an AI to fall within the jurisdiction of Turing, is an anomaly. To some extent, it is a form of life after death, a way in which a person can continue acting in the world after death. However, it is also less than human, and its dependence on the grace of a physical agent (here, Case) opens up space for very uncomfortable abuse. Pauley was paid a vast amount to have the construct made in the first place, but it remains in effect a software clone.

The ethical questions are very similar to the ones that arise in normal cloning: should property rights accrue to artificial life? Does the individual rights of an artificial being differ from those of a natural one? Does one’s moral and ethical approach change towards something you know to be man-made?

The text clearly uses its artificial life-forms to examine these questions. Pauley is introduced without his legal or societal position being clarified with regard to life or death, or freedom and dependence. On first account, the construct is a tool, the section in which they liberate it from Sense/Net is called “the Shopping Expedition”. Not having sequential memory means that it is inert when not activated, chillingly illustrated in the above passage by its reacting in the exact same way on two different activations. Sense/Net’s keeping it in a vault in a deactivated state implies that they too see the construct less as an entity than as object, or even, seeing that Pauley was a hacker, a trophy.

Case’s response to the construct projects the “typical” fictional response. Shown to be slightly bigoted in his reaction to the Panther Moderns, Case shows a “speciest” prejudice towards the Pauley construct. He is as uncomfortable with it as he is with Wintermute, its “eerie non-laugh” continually setting his teeth on edge. His interaction with it is brusque, often taking the form of orders cutting it off in mid-thought.

The construct responds to this attitude with ironic self-denigratory comments like, “[...] never mind me, I’m just dead anyway” (WHNU:203), both a testament to its complex emotional response and a reminder of its difference from the “normal” human state of being alive. Pauley is in fact very aware of being dead. More than once Case’s suggestions are met with, ‘not unless you have a morbid fear of dying’.

The construct's psychological code and character signifieds (the modalities of knowledge, ability and – eventually at least – desire) are very strongly coded to give it the semblance of realism. It explicitly shows self-awareness, one of the traditional measures of sentience. Given sequential memory and access to the matrix, it is an accurate resurrection of Pauley, but it is telling, in the context of *Neuromancer*, that the reward it wants from Wintermute for its services is oblivion, to be finally erased and to symbolically free his soul from corporate ownership. Presumably, the wish arises from a combination of its difference from both human and AI and the fact that it is always dependent on an external agent.

In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, “Sally” and Kumiko visit the Finn, who has had himself deliberately reincarnated as a personality construct housed in an armed and armoured cylinder in an alleyway. The alley is littered with “votive” offerings, from cocaine to alcohol to packets of cigarettes. This (version of the) Finn, almost eight years dead, functions as an oracle. Focalised through Kumiko, the sequence contains only third-person descriptions of the conversation, and relies fairly heavily on the reader's ability to compare the Finn's existence to that of Pauley. The Finn has taken precautions to avoid the untenable position Pauley was trapped in: apart from the armour and a laser, he has made sure his construct has some inbuilt autonomy. He has “[real]-time memory if [he wants it], [is] wired into c[yber]-space if [he wants to be]” (Gibson, 1988:172). The technological changes, combined with his “job” as oracle, largely frees the Finn from the sort of abuse McCauley's construct suffered.

The power of this image is dependent on two things. Firstly, the reader's knowledge from *Neuromancer* of the Finn serves as basis for this “Finn” as character. In other words, the serial nature of the world adds to his earlier incarnation's fairly stereotypical personality a representative life span and, retrospectively, mode of living. Highly representative, in fact, since what is more realistic than a character actually dying? Secondly, Molly speaks to the Finn not with the odd arrogance and distancing that Case uses when addressing the Dixie Flatline construct, but rather as old friends or colleagues would, in other words, not as a complex tool reminiscent of an old friend, but as the old friend itself.

4.4 Exploration

4.4.1 Structure and Context

If *Neuromancer's* close focalisation through Case allows personalised access to the texts *novi data*, it also filters the narrative so that the reader experiences the world largely as Case does: claustrophobic, paranoiac, and with a very narrow focus. This is exacerbated by the fact that the narrative is essentially linear, and provides minimal explicit foreshadowing or even recontextualisation from the implied retrospective position of the narrator. Even offscreen events are filtered through Case, usually explicitly related by Molly or other characters. Exploration mostly proceeds in steps: as Case allows himself a new goal, the reader's horizon of expectation opens up correspondingly.

Simstim provides a broadening of the narrative restrictions imposed by the narrow focalisation, allowing Gibson to show Case perceiving remote events through Molly's sensorium. If this widens the field of vision somewhat, though, it only doubles the tunnel vision: in simstim connection, his perceptual field is limited to Molly's immediate surroundings. Even switching back and forth between their sensoria allows him only the view of the room he is in, or of the monitor interface.

The wider perspective resulting from the use of multiple focalisers in the later novels does little to ameliorate the claustrophobia of the narrative. In sf (as in the thriller, one of its root genres), multiple domains generate not only perspectival narration, but also the expectation of their inevitable convergence. Thus, in addition to being claustrophobic in focalisation and space, all the domains in *Count Zero* and those of Mona and Angela, especially in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, invite the reader to imagine the conditions that would bring about their convergence.

The convergence is also foreshadowed by similarities in the narrative domains. In *Count Zero* each character is watched and influenced by forces outside of their control almost from the outset. Once in Virek's employ, for example, Marly becomes aware that "something surrounded her now, monitoring her with relaxed precision; that she had become the focus of a [sic] least a part of Virek's empire" (Gibson, 1988:144). The idea of surveillance emerges more gradually in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, but Mona is kidnapped and placed under guard and Angela is minutely watched and manipulated by her employers, Sense/Net. In the other two domains, the focalisers themselves risk watching secretive others.

Throughout all the novels, information is largely restricted to the discovery process of the focalisers. Key information, such as the background of the Tessier-Ashpool family or the existence of technology to replicate physical characteristics occasionally only emerges as the characters learn it, sometimes – as with Wintermute’s being, indirectly, Case’s employer – because of deliberate subterfuge by other characters. In the later novels, knowledge is divided among the various domains: in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, knowledge of the threat to Angela emerges from the Mona domain. In addition to disentangling the complex language, reconstructing the world, and keeping track of the technologies in the fictional world, the reader has to keep track of the various domains and be on the lookout for scraps of information that together contribute to the central threat in each novel. As the elements that contribute to the central plot are not necessarily flagged, the reader is required to treat almost any information as potential clues not only to the world, but also to the narrative.

4.4.2 *Hyperspecificity, Consumer Politics and Corporate Codies*

How unthinkable complex the world was, in sheer detail of
mechanism, when Sense/Net’s corporate will shook tiny
bones in the ears of unknown, unknowing children

(Gibson, 1988:197).

The *Sprawl* trilogy presents a mimetic world through its structural similarity to actuality, as well as through coherent integration of *novums* throughout the higher and anthropomorphic levels, notably cyberspace, body modification, neural-cyber interfaces, and artificial intelligence. These technologies inform the texture and power structure of the fictional world, and their gradual development and alterations through the sequence reveal the structures of power and culture in the fictional universe.

Apart from the stylistic influences of noir, one of the factors that distinguishes the *Sprawl Trilogy* and which has since not only influenced much of cyberpunk but also had a significant impact on mainstream fiction, is its high degree of specification. Gibson, who claims to have adapted this strategy from Hammett, calls it “hyperspecificity” (*in* McCafferey, 1991:269).

Hyperspecificity emerges most often in adjectival constructions, whether presenting and/or constructing *novi data* or drawing actual-world

details into the fictional world. Examples range from phlebotinous⁴¹ specification of operational specifications, like Ratz' "seven-function force-feedback manipulator" (Gibson, 1984:8) to specifying global origins (such as Ratz' Eastern European steel dentures) to brand names of objects, such as Case's Yeheyuan cigarettes or the "Ono-Sendai" cyberspace decks used by both Case and Bobby. Brand names are ubiquitous throughout the trilogy, forming a consistent series of signs connoting technology. SF brand names are often invented, but Gibson in particular often uses many actual-world brand names in his fiction: Braun, Disney, Mitsubishi, Honda and others.

Hyperspecificity functions to increase the apparent level of detail (see "Ontology", below), but in the case of actual-world brand names, it becomes a specialised form of permeability. As in actuality, brand names signify market penetration, but in a narrative set in the future, the use of actual-world brand names signifies *temporal* market penetration and endurance. As such, hyperspecific actual-world references function mimetically to support the illusion that the fictional world retains the current state of the actual world as a moment in its past, in other words that it is a "real" possible future of actuality.

Thus the prevalence of actual-world brand names suggests a particular trajectory for a company's development. Simultaneously, the presence (or notable absence) of a particular brand comments on the relevance of the brand to the fictional world. As such, the brand names invite the reader to extrapolate the future course of the companies they belong to.

In Gibson's fictional world some brands survive apparently unaltered, such as Braun and Levi's. Others remain leaders in their core business (thus implying adaptation to future technologies), like Smith & Wesson or Zeiss (who in the sequence make eyes as much as lenses). The petrochemical giants are absent, since gasoline vehicles have been superseded (and outlawed), but more than one present-day automobile manufacturer is still active. In parallel to the actual-world reorganisation of Harley-Davidson (from manufacturing motorcycles to licensing the brand onto accessories), Porsche has apparently moved to watches, and Honda to helicopters. Hitachi manufactures advanced and commercial computer products, specifically "simstim decks" (the equivalent of television sets as opposed to computers). The novels mention both a Mitsubishi Bank of America and Mitsubishi-Genentech, representing the Japanese multinational's move into a radically different direction from its actual-world interests. (Sony, however, has recently formed a biochemical subsidiary).

⁴¹ A term coined by the TVTropes.org WIKI (2006). Named for a comment of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* writer David Greenwalt's, phlebotinum designates the semi-specification of fictional technology: it's an explanation of "how stuff works" at the general level, comparable to the kind of answer that would normally satisfy an ordinary user in the actual world. TVTropes, in its best ironic voice, describes it as "a technology that makes the plot run".

In the fictional world, brand penetration into society is metaphorical, as well as metonymical. The ubiquity of brands both represents the reliance of ordinary individuals on corporations, and foreshadows, introduces and highlights one of the trilogy's major themes, that of the conflict between the individual and the corporation. Apart from Mitsubishi, whose actual-world interest spans a wide range from banking to pharmaceuticals, in addition to vehicles and general sales, most of the recurrent companies in the novels – Hosaka, Sense/Net, Maas biolabs, and Tessier-Ashpool – are invented companies, the first three specialising in fields that had no clear leaders in the early 1980s.

Corporate power pervades the *Sprawl* trilogy, but it takes a variety of forms throughout the sequence. *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* describe the workings and culture of two nebulous multinationals that are depicted as unusual in composition and structure, while in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* Sense/Net (which features prominently in *Neuromancer* as well) plays an important part.

Like most other aspects of the fictional world, the reader can only build up his picture of the corporations through collating references scattered across a great many pages. One effect of this is that quite a few of the companies loom large as fictional presences in the fictional world long before the characters become directly involved with them, and certainly before the reader has any clear idea of their relevance to the narrative.

Tessier-Ashpool, the main company described in *Neuromancer*, is a holdover from the early twenty-first century. The reclusive Tessier-Ashpool family has long since withdrawn to Freeside, leaving their unspecified planetside interests to be managed by a group of legal firms. The fact that the company is initially unknown to the main characters stresses both its age (more than a hundred years) and its lack of publicly known commercial interests. With their Spindle headquarters of Freeside, reminiscent of a castle on promontory, T-A is repeatedly associated with the aristocracy. Ashpool, later described “a mad king” maintains contact with heads of state and “a queen of Spain”.

As such, T-A is perhaps more typical of the idea that ‘money makes money’, or the aristocracy rather than of a true corporation. Its economic base appears to be feudal, with its main inferable source of income the tourism and real estate interest in the artificial satellite. The “aristocratic” attitudes extend to a set of colonial values. From the vat-grown temporary ninja assassins to the two or three human individuals Molly encounters to Wintermute, T-A's employees are dehumanised, treated as tools to be used and cast aside at their convenience. The most telling is Ashpool's dehumanising grammar, in musing

on succession in the clan: “Strange [...] to lie [...] *with what legally amounts to one’s own daughter*” (Gibson, 1984:221). 3Jane, and presumably her predecessors, are seen purely as temporary faces for the corporation and vessels for Ashpool’s seed.

Turning inwards, and effectively recirculating the same air, nutrients, money, and ideas throughout Freeside, T-A has become stagnant. As an essay of 3Jane’s has it, “We have sealed ourselves away behind our money, growing inward, generating a seamless universe of self” (Gibson, 1984:161). Wintermute’s image for the Tessier-Ashpool family, conveyed to Case much earlier, is a wasp’s nest, where another identical sibling is always ready to take over from its predecessor. The family has decayed past the point of meaning: noting furniture out of place and wooden doors forced to fit the smooth design of the spindle, Case muses that Tessier-Ashpool collects “all the fittings [...] to fill out some master plan, a dream long lost in the compulsive effort to fill space, to replicate some family image of self” (167).

This approach to corporation is enabled by technology (the higher order informing the anthropogenic) of Villa Straylight: the succession of Janes are cloned, Ashpool spends much of his time in cryogenic sleep. Specialist agents are generated through the same technologies. From the landed money to the parasitic structure to the obsession with family integrity to the point of incest, Tessier-Ashpool is reminiscent of the aristocracies of France, Egypt and Spain (all referenced in the trilogy). Like an ouroboros, T-A both tries to live forever (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* shows a virtual version of 3Jane programmed into Wintermute) and seeks its own destruction. In one sense, the events in the novels all emerge from Marie-France Tessier’s desperate attempt to break the cycle by programming Neuromancer and Wintermute to merge into an expanded consciousness.

T-A’s origin indicates that its fiction-internal association remains with a bygone time. As such, if it is metaphorical, it is metaphorical of the social systems and mores enshrined by early modern property law that underlie the wealth of a significant portion of the twentieth century’s ultra-rich. The top tier of society contains a significant share of aristocratic families that enforce their own continuity through repressive systems. These include the royalties of Europe and the Arab peninsula, but it also includes family-driven corporations and the international banking cartels, internally circulating the same debt and credit and skimming a little off the top.

Virek’s corporation in *Count Zero* is similarly structured (as is shown through its rapid collapse following his death), although here the core is an individual whose life is being extended beyond his natural capacity. Virek is similarly associated with the aristocracy through patronage of the arts and his styling of his virtual home as a highly detailed model of Barcelona. The main

difference is that, where T-A's vassals appear to effectively be slavish *robotas*, Virek appears to command a great deal of personal loyalty at all levels of his corporation, personified in Paco, his personal assistant and guard, whose personality is duplicated as a virtual assistant/security AI. In this aspect, Virek represents organisations built on the cult of personality.

Marly meets Virek in person early in the novel, and soon realises “with an instinctive mammalian certainty, that the exceedingly rich were no longer even remotely human” (1986:29). The implied opposition here to avian or reptilian interests acknowledges the role of the “ordinary person” as prey of the rich. Probably fortuitously, it also connects Virek to the aristocracy, in particular as presented in the conspiracy theory of David Icke.⁴²

Both Virek's empire and Tessier-Ashpool are presented as exceptional, holdovers from earlier times. The greatest distinction is articulated by Case as he watches Ashpool die through the simstim link:

Power, in Case's world, meant corporate power. The zaibatsus, the multinationals that shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers. Viewed as organism, they had attained a kind of immortality. You couldn't kill a zaibatsu by assassinating a dozen key executives; there were always others waiting to step up the ladder, assume the vacated position, access the vast banks of corporate memory. But Tessier-Ashpool wasn't like that, and he sensed the difference in the death of its founder.

(Gibson, 1984:190).

Case's comparison emphasises that the standard corporation type in the novel – rarely seen up close, but continually present – is the *zaibatsu*-style faceless corporation, with a board and a stable and restrictive hierarchical structure. The corporations in the novel that represent this most closely would be Mitsubishi-Genentech, Hosaka, Maas Biolabs, and Sense/Net. This corporation type was arguably also the most common corporate structure at the time the trilogy was written. (Corporate culture has arguably changed since in two main directions: the comparatively open, flexible structure of companies like Google, and a purely profit-driven system in which the explosion in CEO salaries increasingly ossify both corporate culture and a new, almost aristocratic hierarchy.)

The reader's perspective of these corporations is built up only gradually, through glimpses occasioned by the ubiquity of their brand names through

⁴² Icke claims that the world has been run for some centuries by lizard-like alien creatures that have gradually replaced the aristocracies of Europe.

hyperspecificity. As such, each mention reinforces the ambiguous relationship of the general population to the corporation: the familiarity of the brand might be reassuring, but it can easily become a sign of the individual's dependence on the corporation's products. More than this, ubiquitous market penetration – including telemarketers somehow obtaining one's phone number, corporate ownership of public spaces, and personalised offers – generate a vague sense of paranoia and unease as corporate influence extends further into the private life of both the client and the employee.

The theme of corporate control over the individual is introduced very early in *Neuromancer*, with an M-G manager employee in Ninsei with the company logo tattooed on his hand. According to Case, "M-G employees above a certain level were implanted with advanced microprocessors that monitored mutagen levels in the bloodstream" (1984:18). This procedure represents a significant technological and financial investment in 'human capital', but it also literally marks the employee as belonging to the corporation, and it allows cellular-level surveillance of the employee.

The extent of corporate control over the individual that is represented here is echoed in his thoughts around a bloodsport-style colosseum, where the crowd is

mostly Japanese. [...] Techs down from the arcologies. He supposed that meant the arena had the approval of some corporate recreational committee. He wondered briefly what it would be like, working all your life for one zaibatsu. Company housing, company hymn, company funeral.

(Gibson, 1984:40).

The existence of "some corporate recreational committee" implies an Orwellian obsession with control of the individual's interests. The setting itself, with the fight replayed as ten times life-size holograms and described in detail, also reflects on the demands of corporate life. By implication, the arena serves as an outlet for tensions that literalise the life-as-controlled-spectacle metaphors commonly used for corporate life: the rat-race, a dog-eat-dog world.

Marly's contact with Virek's company allows the reader to experience corporate interest through presence. Her experience of his wealth is stressed repeatedly through poetic language emphasised by its presentation through a combination of narrated thought and free indirect discourse:

How could she have imagined that it would be possible to live, to move, in the unnatural field of Virek's wealth without suffering distortion? Virek had taken her up, in all her misery, and had rotated her through the monstrous, invisible stresses of his money, and she had been

changed. Of course, she thought, of course; it moves around me constantly, watchful and invisible, the vast and subtle mechanism of Herr Virek's surveillance

(Gibson, 1986:107).

The repetition of experiences like these is mutually reinforcing with the claustrophobia of the narrow focalisation to model for the reader the experience of being under continuous surveillance by forces that have unspecified agendas that remain only partially understood by the private individual.

Employees are under even more pressure, from the M-G employee early in *Neuromancer* to Christopher Mitchell in *Count Zero* to Angela in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, whose employer Sense/Net has nurtured in her an addiction to a drug that inhibits free contact with the matrix.

Corporate control in the novel extends to the top organisational tiers, with perhaps the most telling example of corporate conformity being exactly one of planned non-conformity. Sense/Net appears more humane than the other zaibatsu-style corporations, perhaps because of its monopoly on simstim entertainment. As superstar, Angela's health is of interest to Hilton Swift, a top executive at Sense/Net; she

imagined Swift waiting for her on the deck, wearing the tweeds he favored in an LA winter, the vest and jacket mismatched, herringbone and houndstooth, but everything woven from the same wool, and that, probably, from the same sheep on the same hillside, the whole look orchestrated in London, by committee, in a room above a Floral Street shop he'd never seen. They did striped shirts for him, brought the cotton form Charvet in Paris; they made his ties, had the silk woven in Osaka, the Sense/Net logo embroidered tight and small. And still, somehow, he looked as though his mother had dressed him.

(Gibson, 1988:53).

The planned non-conformity of Hilton Swift is in fact absolute conformity to a corporate will which is in turn outsourced. As Marly's friend Andrea asks rhetorically of Virek "[...] is he an individual? In the sense that you are, or I am?" (Gibson, 1986:144). The *loa* point out that "Hilton Swift is obliged to implement [the corporation AI] Continuity's decisions. Sense/Net is too complex an entity to survive, otherwise" (Gibson, 1988:265). Swift has become the perfect member of the hive, despite the difference in seniority no less dehumanised or more truly individualistic than Tessier-Ashpool's ninja. Curiously, this mental image of Swift recalls if anyone Bill Gates.

The absurdity – at least in actual-world terms – of the Turner narrative in *Count Zero* illuminates both the logic of control and that of intellectual property. Turner's assignment, not for the first time, is to serve as corporate headhunter: to help an employee defect from Maas Biolabs to Hosaka. Instead of a matter of contracts and non-disclosure agreements, the extraction program is a carefully-planned black ops military/espionage project that takes some five chapters to describe, involving several mercenaries, heavy weaponry, a medical team and a highly advanced aircraft.

The confrontation emphasises the importance and rarity in the fictional world of truly exceptional talent and genius, but it also explores (or parodies?) the potlatch logic of corporate competition. The last few years (2010-2012) have brought numerous court cases involving copyright infringement, reverse engineering and even industrial espionage between major software and cellphone companies: Apple vs Samsung, Apple vs Android, Microsoft vs Google, and others. Gibson critiques corporate culture by highlighting similarities between the zaibatsus and the Yakuza, including the culture of secrecy and retaliation, the use of corporate spies and character assassins (ninja, in the novels) and the execution of black ops.

This throws into relief the extent to which corporations have become obsessively paranoid and as security-conscious as any nation. The implication is that they are as powerful as any nation. Hosaka and Maas are both supercorporations that recruit, protect and retain their scientists at any cost. They represent an escalation of corporate principles that are not unknown around the turn of the twentieth century: headhunting, bribery, indoctrination, intimidation and, various forms of industrial espionage. Admittedly, Maas' "reportedly" exploding a small nuclear bomb to stop Mitchell's escape appears to be a rather extreme escalation, until one remembers that a number of multinational companies employ private armies to protect their interests in Africa and the Middle East.⁴³

4.4.3 *Resistance*

The novels examine both corporate culture and the relationship of the corporation to the individual. Case is set up from the beginning in opposition to the corporations. Though never specifically acknowledging the fact, he lives his entire life in the shadows between super-corporations. A "playground for technology" (Gibson, 1984:11), Chiba city exists on the periphery of a series of corporate arcologies. As Chiba functions in their shadows, so Case lives as scavenger beneath their tables, as it were. The super-corporations are

⁴³ Not to put too fine a point on it, such companies include De Beers, Dick Cheney's officially former company Halliburton in Iraq, and (infamously) Elf and Shell.

indirectly responsible for his livelihood, as they produce the intellectual property that he is good at stealing. At the same time, he is dependent on them to produce at least some of the tools of his trade. This ambiguous essentially internecine relationship is stressed through several characters: Case, Molly and Bobby most obviously, but also minor characters such as the Voodoo *houngans* and Turner's maverick genius brother Rudy, living on a remote farm guarded by cyborg bio-engineered dogs. Molly gives the theme continuity: in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (around sixteen fictional years later) she has taken a new identity and has a new set of associates slightly south of the law, and as much as before, she prefers to counter-surveillance her employers. For both, the corporation is associated with authority, "the Man", to use the parlance Gibson would've grown up with, with surveillance, and with restriction of possibilities.

Molly's distrust is one of many instances of resistance against the overriding power of the corporations in the sequence. Some critics have lamented the fact that the sequence still ends with the characters disempowered, in thrall either to corporations or to the near-omnipotent risen AIs. But as in Foucault's reading of power in society, the point is as much understanding the mechanisms of oppression and *attempting* resistance as it is the promise of a possible reversal of the order of power.

Case and Molly's first operation, the liberation of the McCoy Pauley personality construct from Sense/Net (Gibson, 1984:60-61, 67), is an interesting example of resistance against a totalising power. The attack occurs on three levels: while Case hacks into Sense/Net's computerised security system, Molly physically enters the building to break into a vault and remove the personality construct. At the same time, the Panther Moderns provide a diversion by informing both the employees of Sense/Net and security forces that the employees have been exposed to a gas that will turn them into a violent psychopathic mob.

The attack thus focuses on three different aspects that structure and internally strengthen the corporation: information security, physical security, and cohesion of the personnel corps of the company. These in turn reflect the three aspects in terms of which the narrative structurally opposes Case to the corporation: invasion of privacy, including his body; control of the spaces in which he finds himself; and distaste in (and contrast with) the conformity expected and fostered by the corporations.

Whether Gibson followed security theory or whether, like the internet itself, security and resistance has been semi-consciously shaped after the fictional hacker-anarchist groups and agents of cyberpunk, the operation displays interesting parallels to contemporary anti-corporate resistance. Gibson's Panther Moderns are an interesting prediction, or precursor, of the

“hacktivist” group Anonymous. Equally tech-savvy, Anonymous comprises an unspecified but large number of hackers who often use situationist surreal demonstrations and illegal tactics to promote freedom of speech and other ideological interests that pique them. In 2011, HB Gary, one of the US government’s main internet security providers had their servers hacked by an Anonymous subgroup called “LulzSec” (LulzSec, 2013), utilising all these pillars: physical penetration of the company for reconnaissance purposes, social engineering to convince company employees to allow attack software onto their computers, and deliberate and public defacement of web properties to discredit the company.

The tactics of the Moderns is a form of situationist terrorism: they use two different but complementary pieces of misinformation to convince two different target groups of a non-existent serious threat, so that the panic generates a threatening situation. Both scenarios rely in part on the prefigurative ability of the (fictional) individual, formed by his or her implied exposure to scenes from popular culture and the news. Thus the threat alters the individual’s perception of reality, which leads to individuals changing reality of their own accord. The reader’s parallel media exposure enables the understanding that the sudden hallucination would lead to mass panic. The fictional act of terrorism turns the logic of the mass media in against itself: the habit of fictionalising the real also facilitates the realisation of the fictional. Violence, misinformation, and paranoia form a media loop: inspired by the media, misinformation conditions a violent response, which in turn becomes information to be turned into propaganda.

The Sense/Net run is also very specifically marked on a formal level. In a marked departure from the novel’s single-person focalization, the Moderns’ interventions are described from an omniscient narrative point of view. This evokes an ‘objective’ experience of events, the ‘realism’ of which also clashes with the surrealism of the Moderns’ distraction. Furthermore, the suddenly expanded, fluid focalisation evokes the impression that anything has become possible, and that the resistance is in control. As such, the narrative form reinforces the act of rebellion of the anarchists. Another way in which the trilogy models the experience of existence include characterisation (for instance, Kumiko’s innocence offers the reader moral higher ground over the criminals around her). The perspectival revelation of information in the later novels allows the reader to compare Molly’s and Turner’s plans to the knowledge of their corporate opponents, translating the power of knowledge to a fictional experience, while the combination of focalisation, hyperspecificity and restricted information in many sections model the claustrophobic experience of being under surveillance by the companies on which you depend.

4.5 Ontology: the World of the *Sprawl* Trilogy

The *Sprawl* trilogy generates a world that is at the same time familiar enough to be easily accessible and daunting enough to make such access uncomfortable. Perhaps most significantly, the world is plausibly representational: a number of factors contribute to its functioning as an ontologically convincing construct despite its internal fragmentation.

The trilogy sets up a system with a clearly identifiable base world, ontologically analogous to actuality. In this world, which is spatially analogous to actual-world Earth, base and lower order correspondence relations are sustained, as are all Ryan's correspondence relations as far as genre conventions allow. As is to be expected in extrapolative sf, the world presents an expanded inventory, with numerous differences from actuality, including additional species of technology (at least, technology unknown at the time of the book's original publication; to cite one of the more dramatic examples, the past few years have seen significant strides in the use of neural net interfaces; *c.f.* Le, 2010). These extrapolations occur along a timeline that is an *extension* of that of the actual world rather than a parallel timeline. (Geopolitically Gibson's projection of the Cold War impasse between the US and the USSR lasting for more than a century has of course been disproven). Accounting for genre conventions the extension of the timeline into the future, with all the technological variations occasioned by this extension, are effectively small miracles. Generically, they don't disturb the "realism", in Ryan's broader sense, of the fictional world.

4.5.1 *The Fragmentation of the Primary World*

The fictional world contains a high density of *novi data*, semi-"naturalised" by being mediated by Case's focalisation. Much of the *novi data* accrue to characters (even walk-by characters like the Mitsubishi-Genentech employee who passes Case in Ninsei). The *novi data* are embedded within the fictional world in part because they occur amidst high levels of detail describing the actual-world parallel aspects of the world.

In part resulting from the hyperspecificity of the novel sequence, the world is high on local detail, especially with regard to the spaces the characters move in, exterior as much as interior. The cityscape features as a constant backdrop to the action, often, as in Ninsei, representing one form of authority, while the action traces different power struggles. The architecture, often described, "dominates" and "divides" (Gibson, 1984:13), and there is a strong emphasis on the scale of buildings such as the arcologies in Ninsei, the projects

in Barrytown and the Hypermart mall (in *Count Zero*), and the apartments in Paris. Destinations, apartments, and hotel rooms are almost invariably marked as several stories above the ground. Jammer's, the nightclub on which the narrative lines of *Count Zero* converge, is "up twelve [...] flights of dead escalator" (Gibson, 1986:227).

The immersion in and ubiquity of the urban environment, with the high frequency of closed spaces and interiors as settings, contribute significantly to the impression of claustrophobia. As McHale (1992:248) shows, the environments become a series of microworlds that exteriorise the novel's ontological motif. Many of the locations are specifically associated with different modes of social or ontological being, each with its own social laws: Chiba is a criminal zone, the Sprawl a massive urban district reminiscent, perhaps, of Brooklyn, New York or 80s Berlin. Barrytown, from which Bobby cannot wait to escape, is a social dead end, overlooked by the Projects, the remainder of the Igoe-Pruitt generation of town planning. Jencks half-playfully (1996:470) cites its demolition as the symbolic beginning of postmodernism⁴⁴.

The subworlds are differentiated in part by their differences in character and function, emphasising the sense of ontological displacement from world to world. Most of the subworlds are independently complex with integrated clusters of technology, application and social effect. This is evident from shops carrying the Panther Moderns' skull plug-ins, and figured in the artificial forest-like ecosystem of the Projects. The worlds even contain base-level markers like toilets. With the implied continuity of the fictional world, such indicators of functional completeness also carry over between subworlds.

Marking the boundaries emphasises that many of them are policed by the ever-present corporations. Much of Freeside belongs to Tessier-Ashpool, Maas-Neotek has a large section of desert fenced in, and both the T-A AI Wintermute and Virek's organisation have extensive surveillance capabilities. This in turn implies that most 'ordinary' citizens remain within the boundaries set for them.

In cyberspace, Gibson reverses the early dreams of virtual reality: cyberspace is representational only in an abstract sense of the word, but is considered superior (possibly because more "transparent") than the representational virtual reality of simstim.

Although cyberspace is a non-realistic world and sparsely populated, it is described so as to create a strong sense of presence. Even more so than in

⁴⁴ Barrytown is also the name of a lower-class district in New York, the subject of a Steely Dan song that achieved a fair measure of success in the early 70s; its mention here reads both as a nod to pop culture and becomes a shorthand for the reader's benefit.

the base world Gibson takes care to establish the scale of objects. Perception is analogous to that of a real body, but “bodily” movement is not relevant, the consciousness moves along as in a vehicle. Security programs, though manifesting as clusters of geometric space, are described in spatial terms and can harm the victim’s real body. Even so, the strong descriptions of space and movement heighten the sense of presence.⁴⁵

The sequence establishes cyberspace early, through Case’s (expert) knowledge, as an abstract world in which (simulated) physics apply to space and movement. While flight is possible in cyberspace, travel remains spatialised: the simulated body has to move along a trajectory. This spacetime allows hackers to act against or run from the ICE, for example.

As a result it comes as a shock to Case when Wintermute summarily immerses him in a convincing, if sparse, microworld. Similarly, against all expectations Bobby finds himself pulled from the geometric landscape of cyberspace into Virek’s virtual Barcelona. Part of this shock is due to the scale of Virek’s intrusion: to attack Bobby, the whole of the Barcelona construct has to move from Europe to America. (This is very different from the present version of the internet, where the user’s normal experience is more closely akin to a fragment of a different place being brought present. Even the protocols do not actually “move” in the sense that a request is *copied* to “forward” locations, not moved; the “original” request remains on the user’s computer.)

These specialised internal microworlds, which take the form of fully representational and functionally fully interactive virtual realities, represent anomalies to the reader’s fictional ‘guides’, the *novum* develops into a new form in front of the reader, as it were. Case is under attack at the end of one paragraph and in a dramatically different world the next; Marly turns a doorknob and enters a virtual Barcelona. Appropriately, transitions to these VR worlds are coded as ontological shocks for the reader as well.

The greatest ontological breach is enabled by the aleph, the biosoft into which Bobby has plugged himself in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. As an

⁴⁵ It is hard to say whether this configuration of cyberspace could still be extrapolated from current computer technology. Gibson’s cyberspace assumes systems and data sets so complex that they can no longer be apprehended by humans except in graphic representation. As currently constructed, the Internet hides the transfers and relationships of scale from the user, but a few simple exercises in privacy and non-browser interface data retrieval protocols such as FTP remind the user that the internet is in fact a vast population of data systems and interface protocols. In fact, the so-called “Deep Net”, as well as a number of high-security networks operate *primarily* without obvious user interfaces. Some of these (such as Tor or I2P) are routinely used by individuals in heavily censored countries to access or contact the outside world. As an example, the 2010 Wikileaks scandal most likely made use of such systems.

In short, the appearance of the internet and the extent to which connections are “visible” to the user is largely arbitrary and could theoretically be reversed in following builds.

approximation of the whole of the matrix (itself an abstract description of reality), the aleph also contains versions of Neuromancer/Wintermute. Because of her modifications, Angela is able to access the Matrix without being plugged in. When she enters the aleph at the end of the novel, her digital self can cross from the model Matrix to the real one, even though the aleph is physically situated far from any actual-world networks. Thus she has access to information from the real world, such as the murder of Robin Lanier and the ascendancy of Mona to stardom within Sense/Net, and she still has access to Continuity, Sense/Net's AI. At the end of the trilogy, Angela joins Bobby, Colin and some other denizens in the aleph, and Neuromancer announces that they are about to visit the Centauri AI "not far" away.

The reader is left to puzzle out how Neuromancer is able to finally transgress the laws of physics. Angela's ability seems to be a key component, based as it is on technology Wintermute had her father implant. The implant allows an ontological bridge between reality and the matrix independent of any physical connections. As a digital approximation of everything, the aleph presumably "extends" far enough from Earth for Angela, Wintermute and the others to approach the Centauri System in virtual space so that they may step over into Centauri virtual space, and thence, in consciousness at least, into Centauri real space.

Through this logic, Gibson sets up a typically postmodern breach of ontological boundaries. The aleph is a subworld of the novel's base world. According to the base world's physical laws, which in terms of this restriction echoes that of actuality, the subworld is both isolated and has a predetermined temporal existence. Angie's connection with Continuity, and her knowledge of events in the base world, that is, events to which she cannot logically have access, indicate that the laws of the base world do not fully obtain in the subworld. From the subworld of the aleph, an approximation of "cyberspace [which] consists of the sum total of data in the human system" (Gibson, 1988:315), they access a system that lies outside of the base world's cyberspace, thereby negating all certainty that the laws of the base world apply in cyberspace, much like fiction is strictly speaking not bound by the laws of *its* base world, that is, actuality.

The aleph being used as ontological bridge is interesting at a metafictional level as well, as its name and properties are of course drawn from Borges' story by the same name. It therefore also becomes one of the more overt ontological bridges between actuality and the fictional world, and between the most important precursor of postmodern literature and cyberpunk.

4.5.2 *Technological development and realism*

It is worth pointing out that, at least as Bruce Sterling originally envisioned it, cyberpunk would be the reinvigoration of hard sf; in fact, an early name for the initial movement was “radical hard sf” (in Cramer, 2004:194). Hard sf, to oversimplify Cramer’s description (2004:188) relies strongly on the construction of a world that is “scientifically plausible”, and that extrapolates with something like scientific rigour from “scientific knowledge external to the story”. While the *Sprawl* trilogy is certainly not hard sf, it does owe some debt to Sterling’s original vision, notably in its exploration of current technology that is coherently integrated into the fictional world, and in its extrapolation based on actual-world socio-political trends rather than wishful thinking. Its near-future setting (which James [1993:198] apparently sees as a shortcoming) results in part from these restrictions. Simultaneously, its very near-future setting demands it be taken as a distinctly possible future, and invites the reader to recognise in actuality the trends that might lead to the concretisation of this particular future.

Reality has to some extent caught up with fiction, but the *Sprawl* trilogy differs most obviously from its contemporary actuality in the extrapolation of technologies that were no more than projected and/or experimental at the time of publication to pervasive fictional *novums*. At the time of publication (of *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, at least) the world of the novels was an entirely possible future. If the fall of the Berlin Wall and the development of the Internet has set the actual world on a different path, many of trends explored by Gibson have become even more relevant in the last ten years.

Gibson’s projections include the international collection of information into a single “matrix”; the manipulation of DNA at cellular level; fine-control prosthetics; direct human-computer cybernetic connections; virtual reality; and extensive cosmetic (and anti-cosmetic) surgery. Socially, the novels project accelerated globalisation; the rise of Japan and China to technological leadership; the weakening of the Soviet and American power blocks; the rise of corporations to international prominence over nation-states; widespread adoption of new technologies; social acceptance and even valorisation of body modification; and the power of cultural/mass media organisations.

The sequence invites the projection of its contemporary actuality developing into the world of the fiction. It proposes two major milestones itself: the role of war in bringing about both geopolitical and technological change, and the development of an international data matrix and artificial intelligence.

Much of the technology that looms large in the narrative is described as “postwar”, “wartime”, “military”: icebreakers, cyberspace decks, some of the

weaponry, and the more advanced prosthetics. Armitage is apparently reconstructed from the physical and psychological ruins of an ex-marine called Corto who participated in the action for which the first icebreakers and cyberspace decks were developed. Two major effects are implicitly ascribed to the war: the boom in technology, and the comparative weakness of both the USA and Russia in the novels.

The principle of war spurring technological development is well-known, but it is worth pointing out that in the trilogy, as in actuality, this inconvenient truth usually remains backgrounded. In some ways, development of cybertechnology in the fictional world parallels that in the actual: the first serious twentieth century work on computers was done during WWII in an attempt to break the Germans' codes, as here icebreakers are designed to break into secure government (enemy) computer complexes. In both instances, computing technology was developed for military use at a series of comparatively small institutions. In both cases, the technology moved into the public domain and was reappropriated and redesigned by the civilian sector.

As pointed out above, not many of the major American companies are shown to be major players in Gibson's world, and several appear to have been supplanted or swallowed by European, Japanese and even Chinese companies. The sequence backgrounds US companies and security forces. Combined with the relative absence (and implied) inefficiency of the US security forces and government and the widespread urban deterioration in the Sprawl, there is much evidence to imply that the USA seems to be very much cut down to size, even if the novels do not explicitly state this.

The development of the matrix rests on a few assumptions regarding technologised societies. The first is that technology will always develop as far as possible: from small computers to ones that assist the military to ones that run multinationals to an international matrix; from prosthetics to elective surgery to deliberate modification of the body. Secondly, society will adopt any technology if there is incentive enough: the existence of simstim is enough motivation for wetware skull plugs to become very widely adopted, despite the "invasion" of the body this entails. It also articulates the counter-cultural hacker idea that "information wants to be free", in that it is impossible to keep any of the technologies within preplanned boundaries. In the widely quoted (and misquoted) words of Turner's medical assistant, "The street tries to find its own uses for things" (1986:102). Wintermute becomes the figure for this underground mode of propagation.

Related to this idea is the development and propagation of technology through *underground* channels, a prescient vision for 1984. Case muses "that burgeoning technologies require outlaw zones, that Night City wasn't there for

its inhabitants, but as a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself" (Gibson, 1984:15). The cutting edge of medicine, both in cybernetics and bio-engineering, is the black clinics in Ninsei, not the formal hospitals of the occident. The Panther Moderns and their contemporaries plug "microsofts" into their skull sockets, hardware 'cartridges' plugged into the skull socket that extend abilities such as language skills, thereby modifying simstim technology in an unexpected direction. This reflects the dynamic of the actual-world hacker community, where many technologies are developed by and for a non-official group of specialists, only some of which finds its way back into the public eye.

The "techno-criminal subculture" was primarily a Bond and superhero plot element when Gibson wrote, but probably partly inspired by *Neuromancer*, the computer age has spawned a wide range of criminal activity, some of which is backed by highly advanced technologies. Significantly, most serious computer malware is written for criminal or political purposes and developments in digital technology has given rise to a spiral of criminal, criminalised and counter-criminal activity centered around Digital Rights Management.

With biotechnology, costs are coming down all the time, so that the poorest countries have their own biotechnology research centres. While the situation is nowhere as extreme as the one Gibson sketches, already some medical technologies are tested in India and South America rather than in the USA with the FDA's restrictive and interest group-driven approval system. Thus far, unauthorised medicine has not reached criminal proportions (although this is as much a matter of legislation as intent), but there is every chance that a breakthrough technology might become popular in an unlegislated area while still unapproved in the US.

4.5.3 *Knowledge and the Anthropogenic Order in the Construction of the World*

The *Sprawl* trilogy highlights the importance of knowledge as subset of the anthropogenic order, especially inasmuch as it helps to shape ontology. Thus Case's experience of the world gradually widens as he learns more about the influence of forces like the corporations and Wintermute. Perhaps the clearest example is Bobby: an inexperienced hacker dying at the beginning of his narrative, he spends his next two chapters hanging around the local nightclub waiting for "Two-a-Day" Beauvoir, his software contact. Without knowledge his ability remains restricted to acting in the part of the world he

already knows. His progression becomes possible when Beauvoir takes him to the projects and introduces him to a wider knowledge of the world. Thereafter only can he pursue knowledge on his own, ultimately leading to his immersion in the Aleph in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.

The anthropogenic level in general is pertinently policed. Knowledge, movement, and access to bleeding-edge technology is restricted or kept out of the public eye. Thus there are numerous references to much of the top-end technology being developed by “the military”, but official forces are shown to act only on two occasions: in response to the Moderns’ action, and to try and stop Wintermute. The latter action is itself an attempt to restrict knowledge by enforcing the Turing laws. As discussed above, distribution and even generation of new technologies often happens on the fringes.

Knowledge is shown to construct ability to act upon the world, but all knowledge comes either at a price or at the risk of “run[ning] into something else entirely”, as the philosopher/hacker Gentry says in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (Gibson, 1988:165), in this case, revealing your location or your identity. And of course, offering such information empowers others.

The limits on the circulation of knowledge touches on one of Gibson’s visionary themes: that a) virtually all human knowledge would become relatively freely available through the global computer network, and b) that information would become an invaluable commodity in itself.

The anthropogenic order emphasises the role of human agents using human senses to shape and interpret their environment. In terms of thought and mind the characters are strongly representational, but the bodies that enable their agency are often highly modified. Bodies are blown apart and put back together again. In several instances, characters are able to “leave the meat behind”.

The various explorations of consciousness and the body are also expressions of the trilogy’s underlying questioning of the concepts of life and death, or rather, its investigation of how these concepts might become modified in future. The Finn from *Neuromancer* has literally become a back alley oracle, having had his personality transferred to a steel-and-circuitry cylinder. The stranger in *Factory* is Bobby Newmark from *Count Zero*, who stole a single biosoft containing an approximation of everything inside the matrix from 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool, whose personality also persists inside the biosoft. Kumiko’s constant companion is a ‘ghost’, an artificial intelligence that manifests itself to her eyes only as Colin, a charming but fairly stereotypically cynical young Englishman.

The anthropogenic level of Gibson's work becomes a site of ontological interrogation, with knowledge and the mind at the one pole and body and action on the other. The lower level of the world, related to uniqueness of entities and stability of objects, is eroded by the proliferation of lifeforms at the higher, with copies of human minds, (re)constructions of dead people, and entities that are fully functional without bodies.

4.6 Conclusions: the Play of the Actual and the Projected

The *Sprawl* trilogy constructs a complex representational world with high detail and a strong focus on presence and spatiality. While it presents significant departures from actuality, in particular by expanding the inventory of manufactured objects, characters function as guides to gradually introduce the social impact and application of fictional technologies. Integrated into the texture of the fictional world, the represented technosphere is both world-internally convincing and follows a largely coherent extrapolative vector from actuality.

Theme and Subject Matter

While not many of the thematic elements in the *Sprawl* trilogy are entirely new, the sequence combines numerous technologies into a coherent world, presenting them as integrated across both the surface and the underlying power structures of the world. The fictional world and the technology that shapes it becomes a theme in its own right. Power is structured around access to information, while the available technologies, such as the uploading of consciousness, set the scope for characters' ambitions, in this case life extension.

As a future history, the sequence not only introduces fictional technologies, but also shows these developing over a period of sixteen years. The deep changes – such as the fulfilment of the T-A AI – might be visible only to the characters, but they are reflected in surface changes, like the gradual commercialisation of the skull-plug technology. Colin represents a further development of the AI *novum*: its hardware has been thoroughly miniaturised, while its software is personalised and autonomous. Such continuity both creates the illusion that the fictional world exists even when offscreen, and suggests that the fictional world develops according to rules similar to actuality. Both of these contribute significantly to the trilogy's worldliness,

and thus its mimetic qualities (even though, as both Broderick and Csicsery-Ronay point out, the “active dialogue [between the material universe and] cultural axioms” [Csicsery-Ronay, 2008:56] is one of the aspects that distinguish sf from literary fiction).

Colin is only one example of the vast range of possible modes of being represented in the trilogy. In a sense, the novels show the simultaneous existence and parallel development of a number of different post-human species: AI, uploaded human, cyborg. Some of these, like T-As cloned females and ninjas, are closer to subspecies, existing only to serve the requirements of others. “Fitness”, in this evolutionary paradigm, is intimately tied in with access to and control of information. In many cases, the successor species dwarf the human protagonists, emphasising the alienation they feel.

A motif present throughout the sequence is life extension. In *Neuromancer* Julius Deane has his DNA reset every few years, while Ashpool spends years at a time in suspended animation. Virek, who is already being kept alive only through technology, seeks immortality by uploading his consciousness to the matrix. The Finn’s digital afterlife is a marked improvement over that of McCoy Pauley, and 3Jane has ensured that she is hard-coded into the aleph. 3Jane’s efforts to remain conscious and alive forever are a literally a narrative counter to Wintermute’s efforts to attain full sentience inasmuch as her actions repeatedly frustrate Wintermute’s.

Marly notes that “Virek and his kind are already far from human” (Gibson, 1986:146). Virek and Ashpool both link the longevity drive to post-humanism, both as individual and as collective, in the form of the corporation. Corporations in the *Sprawl* sequence are usually hive-like in structure, collective entities that outlive the individuals who create and run them. The corporations, such as Sense/Net, Hosaka, or Maas, are post-human also in the sense that their morality is occasioned only by their own growth and survival. The price of outliving the individual is the loss of individuality and the value of individual lives.

The corporations, with the power at their disposal and their will towards control, are set against the individual and free will. The far-reaching influence of Wintermute questions the possibility of free will, a doubt reiterated through Molly’s expression, “the way we’re wired”. If this is true for the human characters, it also holds for the apparently omnipotent AIs, who are following their programming to its conclusions.

The interweaving of the fictional *novums* of the AIs, the matrix, and body modification into social systems of post-humanism, power, and biological and psychological identity relates the trilogy (in refiguration) back to actuality. Indeed, the continuity of actual-world current brand names and technologies in

the fictional world implies that the novel's future is near enough to be a possible 'real' future. For all its abandonment of the sf megastory, at the time of publication the trilogy would have appeared a very possible, and even likely, extrapolation from contemporary social and technological trends. Even in 2013, the bleak future of the *Sprawl* trilogy is in general terms still a distinct possibility. The fact that the Internet has (so far) taken a different direction, and that China and India seem poised to join and even overtake Russia and the US as major geopolitical actors much sooner than Gibson anticipated might negate many of the details, but does little to change the trends.

Several of the technological trends predicted by Gibson – the importance of information, the spread of body modification, the directions of research in biotechnology, the miniturisation of optics, and the rising power of corporations – are coming to realisation.⁴⁶ The progression of fictional technology amplifies the question implicit in all extrapolative fiction: “*what steps would our world go through to coincide with the fictional world?*”

Part of the answer lies in the underlying developmental dynamics of the fictional world. These are the same as in actuality: a scarcity economics that leads to armed and economic conflict between nation-states and between corporations, and between corporations and individuals. Personal rights and public space yields to corporate, and individuals are under increasing surveillance by both governments and corporations. Meanwhile individuals and revolutionaries try to democratise technology, to help the street to find its own use for things.

Form

The *Sprawl* trilogy embeds the themes of corporate power and ubiquitous social penetration of technology at the formal level through the use of hyperspecificity. At the same time, hyperspecificity greatly adds to the perceived complexity of the world by generating the equivalent of high resolution graphics, with fine details visible in almost every description. The high complexity and large size, coherence and integration of technology across correspondence tiers all contribute to the novels' worldliness.

Broderick's summary of the *Sprawl* trilogy is that, “Gibson deploys his minimalist (*not* skimpy) characters through swift, barely comprehensible plots

⁴⁶ A common critique of Gibson is that, while he predicted numerous changes in technology, he failed to predict the cellphone. This is a less unfair criticism than one might think: compared to the last thirty years or so, the scale of development in the *Sprawl* suggests a fair degree of stasis. It doesn't scale to Moore's law (1965) internally, and certainly not when compared to actuality.

and counterplots” (1993:82). The various aspects he mentions are pertinent here: one of the reasons sf characters are often flat compared to ‘literary’ ones is that there normally isn’t room for plot, characterisation, and the description of a world in a text of normal length. Although with some exceptions, notably Marly and Angela, Gibson’s characters are “minimalist”, with personal horizons very little beyond their immediate experience and very few personal attachments and restricted modalities of knowledge, desire and ability, this is in part due to the oppressing world in which they find themselves. The characters are complexly presented, using a wide range of codes. Free indirect discourse and represented thought allow the reader access their inner lives and mental processes. Together with the wide range of character codes, the complexity of their mental processes, which include dreams, self-evaluation, secondary theory of mind, and construction of identity in temporal structures, conveys the realism of the characters.

Within the complexity of the plots, tied thematically to the all-pervasive conspiracies and all-embracing power structures, Gibson uses a range of compression strategies to cram as much detail of characterisation and world detail as possible into the texts.

Most obviously, the characters’ direct involvement in the *novums* allow world and character to be presented simultaneously. At the production level, the complexity of the plots likely results at least in part from the need to overlap characterisation, world-building, and narrative. Internally, it comes across as a story as complex as life occurring in a world with a high level of integration of ideas, *novums*, and events.

Secondly, although the trilogy is by no means dependent on the sf megatext (*pace* Broderick), community in the megatext enables the *Sprawl* trilogy to present innovations or ‘retrovations’, like Ratz’s “antique” prosthetic with far less preamble than would otherwise be necessary. Likewise, the Finn, Ratz, Turner and others become variations on character types, or at least character roles, that are already familiar. This allows characterisation to proceed apace with only the briefest mention of the operating details of businesses or characters.

Gibson regularly provides a great amount of detail about one object or character, trusting the principle of coherence to transfer the characteristic to others in the same class. Thus, detailed description of supporting characters implies that main characters are ‘describable’ and theory of mind in one implies theory of mind in others (of the same class). This is to a large extent true of the non-human characters as well: the ontological restrictions on Wintermute also apply to Continuity, and variations on the restrictions, like Colin, are read as developments in the technology. In much the same way, hyperspecific reference to one object, say Case’s Ono-Sendai cyberspace deck,

both connotes a particular status to that object (here, bleeding-edge) and by association implies that all fictional objects *could* be specified in as much detail. This casts a sheen of ontological stability over the entire world.

The mimetic representation of world and characters both eases access and allows the reader to associate with the characters. Virtually all the focalised characters are heroes and/or rebels standing against the authority of the corporations or criminal organisations (the exception proving the rule are the focalisers of the Factory domain, who are outcasts, though decidedly non-heroic). Association, even only to a minor degree, supports the thematic opposition in the sequence between personalised individual and depersonalised corporation. At the same time, it aids immersion in the fictional world.

Along with narrative immersion, the focalisation often enforces a character's specific physical perspective on the fictional world. The focalisation and the repeated mention of objects, their manipulation, and contact with architecture and objects generate a very strong sense of presence. The sense of presence is in fact fiction-internally duplicated through simstim and telepresence, of which the best-known example is Molly's sensorium, tracked by Case, tracked by the reader.

The internal modelling of experience is more pervasive than in *Viriconium*, although the experiences themselves not quite as unusual. Most notably, the narrow focalisation, restricted knowledge and largely linear (within a given narrative domain) narrative duplicates for the reader the sense of threat and claustrophobic oppression felt by the characters. This partly accounts for Clute's description of the trilogy as "a *noir* megalopolis of inner space" (2004:67).

Interactivity in the sequence takes the form of participation in the modelling of experience and the narrative suspense generated by such close involvement in the fictional events. Additionally, the use of several narrative domains that differ in emotional and immersive requirements forces the reader to adapt rapidly between different narratives while having to keep track of the complex and rapidly moving plots. Much of the trilogy's interactivity is thus structured into the narrative itself. Finally, some aspects of the world require some disentangling even for experienced sf readers, so that the fictional ego has to make sense of fictional events on the fly.

The *Sprawl* trilogy's representational characters are placed in a world where complexity and convincing underlying developmental structures combine with a very strong sense of presence to create an environment with a very high degree of worldliness. Narrow focalisation and mimetic characters allow the social impact of the technologies and the power structures to be experienced first-hand. The mimetic strategies aid immersion to grant the questions posed by the text more personal and immediate import.

The reader is immersed in a fictional world that, during reading, emphasises the experience of the moment over its thematic concerns, while modelling the experience of persecution and resistance. The comparative difficulty of the plot embeds a significant degree of interaction into the process of reading itself, but the degree of immersion the texts require is such that analysis of the world and of its similarities or dissimilarities to actuality would be very difficult during an internal reading. The texts thus force a clear break between reading and refiguration, even as the implications of the technologies in the fictional world, the plight of the characters, and the narrative lacunae (especially at the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) demand contemplation.

The trilogy uses interactive aspects to deepen immersion, but the immersion in turn alerts the reader to aspects that require cognitive interactivity in refiguring the text and evaluating its relevance to actuality.

Finally, in part, the *Sprawl* trilogy becomes a virtual reality *both* in the sense of an immersive narrative environment – a virtual film of sorts – *and* in the sense of a thought experiment, allowing the fictional ego to explore the implications of current trends in technology and society. The thought experiments of cyberpunk are important because they lay bare and make explicit the relations to the objects, technologies, and institutions that already structure the actual world.

5 JEFF NOON: VIRTUAL REALITY AND ALTERING REALITY

5.1 Introduction

Jeff Noon's work shares the centripetal cluster of cyberpunk themes – individual vs corporation, body vs machine, nature vs urbanisation, transhumanism, artificial intelligence, and so on – with Gibson and others, but its stylistic self-reflexivity is much more evident. As with Gibson, the surface texture of the narrative contains neologisms, but there are many more of them and, in *Vurt* (1993) especially, the grammar itself also differs significantly from “standard” English. Significantly, sentences are compressed and “back-broken”, and the comparisons tend towards metaphor rather than simile. The result is an *anti-language* of sorts that is, quite literally, difficult to read for the first few pages, even as the reader is trying to piece together the signifieds of the neologisms. Simultaneously, though, the language also represents the personality and sociolect of the narrator and expresses distance succinctly.

The neologisms themselves are also of a different quality from Gibson's. Where the earlier novel's *novi data* tend to be named descriptively and especially pseudoscientifically (“cyberspace”, “mycotoxin”), Noon's are very often based in wordplay and/or contractions (“droidlocks”, “inpho”, “Vaz”). This, too, initially hampers immersion; if Gibson evokes high seriousness, Noon evokes playfulness. The correlate is that Noon's fiction generates interactivity at the level of language and naming itself, and the commitment to this interactivity heightens the commitment to the textual world and the narrative once immersion is achieved.

Presenting a world different from actuality, and allowing this world to achieve cohesion, leads the reader towards the fictional world not via metamimesis but via formalism. As such, the playful interactivity of the better formalist fictions is co-opted to present a world and narrative that, upon reflection, explores particularly disturbing social and technological developments. Like the *Sprawl* trilogy, Noon's Manchester fiction generates a serial world, where each text presents a further sortie from actuality and which finally presents a world that is fully alternate to actuality even while positing possible outcomes to the developments of technology.

It would be fair to state that Jeff Noon is a Manchester writer as much as Angela Carter and Peter Ackroyd are London writers. Virtually all his work is set in Manchester, with a very strong emphasis on the city and environment.

As such, he also fits with a range of artists, especially the musicians associated with the Factory label during the 1980s and early 1990s who self-consciously incorporate Manchester in their work. Like many of them, he is interested in the intersection of the dehumanising industrial history of the city and the attempts to explore and express individualism through art, drugs, and music⁴⁷ to the extent that he produces “scratch remixes” of stories in *Pixel Juice* (1998).

Noon’s first novel, *Vurt* (1993), won the 1994 Arthur C Clarke Award. It was followed by *Pollen* (1995), a novel set in the same fictional world some twenty years later, *Nymphomation* (1997), which in terms of world-construction functions as a prequel to *Vurt*, and the short story collection *Pixel Juice* (1998), where many of the stories are set in the same world. Further removed from genre fiction than is William Gibson’s world, Noon’s future Manchester is as much a serial world as the American’s. Although more overtly experimental, Noon’s fiction is clearly cyberpunk, engaging with a similar cluster of themes centring on the interfaces of body/disembodiment, human/machine, identity/corporation/ecology, and reality/virtuality.

McHale (1992:245-255) shows that cyberpunk often functions by literalising many of the postmodern devices at the level of the fictional world. As such, cyberpunk usually follows a transreferential arc from actuality through a possible future world. In Gibson and most of the original “school” of cyberpunk fiction the experimentation rarely extends to formalist devices at the basic and lower orders of correspondence relations and world-creation. Jeff Noon’s fiction follows a similar arc, but very often also brushes on the borders of formalist postmodern fiction in its representation of future worlds.

5.1.1 Plot Summary

Although Noon’s fictions have far fewer character-based connections than Gibson or even Lessing, there are very clear historical relations between *Vurt*, *Pollen* and *Nymphomation*. These novels are all set in Manchester along the same future time-line, as are a number of the stories in the collection *Pixel Juice*, although some of the stories are like fully formalist riffs on the world of *Vurt*, and several might equally be set in a similar but different world. Even more than with the *Sprawl* trilogy, the temporal distance from actuality is hard to gauge, which is arguably one of the puzzles posed by the sequence. However, looking backwards from about halfway through *Pollen*, the sequence appears to have *Pollen* narrated from the late twenty-second or early twenty-

⁴⁷ The Mancunian intersection of drugs, music, desperation and creativity is explored in some depth in the film *24 Hour Party People*. Well-known proponents include the Stone Roses, the Happy Mondays, Joy Division and New Order.

third century. Events are set at least fifty years earlier, with the action of *Vurt* placed some sixteen years earlier, as can be inferred from the presence in the later novel of Blush, the now teenage daughter of Scribble, the narrator of *Vurt*. *Nymphomation* deals, among other things, with the introduction of Vaz, a ubiquitous universal lubricant in especially *Vurt*. The comparative similarity of the world to the actual implies a distance no more than halfway between actuality and *Vurt*, or from the middle to late twenty-first century.

Vurt is narrated some time after the fact by Scribble, the nerd in a teenage gang out to find and use as many as possible “feathers”, the modes of entry to virtual reality game-worlds. The group comprises Scribble, the volatile leader Beetle, the “new girl” Mandy, and Bridget, a partially telepathic “shadowgirl”. They also have with them an alien being they call the “thing-from-outer-space”, which appeared among them when Scribble’s lover Desdemona disappeared during a feather trip in Curious Yellow, a meta-feather itself only found inside of another *Vurt* called Takshaka. Their quest for Curious Yellow takes them through some areas of Manchester variously populated by subcultural groups. These include Tristran and his partner Suze, a *Vurt* being he got in return for losing his brother in Curious Yellow, and the robot Chef Barnie and his wife Cinders O’Juniper. The latter seduces Scribble while she is possessed by Desdemona. All the while, they are on the run from the police and the “shadowcops”, smoke-like snakes who themselves originate from Takshaka. Along the way, the Thing is shot, as is Beetle, and Bridget stays behind in a commune of “dogmen”.

The main narrative is intercut with sections headed “Game Cat”, which as it turns out are reviews of feathers and comments on *Vurt* in general. The actual author of the reviews contacts Scribble with advice, helping him to retain his focus and negotiate some of the obstacles to his goal.

Scribble manages to enter Curious Yellow, then takes another feather. The meta-meta *Vurtual* access draws the attention of Sniffing General, a “door god” *Vurt* being who controls access between different levels of reality. To stabilise the ontological levels, the General allows Scribble to see the Game Cat, and releases Desdemona back into reality. The catch is that trade-offs between reality and *Vurt* is always more or less even: Scribble has to stay behind to allow Desdemona back into the real world to raise the child she conceived while possessing Cinders.

At the end, the present Scribble claims that his life story has been made into a feather and that the novel might be any one of a series of recursive levels within that feather.

Pollen has a series of onion-like frames. The novel opens with the poem “John Barleycorn must die”, after which there is a mock-academic essay that describes, among other things, a war between the real and the Vurt apparently at least fifty years earlier. It gives the time of the discovery of Vurt as “sometime near the turn of the last century”. Within this frame, the narrator Sybil announces that she is older than a hundred years, assuming she and the author of the introductory essay are writing from more or less the same temporal distances, this places the events of Vurt sixteen years prior to, but at least twenty or so years after its invention, i.e. in the early twenty-second century.

Sybil is a “shadowcop” for the police department, using her telepathy to read the minds of the living and sometimes the newly dead. She is called in when a Coyote, a rogue dogman cab driver, is found dead with flowers growing out of his lungs. Coyote has been killed by his last fare, a girl called Persephone, who is an emissary from Juniper Suction, a Green Heaven afterlife feather. Sybil, her dogman patrol partner Zulu Clegg, the Vurtcop Tom Dove, and her estranged daughter Boda start a search for Persephone.

Boda works for the Xcabs organisation, empowered by the maps of the city provided by a Vurt being called Columbus. The same map is also used by the police, but it functions as a Trojan of sorts that enables Persephone to spread an invasive pollen throughout the city, with the goal of turning Manchester into an emanation of Juniper Suction.

Coyote is resurrected, and helps Sybil, her team and her illicit Zombie child to reach Juniper Suction, where they confront John Barleycorn. Barleycorn feeds them the food of death, but as Sybil is not naturally susceptible to Vurt (being Shadow, i.e. partially dead in spirit), she is able to resist him and strike a sort of truce.

5.2 Vurt

5.2.1 *Access: Deliberate Difficulty*

Formalism

On the first reading, the future world of these two novels is a journey of discovery: the ontology of the world is revealed only gradually, and in both novels modified retrospectively. *Vurt*, *Pollen*, *Nymphomation* and *Pixel Juice* all contain markers of the graphic medium, most commonly as typesetting or empty and near-empty pages, and yet, all the novels and most of the short stories construct immersive worlds.

The reader's initial access to *Vurt* is a series of brackets that, in themselves, blur ontological levels.

The novel's dedication, "For Nick – totally feathered up, living on the dub side" (Noon, 1993:*unnumbered*), is printed in the same font as the chapter and section titles and epigraphs, thus formally grouping it with the narrative *as such* rather than with the publication details (and, in later editions, Newspaper review extracts) which are in a different font. This is followed by a page with the cryptic phrase, "A young boy puts a feather into his mouth", then another page marked "Part one", and finally a page bearing (in the first edition; later editions don't box the text but use a different font) the following:

DAY I

*'Sometimes it feels like the whole
world is smeared with Vaz.'*

(Noon, 1993:5).

These three levels of formal organisation, "Part one" [and later, two to four]; "Day one", accompanied by an epigraph [up to Day three, later twenty-one to twenty-three], and the chapter title each affirms the medium of presentation, the printed artifact.

The formatting of the section heading separates the epigraph from the narrative, suggesting a poster or a card or a dialog box. Simultaneously, "Day 1" ("DAY ONE" in the 1994 edition), rather than a date or even a day of the week indicates that the sequence of days is more relevant than conventional temporal deixis. Thus it subjugates historical time to a combination of subjective time – day one, of a subjectively determined sequence – and to the immediacy of measuring time by the day rather than as part of a system.

This blurred ontological status of the dedication and the epigraph is functional, but its relevance only becomes apparent some way into the novel. Although most of the events are told in the historical present tense, the narrator speaks from a defined space-time with a definite relation to the deictic level.

The use of "Day 1" also leaves the time-frame of the novel mysterious. With the mention of "Vaz", it is an early indication of *Vurt*'s naming *novi data* well in advance to giving explanations and/or detailed examples of use. However, much of the *novi data* has evocative names (partially naturalised under the narrator's sociolect), allowing some approximation of their meaning, as well as surprises in the revelation.

In the case of Vaz the capital letter suggests a brand name, and the accompanying verb “smeared” together with the name’s similarity to “Vaseline” suggests a lubricant. The epigraph also suggests a (possibly) subcultural “coolness” to Vaz, probably because of wider applications, that the actual-world lubricant doesn’t really command. This opens up a very wide semantic field. It might mean that it feels as though the world is slipping away, or that it is comfortable, or (possibly) that it moves quickly. The similarity to a common brandname clearly sets up an oscillation, inviting the reader to compare actuality to the fictional world.

The entry *in medias res* into the world itself concretises the fairly large difference between the fictional world and the actual. The first chapter, headed “Stash Riders”, introduces a fairly clipped style, often combined with almost back-broken sentences, a common formalist postmodern device, and unfamiliar slang terms.

Mandy came out of the all-night Vurt-U-Want, clutching a bag of goodies. Close by was a genuine dog, flesh and blood mix; the kind you don’t see much any more. A real collector’s item. It was tethered to the post of a street sign. The sign read NO GO. Slumped under the sign was a robo-crusty. He had a thick headful of droidlocks and a dirty handwritten card – ‘hungry n homeless. please help.’ Mandy, all twitching steps and head-jerks, scurried past him. The crusty raised his sad little message ever so slightly and the thin pet dog whined.

Through the van’s window I saw Mandy mouth something at them [...]

(Noon, 1993:6).

These paragraphs are fairly typical of what’s to come, a highly detailed world very different from actuality and dense with *novi data*. It is also common for the *novi data* to be mentioned as if normal, with the explanation suspended for several pages or chapters. Occasionally, as here, these terms can be decoded from the context: a “Vurt-U-Want” is some kind of franchise store, the ‘crusty’ is clearly a vagrant, and is mechanical in some way. ‘Droidlocks’ combines ‘dreadlocks’, the tangled strings of hair characteristic of Rastafarians, with another mechanical allusion. ‘Droid’ is short for ‘android’, originally a term coined to describe human-like robots, but popularised by “Star Wars” as a general term for independent robots. As here, though, terms are rarely clear on first mention, and very often – as with Vaz, Vurt, Shadow, and many others – only become clear much later in the novel. (Some of these are discussed below, under *Ontology*).

The world-internal focaliser implied by the opening sentences only emerges as first-person narrator by the third paragraph and is named only four pages later, although the phrasing already implies a personalised narrator. Scribble's voice is specific, marked not only by general fictional-world terminology like "shadowcop", but by personalised turns of phrase. One example is the phrase "a real collector's item", apparently used to describe old-fashioned or near-obsolescent phenomena. In a later scene, Scribble describes a policewoman raiding their apartment as: "flesh and blood; collector's item. She had a curly perm. Yeah, that collectable" (Noon, 1993:53).

Between Scribble's clipped style and the barrage of unfamiliar and only gradually explained words and information, the novel problematises access. The world is clearly very different in content and texture from actuality, and following the narrative and decoding the references requires, or at least invites, a great deal of active involvement in the reconstruction of the world. This, of course, draws attention to the imaginative journey the reader undertakes, instead of obscuring it. At the same time, though, the complexity, pace and tension of the narrative invite immersion.

Presence

Immersion is increased significantly by a strong sense of presence. On the macro scale, this is created through ubiquitous reference to Manchunian landmarks and detailed through selective descriptions of place. Much of the outdoor action is mapped street by street (e.g. 1993:277-8), a strategy to affirm place common in urban writing such as, for instance, the London writing of Angela Carter, Peter Ackroyd, and Iain Sinclair and the New York fiction of Paul Auster.

Locally, presence is evoked by a strong emphasis on the relationship between entities, objects and surroundings. The robo-crusty, for instance, is slumped under a street sign, and bears a "handwritten card" in addition to his droidlocks. Two pages later, as "the van [jerks] *backwards* [...] the *left back wheel* [puts] the collector's item out of its misery" (Noon, 1993:8, *emphasis added*). Similarly, the shadowcop "[broadcasts] *from the store wall*, working his mechanisms; flickering lights in smoke [...] an inpho beam shining out of [its] eyes" (Noon, 1993:7' *emphasis added*) to be attacked by the robo-crusty's dog.

Throughout the novel, new entities are often juxtaposed against detailed spatial and sensory descriptions. Thus, the chapter "Flesh techniques", most of which is concerned with getting the tentacled, oozing Thing back to the

apartment, is told as a journey from the parking lot up the main stairwell. Specialised locations like “The Slithy Tove”, a nightclub in which Scribble is approached by the Game Cat, and the Roboville, home of a relatively minor character are described in great detail – although, of course, this also causes them to become microworlds of sorts.

Such descriptions help to stabilise the world by granting it a high level of completeness, as well as by reaffirming the stability of its world-internal basic, lower, and higher orders. As a result, even though the reader might have qualms about relocating to the base world, it is nevertheless established as a stable, fictionally real world through its grittily realist mode of representation.

5.2.2 *Characters, Narration, and Guidance*

Like much else in *Vurt*, the presentation of character is equivocal. The characters, and especially Scribble, contribute much to the fictional journey, allowing the reader to make sense of both the space and the technology of the fictional world. All the characters are presented using the full range of codes, often shared as with the social code, including language, their social class, and their cohesion as a group. Moving together, acting together, having sex, eating, and taking feathers all indicate that the biological code is fully operative. In fact, Scribble’s narrative emphasis on activity combined with the eroticism of the feathers tends to overemphasise the biological code. In Scribble’s case, the code is strengthened by later mention of his sister and his father.

The one code that is underemphasised is the code of description: the Stash Riders gang is rarely described in visual detail beyond stance and expression, attitude, and the manipulation of objects. This is not true for many of the supporting characters. Tristran and Suze are described in some detail, as in fact is the policewoman who hounds them through much of the novel. The two characters described in the most visual detail are both Vurtual: Game Cat, when he manifests in a nightclub to speak to Scribble, and Sniffing General the Door God. This is particularly unusual in light of the fact that no other characters ever see them, creating the impression that the Game Cat, in particular, is “more real” than the primary world within which the characters move. In part, this reflects the metaphysics of the novel, with *Vurt* actually displaying a stronger sense of continuity than the real world.

For the main characters the code of description seems to blur, or be substituted by, the code of metaphor and metonymy. When jealous of Mandy, the “Shadowgirl” Bridget “[looks] daggers at the new girl, smoke rising from her skin” (Noon, 1993:11). Mandy is described only as “the new girl”,

obliquely, when Scribble opens the car door “a thin-girl measure” (Noon, 1993:9), and as a “teenage girl”. With Beetle, his nickname and his use of Vaz and Jammers form most of the code of description.

The forced perspectivism of Scribble’s focalisation makes it impossible to access the consciousness of the other characters. Scribble ascribes behaviours and motives to them. For example, Beetle has an obsession against anyone taking feathers alone, but few of them ever discuss their own views or mind-states. Although in one or two cases, the reader can infer psychological processes at odds with Scribble’s interpretation, most of the other characters remain comparatively inaccessible, a state compounded by Scribble’s self-absorbed desperation.

Scribble and the rest of the Stash riders share many of the codes of character. Their shared experience and language, as well as their cohesion as a group of juvenile criminals, establishes the social code. This is extended by occasional remarks about the society.

Scribble partakes of all the modalities of character: he acts (ability) for specific reasons (desire) and, as narrator, he has a wide knowledge of the fictional world. Even as character, he has knowledge and understanding that often surpasses that of the other Stash Riders, although the discrepancy between what he *knew* at the diegetic level and what he *knows* in hindsight is an important part of the narrative. In fact, at one level *Vurt* is about Scribble’s extending his knowledge and his ability.

Of course, the characters are cast from the beginning in a social role that makes access difficult for many readers. As a group, they emphasise the similarities between drug culture and the feathers. As a gang, the group structure focused on Beetle’s domineering personality stresses the fact that they are basically petty criminals on the dole, or “dripfeed” as Scribble calls it.

Even Scribble is initially grouped firmly into the criminal subculture by association, by his apparent callousness about the killing of the dog, and his alien ideolect. The earliest direct speech is Scribble’s aggressive questioning of Mandy (“You got it?”, “You got the one?” and later, “Where is it!? [...] Where’s English Voodoo?” [Noon, 1993:7, 11]), which reveals an urgent, obsessive desire. From the context, it is clear that English Voodoo is a Vurt feather, but Scribble’s obsession with it becomes clear only much later.

As narrator, Scribble becomes a guide, granting the reader access to the world and his own intradiegetic and hyperdiegetic thoughts and observation. His idiolect emphasises the sense of an “inner life” almost from the beginning, no matter how the reader feels about Scribble, he is presented as a representational character. This greatly reduces the distance to the fictional

world as he gradually explains the technologies and social structures by moving through them.

By the end of the first chapter, the reader is aware that Scribble's actions are driven at least in part by his desire to rescue his lost lover. He is also contrasted with the others, being sensitive, intelligent and fiercely loyal, even in the face of their manipulative and narcissistic behaviour. Through this he also functions as guide at the metaphysical level of the novel, both with regard to the world's actual metaphysics and morality. If Scribble is in part a moral guide, he can also lead the reader into temptation.

Written in the first person, the narrative style reads as Scribble's voice, the idiosyncracies as an expression of his personality. The level of detail evokes a careful observer with an eye for detail, particularly ironic detail. The narrative tends to favour telling over showing, with even highly descriptive sections like the one detailing Chef Barnie's home life, embedding much of its description as adjectival phrases in the narration of small actions.

Scribble's immersion in the events of his world is also expressed through some stylistic quirks. The narration often slips into short sentences and one-sentence paragraphs ranging from minor actions to clipped conversations to italicised (and non-italicised) emotive comments. Usually the narrative adheres to the convention that these are unvoiced thoughts at the diegetic level, strengthening access to Scribble's interior self, although the short paragraphs sometimes reflect the thoughts of Scribble-as-narrator instead.

In addition to portraying the rapid flow of events, the short sentences also lend the narrative a strong sense of activity and urgency. The clipped sentences help break more complex actions into steps, illustrating Scribble's attempts to explain and understand events. It also creates a slow-motion effect as though the narrative can be rewound like a videotape.

One of Scribble's peculiarities is a habit of using the indicative "that" as an augmentative, for example: "The dog went for the [shadow]cop's legs, twin fangs closing on nothing but mist. *That* dog was confused!" (Noon, 1993:7; *emphasis added*).

These indicatives are the first hints at the true distance between Scribble-as-narrator and Scribble-as-character, but the idea is not developed until the third chapter, as Scribble quietens down after the Skull Shit feather.

Maybe I'm some kind of romantic fool, especially when the Manchester rain starts to *fall in memory* and I'm scribbling this down, chasing the moments. Bridget *used to say* that the rain around *there* was special, that something had gone wrong with the city's climate. That you always thought it was just about to start raining, but it

always was, anyway. All I know is that *looking back* I swear I can feel it falling on me, on my skin. *That rain means everything to me, all of the past, all that has been lost.* Over the road the black trees of Platt Fields Park are whispering and swaying, receiving the gift of water gratefully. The moon is a thin knife, a curved blade. *Miles from there, and years and years later,* I can still feel that slow struggle towards the front door

(Noon, 1993:19, emphases added).

This passage is the first clear hint of a relevant distinction between Scribble-as-character and Scribble-as-narrator. Even the introductory sentence in this passage might belong to either frame, but the rest of the passage very clearly sets the hypodiegetic level far beyond the diegetic. On a later reading, it is clear that the combination of present and past tenses intentionally blurs the already complex relationship of distance and the referent worlds of the description – that is, the diegetic world, the Crash Drivers Vurt, and the Vurt of the narrator’s present. Specifically, the references to the trees of Platt Fields Park and the moon are diegetic, not hyperdiegetic, expressing the clarity of the *memory* rather than reality.

Though sprinkled throughout the narrative, the hints are rarely obvious. The clearest indication is the difference in tone: Scribble’s older self often uses a more reflective, less urgent style when reminiscing instead of narrating. At the level of character, the stylistic tension between Scribble imagining himself in the midst of the action and Scribble looking back melancholically contributes to both his presence and the realism of his character by expressing change over time. As narrator as well as character, Scribble has two separate sets of motivations, or “signifieds” of character: those driving his younger self, the character; and those motivating his older self to narrate the story.

The flagging of the discrepancy between what he *knew* at the diegetic level and what he *knows* in hindsight emphasises the loss and tragedy to come, which in turn adds urgency to the question of distance, opening up a horizon of expectation of tragedy. The narrative split to some extent models the reader’s access: the older Scribble transposes part of his mind into his memories, accessing a past world through a fictional ego.

Scribble’s immersive descriptions of subjective experiences contrast sharply with the group of chapters headed “Game Cat”, which comprise ten of the forty-six chapters, and are non-narrative sections that provide additional information, usually regarding Vurt. To the first-time reader, the sudden shift in perspective, tone, style and content might suggest (popular) encyclopaedic

entries, or – which is in fact the case – magazine articles. Intercut between the chapters narrated by Scribble, the Game Cat chapters occupy a problematic ontological position. They are almost always directly relevant to either the section preceding or that following them; for example, the Game Cat section preceding the group's Skull Shit trip provides a review of the feather. This poses the question (particularly urgently before the narrative distance is revealed): are these chapters interpolations quoted from a magazine by the implicit author? Do they exist at the narrative level, at the metanarrative, or both? If Scribble is the implicit author of the novel, should these chapters be read as written by him as well?

In retrospect, the likeliest explanation is that Scribble, as narrator and implicit author, inserts them from the magazine into his narrative after the fact; but on first reading, they, like the structural levels, the chapter headings, and the epigraph, provide additional information *while* representing formal interruptions of the immersive reading of the novel.

5.2.3 *Ontology*

Worlds: Base World

The reader's initial access to Scribble's reality – the fictional real world – is complicated by the idiolect, by metafictional devices, and by its marked difference from actuality. As discussed above, fiction-unique details arise early and often. This, together with the tone and the later infractions of taboos, establishes the fictional real world as rather distant from actuality. This distance is further emphasised by the metafictional markers of the multiple headings of part, day, and title.

The distance, which might lessen immersion, is balanced to some extent by the narrative opening *in medias res*, and by the peculiar blend of wryness, and humour. Further balancing the repulsion of the distance is the complexity of the base world.

The technologies, Vurt (to be discussed), the robo-crusty, and even Vaz, imply a future temporal setting, but do not initially appear to violate correspondence relations in their extrapolation from contemporary actuality.

In this, the novel initially trades on the convention according to which extrapolative science fiction includes current actuality (*sans* the ancestors of characters) in its history. Put differently, extrapolative science fiction is understood to be extrapolated from a fully realist world-version of actuality. As such, all modifications of the higher, anthropogenic and occasionally metaphysical levels are causally developed from those of actuality, by respecting the principles embodied in the sciences of the lower level. In *Vurt*

the opening technology, the Shadowcop, for instance, does not violate this convention, and what is apparent of the socio-economic structure appears extrapolated and/or drawn from actual socio-economic functions. Thus, the socio-economic leap from legitimate video stores with employees renting banned or illegal films “under the counter” to the Vurt-U-Want and Seb offering black market feathers adheres to convention. Even Vurt feathers, a technology that allows access to virtual reality, initially appears to be primarily a further extrapolation of VR technology, probably combined with direct neural signals and cellular technology.

The result of the borrowing of the extrapolative convention is that the fictional world appears large, including (as a past world-state) current actuality. The impression of size is strengthened by the high level of detail at a local level, which usually implies a large scale, but in terms of the reading experience, the fictional Manchester turns out to be claustrophobic. Seen exclusively from Scribble’s viewpoint as he moves through the city, the city – and its modifications over actual-world Manchester – is revealed in small, concentrated descriptions. This limited perspective is punctuated by Scribble’s itinerary, which returns to locations only rarely. On a complete reading of the novel, it becomes clear that the fictional real world action is set exclusively in Manchester, or on the moors around it. The only instances where the setting is *not* specifically Manchurian are Vurt environments.

Technology

As suggested above, the most important variations on actuality are revealed and/or explained only gradually. Most modifications in the fictional world are technological in nature, or body technologies emerging from technological changes. Some changes are revealed in throwaway comments. Driving home, for example, night offers “a rich complex of powder smells [...] coriander, cumin, cinnamon, cardamom, each of them *genetically fine-tuned* to perfection” (Noon, 1993:14; *emphasis added*). When the “collector’s item” policewoman Murdoch raids the Stash Riders’ apartment (1993:51), a comment reveals that even lower-class neighbourhoods have security systems integrated into the buildings. The chapter where Tristan and Suze listen to Scribble telling his and Desdemona’s story also reveals that their twined droidlocks are a human/machine symbiosis, washed and sustained with a gel containing nanobots that strengthen and clean the hair.

Apart from Vurt, Vaz is the most widespread technology in the fictional world. Introduced in the “day one” epigraph, its next mention is as supplement to Beetle’s driving skills, smeared on his gloves (“He likes to feel a bit greased when he rides” – 1993:6-7), as well as on the engine parts. Several chapters

later, Beetle uses it as hair-gel (1993:48), and later as a gun lubricant. Vaz is used to facilitate the opening of locks, including car locks, and a variant of Vaz is also used as combination sexual lubricant, contraceptive, and stimulant. Most dramatically, when Scribble wants to use a “phone booth [that] had been vandalised recently, [...] a drop of Vaz in the slot [sorts that] out” (1993:275).

Up to a point, Vaz might be seen as a small miracle. However, some of the uses stretch the cohesiveness of physical laws. In the opening of locks and allowing broken phones to be used, specifically, Vaz appears to be more active than a general lubricant would be. Its strangest use is its second mention: the Vaz on Beetle’s gloves does not lubricate his *hands*, in the sense of making them more slippery, it smoothes his *driving* by improving his reaction speed and control. As such, Vaz either operates as an artificially intelligent substance that adapts itself to situations, or it generally “makes things easier/smoothes/faster”. Such a substance, variously and limitlessly adapting itself to expressions of the abstract *human* category like “making things easier” is a categorical impossibility according to actual-world scientific understanding. Vaz, then, becomes a constant query as to the stability of the lower levels of correspondence relations.

The strangeness of Vaz is further emphasised by the fact that neither *Vurt* nor *Pollen* provide explanations for it. The origins of Vaz are described in *Nymphomation* (1997), which shows it to be based on colonies of nanobots that, at least to a large extent, are able to adapt to requirements.

Vurt

Much of the technology is directly or indirectly tied to Vurt, although Vurt itself is revealed in piecemeal fashion, with hints sometimes preceding explanations by numerous chapters. The first chapter introduces the Vurt-U-Want, the feathers, and the Thing, with the latter’s connection to Vurt not explained until the next chapter. Scribble takes “five blue Vurt feathers [with] printed labels” (Noon, 1993:10) from Mandy’s bag. From the existence of the Vurt-U-Want and Scribble’s derogatory comments, ““Done it. Done it. Not done it, but it sounds boring anyway”” (1993:11), the feathers are associated with both rented films and drugs. The Thing “loads” a feather, adding computer games as a possible dimension to Vurt.

Despite the apparent legality of the Vurt-U-Want store, the narrative context, they are chased by the police, and there is aggression between group members, as well as the hints at their being drugs, connote a level of criminality to the feathers. This is emphasised on the next page, as Mandy produces “a stash from the inner reaches of her denim jacket. It was a black

feather. Totally illegal [...] Seb called it Skull Shit” (1993:11). Scribble’s explanation of this further connotes the idea of music to the feathers. The Skull Shit feather is a “bootleg remix” from Seb, who has “a nice little side-sweep in black market dreams” (1993:11).

The second chapter, a “Game Cat” review of some of the feathers mentioned in the first, confirms the idea that some of the feathers are legal and others not. His name, and the descriptions, supports the idea that the feathers are somehow games:

This week’s safe selection, my kittlings. Status: blue and legal.

[...]

HONEY SUCKERS are out to get you. They want you for supper. [...] They’ll cover your body with bites and turn you into a swarm. Only quork juice will save you. It turns the Honies to pulp. You better find some, and soon, because those bugs are coming. Trouble is, quorks live on the planet Jangle. The Cat says squirt those suckers!

(Noon, 1993, 1993:15).

A variety of aspects accrue to the feathers to sketch both their nature and their social function. However, the various descriptors are difficult to reconcile. The feathers are everything young people want: entertainment, narrative, drugs, music, games, and slightly provocative of authority? Most of these are seen in the first chapter to still exist, making it appear unlikely that the feathers are truly a replacement technology. The phrases associated with using feathers are equally varied, connoting the same set of semantic fields.

A wide range of words and phrases are used to refer to the use of Vurt, connoting drugs, games, music, film and sexuality: “*playing* Vurts” (Noon, 1993:15), “taking”, “what was I on” (154); “gameplay” and “playing” (117; 15); “trips” (37, 237); “dreams” (11 and elsewhere), “stroke” (10 and elsewhere), “ride”, “theatre”, “go in” (12).

If anything, the initial mentions of *novi data* do not truly introduce the technologies, but instead serve to structure the reader’s reception and to generate horizons of expectation: part of the game of *Vurt* becomes to establish the essence and scope of Vurt.

It is only some chapters later that Scribble actually gives a short review of a Vurt, a soap opera called Co-operation Street, which represents the “ordinary” consumer end of the Vurt spectrum: safe even with regard to being non-confrontational. His description makes it clear that Vurt projects the user’s consciousness into the appropriate interactive virtual reality, where s/he

takes a role in a semi-scripted storyline. Retrospectively, Thermo Fish and Honey Suckers can probably be equated with thrillers or action films. Co-operation Street, a virtual reality soap opera.

As often in the novel, the information is presented so as to help structure and refine the reader's understanding of the technology in preparation for its "first-hand" experience. Likewise, the access journey to Skull Shit is specifically described (as is the case for most transitions from the fictional base world to Vurt), although the final moments of entry can only be described in metaphorical terms:

And then the Vurt kicked in. And then I was gone. I felt the opening advurts roll, and then the credits. The pad went morphic and my last thoughts were: *Why are we doing this? Skull Shit? It's so low-level, it's even got advurts in it.*

[...] Screaming down tunnels of brain flesh, putting thoughts together [...] Electric impulses, leading me on, the room wallpapered in reds and pinks

(Noon, 1993:30-31; *emphasis added*).

Despite the expansion of the interpretative framework by the description of the legal end of the spectrum, the first trip description is likely to come as a shock. The atmosphere among the group is marked by much disagreement and tension when Beetle insists that the group take the feather. From the beginning of the trip, the erotic undertone of the feathers, a phallic shape inserted into the mouth, merges with the submerged violence, a connection emphasised by the narrative. Mandy "opened her mouth immediately, like she had something to prove. The Beetle pushed the feather into her mouth, until he could stroke it against the back of her throat. New girl took it all the way, like a Pornovurt star, and her eyes started to glaze" (Noon, 1993:29). When Bridget resists, Beetle forces the feather into her mouth, prompting Scribble to mentally note, "*Shit! That was face rape!*" (1993:30). The existence of the term "face rape" implies both social recognition and social (perhaps legal as well) disapproval. The rape connotation is exacerbated when Beetle forces the feather into Scribble's mouth as well.

Building on the sexual and violent undertones, the trip is a luridly described orgy during which many objects in the apartment become sexualised and during which (among other things) Bridget slices pieces off the Thing and stabs Beetle with a bread knife. In short order, the Skull Shit Vurt (and *Vurt*) violate several taboos: rape, homosexual rape, the combination of sex and slaughter, and cannibalism.

This is a journey the fictional ego cannot really pretend to make, or at least, not on the first reading. At the same time, while Scribble appears dragged along by the Vurt, most readers would be severely repulsed. As at the beginning of the novel, the reader is simultaneously involved (through Scribble, and probably fascinated by the strangeness of the trip) and repulsed. Immersivity and interactivity strain against one another.



The forms and production of Vurt is explored extensively: it is available in official, remix, and bootleg. Many of the feathers come with “advurts”, and they have opening and end credits. The production process appears similar to that detailed in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*: the credits to a pornovurt they watch in a cinema lists the director, editor and actors, and Scribble later meets the Vurt star. However, the feathers have one dramatic difference from film, as the Game Cat points out.

Awake, you know that dreams exist. Inside a dream, you think the dream *is* reality. Inside a dream you have no knowledge of the waking world.

It is the same with Vurt. In the real world we know that Vurt exists. Inside the Vurt we think that Vurt *is* reality. You have no knowledge of the real world.

(Noon, 1993:35).

As Game Cat explains (1993:46), Vurt comes in several degrees of legality: blue for socially acceptable and legal, which appears evenly spread across Soapvurts and adventures; pink for Pornovurts (legal); black for dangerous (and illegal); yellow for “knowledge feathers”, highly immersive and potentially lethal (illegal); and silver for “operator feathers”, which aid in the making of Vurts and, in the case of Sniffing General, the management of the relationships between different Vurts (the legality of silvers is not discussed anywhere, but it is clear that they are not available on the open market). Combinations are also possible: English Voodoo, the feather in which Curious Yellow can be found, is a black and yellow feather, and Vurtball in *Pollen* involves the spectators all using blue and silver feathers.

Vurt is also connected to numerous other phenomena in the novel. Objects and people occasionally “get lost to the Vurt”, traded for a thing or a being from Vurt. The most common of these seem to be dreamsnakes, trade-offs for “small and worthless” (1993:24) things lost to the Vurt. Scribble and Mandy encounter a dreamsnake on the stairs. Although only apparent later, the description shares much with the “shadowcops” which, in *Vurt* at least, are snake-like semi-coherent projected entities that effectively allow the police access to databanks and other extended capabilities.

The police have access to another disturbing Vurt technology: Murdoch (the “collectable” policewoman) hits Beetle with a “Mandel bullet” (1993:217-8) (after the Mandelbrot set, one of the best known fractal representations. The bullet effectively infects the victim with a fractal Vurt virus. Within a few hours, the wound is spreading, and looks like a writhing pool of miniature dreamsnakes). Like Vurt itself, and the mention of things getting “lost to the Vurt”, the Mandel bullet straddles two ontologies that are separate in actuality, but between which exchanges are possible in the fictional world.

Several characters are described as “Vurt” or “having Vurt”, among them Cinders O’Juniper and, much later, Suze. Scribble, who was bitten by a dreamsnake some years prior to the novel’s action, is assumed by some other characters to have Vurt in him (Cinders stares in his eyes looking for traces of yellow, the mark of Vurt). As, initially, these characters basically act as ‘real’ humans, “Vurt” seems to mean having an affinity for Vurt, especially when compared to robot people. However, a later Game Cat section announces Vurt to be one of the “five pure modes of existence”, ontologically on even par with, but different from human.

Already during “Some (serious) Skull Shit”, Scribble experiences The Haunting: in the midst of a fully immersive (and to the characters, convincing) feather dream he experiences the suspicion that the Vurt is not real, that “the real world [is] calling [him] home. *There’s more to life than this*” (Noon, 1993:31-2). The Haunting is a fiction-internal expression of ontological flicker, which usually causes the Haunted to drop out of Vurt as the illusion becomes unsustainable. The Haunting is mentioned by Game Cat fairly early in the novel, but, both because of the explanation’s appearing in the Game Cat magazine and because neither pursues it for a great many pages. According to the review,

Only a chosen few get the Haunting. They are the edge riders. Those strange people who can’t make their minds up; just what am I? This is their question. Vurt or real? The Haunted are of both worlds; they flicker between the two, like fireflies. What are they? Insect or flame? [...] The Haunting is calling you; come up, come up! Let me take you higher. The Vurt wants you. The Cat wants you.

(Noon, 1993:35-6).

This suspicion of the apparent reality of the world surrounding him allows Scribble to occasionally access Vurt without feathers, using elements of the Vurt (interactivity) without necessarily submitting to the narrative (immersivity). For example, to steal and drive a car, he accesses feathers

called Crash Master and Baby Racer, and he draws the knowledge of “*how to load, clean, aim, fire, and kill with a pistol*” from a black feather called Gunstroker (Noon, 1993:230).

His critical distance from the world also enables him to “go meta”, taking feathers within feathers and immersing himself in numerous layers of virtual realities simultaneously. It is, in fact, his ability to use feathers in unplanned and unauthorised ways that allows him to free Desdemona.

Going Meta

The idea of going meta is already introduced shortly after the Stash Riders initially split up. A chapter headed “Tapewormer” starts *in medias res* with a revised version of the opening chapter:

Desdemona came out of the all-night Vurt-U-Want,
clutching a bag of goodies.
There was no trouble, a nice clean pick-up. Des is an
expert and we love her for that.
We rode the stash back to the flat, the fearless four of us:
Beetle and Bridget, Desdemona and I

(1993:184).

The first two pages of the chapter read like a slightly compressed version of the beginning of the novel, containing more telling than showing. This creates a Haunting of sorts for the reader: although not specifically separated, this chapter does not read like the novel’s base world. After the first impression that reality has been “rebooted” somehow, the easiest explanation would be that this section is a flashback to happier times.

The possibility of the section being a base-world flashback offers the possibility of closure of horizon of two different long-term narrative components: the reappearance of Desdemona promises a further explanation of Curious Yellow, and the Vurt group’s taking of Takshaka, the feather from which a dreamsnake comes, seems to promise an explanation of how Scribble got bitten by a dreamsnake.

In fact, it turns out some four pages later, Scribble is inside a Vurt called Tapewormer, which functions as a powerful tranquiliser. It appears to reconstruct memories by replacing the bad with good and emphasising the better ones. Initially, the narrative remains mimetic of Scribble’s experience, appearing as a base-world historical flashback with information bleeding mostly metatextually.

The near-verbatim repetition of the novel’s opening signals, at the metatextual level, that the Tapewormer chapter *cannot* be the novel’s base world. For the reader taking the cue, there are other indications that the chapter

is somehow a projected world. For one thing, Scribble spends quite a bit of starry-eyed detail on Desdemona. Starting on the third page of the chapter (so that the reader won't see the tell-tale italicised font at the beginning), some of Scribble's hidden thoughts reveal a touch of the Haunting: "*What did I just think?*" (1993:187); "*this is just like she's never been away!*" (1993:192). The group also beats the yellow-inside-a-yellow feather Takshaka game fairly easily.

There are occasional irruptions into the Takshaka game of a voice in the font usually reserved for shadowcops (to this point), with several instances of "!!!!!!WARNING!!!!!!", and eventually, "**You are now in a Metavurt, Rung Two. This is extremely unwise, and should be vacated forthwith. Thank you. This has been a Public Health Warning**" (1993:189-90). Scribble's occasional secret thoughts (rendered in italics) still hint at the Haunting, but the last section of the Takshaka trip leaves both the voice and the doubts behind.

Scribble does not appear to notice the "Rung Two" in the interruption. As far as his own fictional ego (now located at Tapewormer) is concerned, he is in Takshaka which is itself in a kind of portal Vurt, i.e. meta.

From the reader's perspective, of course, this Takshaka is a Vurt inside another yellow inside Tapewormer inside the novel Vurt inside the outside 'young boy putting a feather into his mouth' frame.

Eventually, the Game Cat manifests in Tapewormer (which Scribble's conscious mind is not aware of inside of Tapewormer), explaining its workings and reminding Scribble that Desdemona is trapped and suffering in Curious Yellow. He also trades Scribble a silver Sniffing General feather, an "operator feather".

When he takes the Sniffing General the Game Cat traded him, the world goes black with only the occasional voice of Sniffing General talking to him. With no spatio-temporal referent and no body that he's aware of, Scribble loses track of both his thoughts and his sense of self, as Sniffing General is "LOADING...". In the darkness, Scribble sees a cursor pointing to a menu. The first menu includes the options "Edit", "Map", and "Door". The "Door" menu offers several options:

**This option will allow you access through
doors between theatres...Please select ...**

- 1. Blue**
- 2. Black**
- 3. Pink**
- 4. Silver**
- 5. Life**
- 6. Cat**
- 7. Yellow**
- 8. Hobart**

(Noon, 1993:256-7).

After trying several options, he selects the “Cat” door, which has him manifest in an office where “a small man, not much hair, thick glasses covering his eyes” (Noon, 1993:258) is sitting sniffing “Choke” powder.

Scribble remains disoriented in the space between worlds for a fairly long time, disoriented and unable to focus his thoughts. The chapter creates an interesting tension between the fiction and the importation of actual-world information: to an actual-world computer user in the early 1990s, the semi-command line menus would not be problematic. Scribble knows computer interfaces *only* from blue, black and pink Vurt interactive narratives, where his options appear “natural” and he has a pre-generated identity and point of view. In this context it is hardly surprising that he finds the command line of the silver an indefinite and disturbing place.

The sequence of items on the menu is interesting, in terms of ontological relations: with “life” in the middle, the implication is that, while Blue, Black, Pink, and Silver are “less” real than Life, the others, Cat, Yellow, and Hobart, are somehow *beyond* life, more ontologically important and/or stable.

5.2.4 *Subversion/Perversion*

After the initial chapter, Scribble is contrasted with the rest of the Stash Riders, especially Beetle, to emphasise his sensitive, tragic, and poetic aspects. This is particularly true as he talks quietly to Bridget (who has been Beetle’s lover) after Beetle decides to spend the night with Mandy instead, and as he then reflects on the silence of the night.

In their quest for English Voodoo, the black, yellow and pink feather in which can be found Curious Yellow, the feather into which Desdemona disappeared, the Stash Riders visit Tristan and Suze. Tristan lost his brother to Curious Yellow. He and Suze are permanently bound together with their coil of droidlock, their hair woven together into a single long sheaf. As Scribble narrates the story of how Desdemona disappeared, the couple communally wash their hair.

In this highly romantic context Scribble tells how Desdemona and himself tried to help a woman threatened by bodyguards and found a black feather with pink and yellow in their car. The context and history together underline the closeness and positive aspects of their relationship.

With Beetle and Bridget away, Scribble insisted they use the feather. The feather’s opening credits reveal the feather to be the same one Scribble has been searching for, since:

WELCOME TO ENGLISH VODOO. EXPECT TO
FEEL PLEASURE. KNOWLEDGE IS SEXY. EXPECT
TO FEEL PAIN. KNOWLEDGE IS TORTURE

(Noon, 1993:85).

Inside of English Voodoo they find another “small and yellow” feather, which Desdemona takes, but Scribble refuses. He wakes up with the Thing on top of him.

A chapter segue shifts to Scribble and Desdemona making love. In the discussion afterwards, it becomes clear that they have both been sexually abused by their father and that, in fact, they are brother and sister. Scribble does sigh, “Oh, sister!” much earlier in the narrative, but the single mention hardly weighs against the repeated indications of their romantic involvement. If not unprepared, the reader is invited to remain in denial until the scene at Tristan and Suze’s.

The incest taboo is confronted after the reader has invested significantly in Scribble, and played off against two other narratives: a legitimate moral intervention by the incestuous couple, and a legitimately romantic, more than erotic, activity by a legitimate couple. Symbolically Scribble’s relationship becomes normalised in the fictional world, and traditional morality abrogated, so that the erotic tension between him and Desdemona is far less disturbing on a second or later reading.

The other important violation in *Vurt* (and even more so in *Pollen*) is that of miscegenation, here polarised by the fact that “human” is only one of several races in the novel. Even more so than with the incest violation, the motif of miscegenation is easy to miss or ignore – or simply not grasp – for a large part of the novel.

The novel features a number of non-human races very early: the introductory paragraph has a “robo-crusty”; not long after a “shadowcop” appears; and the Stash Riders are lugging the Thing around. None of these are flagged as equal to human, though, the shadowcop in particular could easily be taken as an artificial entity (as indeed it is, although not necessarily of human manufacture). The next clear mention is the Stash Riders’ confrontation in Bottletown with “robogoths” (Noon, 1993:65), who are clearly humanoid and intelligent. In the same chapter, Tristan and Suze’s dogs are identified as “robodogs”.

References to dogs are sprinkled throughout the novel. In the opening chapter already Scribble notes a piece of graffiti which reads, “Das Uberdog”. Tristan and Suze give Scribble a robopuppy called Karli, and Tristan himself admits to having “just a trace” of dog in him (Noon, 1993:219).

The early hints, the robo-crusty, the comment about a “real dog”, and others, find focus in the visit to Tristan in Bottletown, the history of which Scribble traces from its inception as a high-class residential zone, to when “the wholesome families moved out and the young and listless moved in, and then the blacks and the robo-crusties and the shadowgoths and the students. Pretty soon the students moved out [...] then the blacks [...] leaving the place to the non-pure – hybrids only [...]” (Noon, 1993:64). Bottletown’s identity is affirmed by the graffiti, “Pure is poor”, a statement made earlier by Bridget.

The visit to Tristan reveals that robot-dog hybrids exist, but it is only when Scribble deejays at The Slithy Tove club that the exact nature of dogs becomes clear. The narration steers clear of the topic at first, and when he appears the rap star Dingo Tush, whose name already appeared on a poster earlier in the novel, is first described through a blurring of metaphors: “his *fur* swinging”, “his rap [...] *barking*” (1993:134), before the weight of the metaphors tilts into the acknowledgment that the singer is actually part Alsatian.

Cinders later reveals that Chef Barnie started out as human, but had the human parts replaced with robot parts one by one. This revelation prompts the supposition that mixed races are “engineered”, that they are born as one race and later acquire characteristics of others.

She emphasises the fact, which might have remained implicit, that the races have sexual relations by offering a tidbit about her husband’s sexual preferences: “[Barnie] has this thing about shadowgirls. [...] soft smoke, hard plastic. [...] It’s got to be robo or dog, to keep a shadowgirl happy” (Noon, 1993:242). Here, as with the robogoths, it is easy to read the crassness of the exact wording as a critique, supporting the discomfort the reader might easily feel. This is further emphasised in the lurid description of a pornovurt aimed at a dog audience. Focalised through Scribble, whose reaction, both aroused and disgusted with himself, guides and more than likely coincides with the reader’s response. Embracing the novel as virtual reality and the nonhuman races as “real” others, as might happen on second reading, might favour Cinders’ position instead.

A Game Cat section reveals the racial structure of the fictional world:

There are only FIVE PURE MODES OF BEING. And all are equal in value. To be pure is good, it leads to a good life. But who wants a good life? Only the lonely. And so therefore we have the FIVE LEVELS OF BEING. And each layer is better than the one before. [...]
FIRST LEVEL is the purest level. Where all things are separate and so very unsexy. There are only five pure states and their names are Dog, Human, Robo, Shadow, and Vurt.

SECOND LEVEL is the next step. It happens because the modes want to have sex, with other modes, different modes, otherness modes. Except they don't always use Vaz, so these babies get born: Second level creatures. Or sometimes the modes get grafted together. There are many ways to change. [...] There are ten Second level beings and their names are Dogman, Robodog, Dogshadow, Vurtdog [etc.] [...]

Beyond [the first to fourth levels lie] the FIFTH LEVEL. Fifth level beings have a thousand names, but Robomandogshadowvurt isn't one of them. They have a thousand names because everybody calls them something different. [...] Fifth level beings are way up the scale of knowledge and they don't like to mingle. Maybe they don't even exist.

The Cat? He calls the Fifth level Alice. Because that was my mother's name, and it's the thing we all spring from, and try to get back to

(Noon, 1993:269).

Even though it is the culmination of numerous hints, this passage is highly disturbing on first read. Apart from “condoning” the miscegenation between races, the passage also destabilises hierarchical thinking about life, any remnants of the medieval “chain of being” doctrine by placing Human not only on the same level as the (as far as the reader knows) human-looking Shadow beings, but also on the same level as robots and dogs, as well as Vurt beings, which range from Suze to the Thing.

The prejudicial and ethical problems posed by the passage are exacerbated by the ontological. The explicit statement that intercourse between the “states” can lead naturally to hybrids conflicts with actual-world science. In actuality, interspecies intercourse even between fairly close genetic relatives (such as horses and donkeys) rarely produces viable life-forms. As such, the passage represents a radical break in the fictional world with actuality at the lower level of correspondence relations.

Or does it? Natural reproduction between radically different states might be impossible, but genetic engineering allows the “interbreeding” of different plant species with fish, or even viruses.

5.2.5 *Formalism, Metafiction and Interactivity*

The miscegenation in the *Vurt*, incest as well as cross-species breeding, is an example of what McHale (1998:76-7) calls **banality**, the postmodern tendency to break modernist and realist convention by transgressing the boundaries of the acceptable in fiction. Such transgression inhibits immersion

on the first reading. In the commercial context, of course, sexual banality *heightens* rather than inhibits immersion, leading in the 1980s for dramatic increases in sales for novels containing explicit sex.

Banality is not the only formalist strategy of world-construction used *qua* formalist strategy (i.e. used in order to break the immersive frame) in *Vurt*. The novel contains numerous metafictional reminders. For one thing, throughout both *Vurt* and *Pollen* (and even more so in *Pixel Juice*) neologisms and puns proliferate, occasionally suggesting that parts of the text might actually be inspired by wordplay.

This includes the live show by Dingo Tush. Here, an ontological shimmer is set up. Scribble describes him as follows:

[I was] watching the dogman through the glass. Working the crowd up to a *slobber*, his *fur* swinging back and forth to the beat of his *dog* drummer. Tune was called *Bitch Magnet*, and his *rap* was barking”

(Noon, 1993:134).

The narration blurs metaphorical and (fiction-internal) literal uses of phrases. In a different context, “slobber”, “dog drummer”, and “his rap was barking” would all be colourful descriptive phrases. Here they retain the metaphorical function, but also acquire a literal dimension.

The doubling of reference complicates the reader’s interpretation of some later references, such as that of the “Doorman at the Slithy Tove [who] was a fat white rabbit” (Noon, 1993:138). In turn, the indeterminacy causes an ontological shimmer: is this “really” a rabbit? A man dressed as a rabbit? Or is “rabbit” used completely metaphorically?

The novel also contains numerous *mise-en-abyme* structures that recurse the layered ontological structure of both the novel and the reading situation. The most obvious are the Vurts that mimic or approximate reality, such as Tapewormer with its highly realistic “happy version” of the past complete with its near-verbatim repetition of the novel’s opening, and the Soapvurt Co-operation Street. The reverse is the numerous subworlds contained in the novel, such as the various districts of the fictional Manchester.

A peculiarly appropriate example of this is the home of Chef Bernie. Bernie himself is one of a small percentage of individuals in the fictional world who cannot access the feathers, called Dodos. In an almost textbook sublimation Bernie, who was born human, has gradually replaced most of his body with robotic parts and married Pornovurt star Cinders O’Juniper, known privately as Lucinda. As a Vurt actress, Lucinda has a high percentage of Vurt in her.

Scribble wakes up in Bernie's home after being rescued, and the description of his watching television with Bernie's children becomes increasingly surreal. Focalised through Scribble's perception, this and the following chapter are highly disorienting, with several sentences in which the ontology of the game show they are watching, Bernie's house, and Scribble's mental comments are very difficult to untangle (Noon, 1993:235-238). The chapter is similar in style and feel to other chapters that open to Scribble accessing Vurt, and likely to be interpreted by the reader as a Vurt.

Scribble experiences it as "déjà Vurt" (237), the feeling one gets in Vurt on repeating a particular feather, that this reality has already been played. In fact, though, the sequence is (fictionally) real: Lucinda eventually reveals that the house itself is a real copy of the unreal Vurt: "Bernie had these rooms designed for me. They're copies of best-selling feathers" (Noon, 1993:244).

Another instance is the climax of the novel, where Scribble eventually enters Curious Yellow with nothing of value to trade in for Desdemona. As he enters the Vurt, he retains enough self-control to pocket the feather. Once in Curious Yellow, he and Desdemona become locked in a cycle of torture, including torturing one another. Inside Curious Yellow, he takes the copy he's brought with him: he "goes meta", taking Curious Yellow while inside Curious Yellow, a regressive loop. This gets Sniffing General's attention, as the Vurt that "guards the layers". In response to the General's complaint, Scribble loads his Sniffing General feather as well. Using Sniffing General's menus (against considerable protests), he ejects both himself and Desdemona to Pleasureville, where he explains to her, "I don't belong [in the real world], sister. This is my place. This is what I am" (Noon, 1993:334). Effectively, he trades himself to the Vurt in exchange for Desdemona.

Scribble and the phenomenon of the Haunting metatextually echo the ontological structure of *Vurt*. The enticement of the characters, the freshness of the world, and the immersive aspects of the world in general draws the reader in, but the transgressive and metafictional aspects call the reader home by invoking morality.

A final ubiquitous but fairly subtle form of metafiction, if that is the right word, is not a presence, but an absence: the absence of the code of description for the Stash Riders. As discussed above, the Stash Riders are described in terms of what they do or their expressions, but not in terms of hair colour, build, facial structure or clothes. This lack heightens interactivity since the reader needs to fill in the details him- or herself, but invites immersion. It is a lot easier to assume the role of Scribble and assign the roles of the other Stash Riders to friends if one doesn't need to cancel their descriptions first.

Portraying the characters without describing them allows the reader to imaginatively participate in the ontological frame the novel sets up. Scribble claims that his story was turned into a “hard yellow” (1993:342) called *Crash Drivers*, and that

“the Cat [...] persuaded [him] to write down these memories.

[...]

Maybe you’re reading it now. Or maybe you’re playing the feather. Or maybe you’re in the feather, thinking that you’re reading the novel, with no way of knowing...

(Noon, 1993:342).

This idea is further extended into an ontological loop with the novel’s final line, completing the opening line: “A young boy takes a feather out of his mouth” (*unnumbered* 344). It is in the context of the frame of the boy taking and releasing the feather that the levels of segmentation should be read. The separated epigraphs recall blurbs or loading screens on game levels, and the division of the narrative into numbered rather than calendared days implies iterability, support for the conceit of the novel as a game.

Like a yellow feather, the novel is a virtual reality that provides knowledge, inviting the questioning of self, actuality and morality, but the full range of possibilities the novel offers only opens up when immersion and interactivity can be sustained simultaneously. Like *Curious Yellow*, the novel wants the reader to allow the pull of the actual world even while sustaining suspension of disbelief.

In a sense, *Vurt* is *about* “going meta”: about transcending the restrictive structures of everyday life and about finding the place in life one is best suited to. On a narrative level, this is Scribble’s final destination. For the reader, “going meta” is articulated as a disruption of the novel’s refiguration into one’s own thinking about the world.

About a Coda

Although not in the first edition, some versions of *Vurt* contain a last two-page chapter called “The Old Lady” (Noon, 1994:343-4). Here, the Game Cat takes Scribble through door number eight, which the reader knows from Sniffing General’s menus to be marked “Hobart”. Hobart is mentioned on a few occasions throughout the novel, although it is clear there is not much world-internal agreement:

Everybody knew about Hobart, but nobody knew anything. Just the hundreds of rumours that surrounded the name: Hobart invented *Vurt*. Hobart is alive, Hobart

is dead. Hobart is a man, a woman, a child, an alien. Some have called her Queen Hobart, and they have worshipped her. To others Hobart is a dream or a myth, or just a good story that somebody made up, so good that it stuck around, became truth.

(Noon, 1993:197).

In his efforts to dissuade Scribble from pursuing Curious Yellow (which also includes burying a copy of the feather with Suze), Tristan denies Hobart being anything more than a legend: “They think Vurt’s more than it is, you know? Like it’s some higher way, or something. It’s not. Vurt is just collective dreamings” (Noon, 1993:223). Despite this, there is one recurring reference to Hobart that appears to be a fundamental rule of the fictional universe: Hobart’s constant, the exchange value between Vurt and reality. According to Game Cat, “any given worth of reality can only be swapped for the equivalent worth of Vurtuality, plus or minus 0.267125 of the original worth” (Noon, 1993:75).

Behind the door marked “Hobart” an old woman lies asleep, and the Game Cat explains that his responsibility is to not let her wake up “before the right time” because “We’re all in there, Scribble. Inside Miss Hobart’s head. All the Vurt. That’s where we start” (Noon, 1993:343).

Hobart, then, turns out to be the ‘god’ of the Vurt. As with Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, the characters exist in her dreams, and are dependent on her continued slumber. In the context of the embedding ontological structure of the novel, this further emphasises the implied infinite regress, for if all the Vurt is dependent on Hobart, the trip of the “young boy” is, too. Beyond this, the reader: metafictionally, the reader is dreaming *Vurt* and therefore Hobart. But if Hobart can dream entities at “higher” ontological levels into being, is our actuality subject to the dreams of another being, who just happens to be called Hobart in this novel?

The ‘extra’ chapter focuses this infinite regress, but it also more explicitly links the novel to its predecessors and influences, most notably *Through the Looking Glass*. Alice, already mentioned earlier in the novel, is a figure for reading, games, virtual realities, ontological dependencies. Like Carroll’s book, *Vurt* is an interactive novel, which offers the reader marvels, games, and complex psychological challenges.

5.2.6 Conclusion: *Vurt*

Vurt sets up tension between aversion and fascination. The traces of the world that infiltrate the action, and the resultant delay of the reader's understanding, offer a puzzle that invites the reader's interaction with the text. This interaction is the stronger for the extent to which the world is *alien*, the extent to which it is different from actuality without becoming unintelligible. As the fictional world starts making sense – in other words, as the reader's *gestalt* of the fictional world becomes more coherent – the “easier” immersion in the world becomes. Despite its strangeness, the world does invite immersion, notably because access to the world is through the largely representative first-person narrator Scribble, but also because of the strong sense of presence that galvanises further investigation. The technologies and objects are presented as fully present and real, prompting further investigation. The narrative structure, revealing the action, but only hinting at the motives, further invites immersion through the reader's quest to understand the events, the world and the characters.

Vurt does not allow full immersion, though, at least not without extensive interactivity. This is true at every level: technology, world, character, identity and others. Technologies are named before they are explained, and *Vurt* in particular requires constant revision of the reader's understanding. Many characters are not, *ontologically* speaking, who they seem to be: lovers are siblings, apparent humans are robots or *Vurt* beings. Subworlds are presented as *trompe l'oeuil*, and occasionally an apparent subworld turns out to be the real world dressed up as a subworld.

If the repeated transgression of widely accepted social taboos invites a moral judgment on book and author, such a judgment should still account for the narrative function of the transgressions. Their clearest function is to ensure that the reader's relation to the text remains one of interactivity, firstly by engaging the reader's moral/ethical faculties through confrontation, and secondly by ensuring that the reader does not, initially at least, become wholly comfortable with the fictional world.

The puzzles set up by the novel are there to keep the reader coming back for more. Like many of the other novels studied in this dissertation, *Vurt* sets up contradictory patterns. The pace and the puzzles, the world's apparent internal coherence, the guidance and mediation provided by the first-person narrator, the coherence and conditional representationality of Scribble, the intensity of (especially) Scribble's emotional experiences – all these factors

invite immersion. At the same time, the novel attempts to defer full immersion, or rather, simultaneously with its invitation to immersion it keeps the reader at enough of a distance to sustain interaction. After all, the reader *should* actively try to understand the fictional world, should remain puzzled enough, or disgusted enough, not to submit to the text completely.

In this sense, *Vurt* is highly interactive. The reader is constantly confronted with ideas, terms and language that emerge from the fictional world with little prior explanation. In order to make sense of this, the reader needs to become actively involved in reconstructing, and thereby appropriating, the fictional world. Such appropriation allows for complete immersion in second and later readings. Accepting the technological, social, ontological and moral difference between the actual world and the novel frees the reader to approach the novel as “A virtual wonderland” (*Vanity Fair*) in which things are possible (and allowed) that are not available in actuality.

As is usually the case with embedded worlds in fiction though, the “spectre of infinite regress” (McHale) manifests, questioning actuality in turn: is actuality little more than a Virtual Reality from a higher perspective?

5.3 Pollen

Set some years after the events of the earlier novel, *Pollen* (1995; 1996) references the narrative and characters of *Vurt* only incidentally. Instead, it takes up Noon’s future Manchester where *Vurt* leaves off, and continues to explore different aspects of the world. Where the main character and narrator in the earlier novel is a petty criminal mutating into Vurt, *Pollen* takes the diametrically opposed angle: it is narrated by Sibyl Jones, a “shadowcop” or police telepath. As in *Vurt*, Noon uses a variety of formal oddities to manipulate access to the novel.

5.3.1 Access

Access: Formalist Diversions

Like *Vurt*, *Pollen* uses a number of different frames. The narrative “proper” is preceded by several unnumbered pages, including a poem, a piece of concrete poetry, the ‘word’ ‘ahchoosch’ written and overwritten in varying sizes and density across three pages, and a world-internal academic historical

essay. As in the case of *Vurt*, the frames keep the reader at a distance before the narrative itself starts, but with *Pollen* the elements are much longer and create the impression of relevant non-narrative texts appended to a narrative, as with a police report or a historical text (including, for example, a contemporary edition of Shakespeare).

The epigraph is a traditional poem, “John Barleycorn must die” (although, as one of the characters points out in a metatextual reference, the poem was famously performed by the folk-rock band Traffic).

There were three men came out of the west
 [...] made a solem vow
 John Barleycorn must die.
 They’ve plowed, they’ve sown, they’ve harrowed him in
 Threw clods upon his head
 [...] They’ve hired men with the sharp pitchforks
 Serving him most barbarously.
 They’ve hired men with the flailing sticks
 To cut him skin from bone
 And the miller he has served him worse than that
 For he’s ground him between two stones
 And little Sir John in the nut-brown beer
 And the whisky in the glass
 And little Sir John in the nut-brown beer
 Proved the strongest man at last

(Noon, 1995:unnumbered, *preceding page count*).

The poem performs multiple functions, although several of them are only clear in hindsight. Firstly, it establishes metaphor and personification as central to human understanding of non-human processes. Within the poem’s world little Sir John is not radically different from the other characters in *kind* or type. It is only through the world-external perspective of the actual-world reader that the metaphor and the anthropomorphic embodiment can be distinguished. Put differently, “[L]ittle Sir John” and his “head” and “knees” might be primarily metaphorical turns of phrase from an actual-world perspective, but world-internally (that is, by the narrator and the “three men”) he is treated as though embodied. As such, although the relevance only becomes clear much later in the novel, the poem suggests that the relative reality of actuality and fiction, or of *tenor* and *vehicle* are dependant on perspective.

Secondly, the poem introduces the seasonal growth-cycle of plants, a process both more enduring than anthropocentric cycles and external to anthropocentric ethics and judgment. In fact, the poem’s focalisation, through which the human characters are presented as the agents of unmotivated

destruction, suggests that nature is in fact innocent and preyed upon and that humans have little moral authority.

Thirdly, the poem hearkens back to a folk tradition – exemplified in already ‘softened’ form by the Grimm Brothers, in which extreme violence is ordinary, and where it is not diluted for consumption by (for argument’s sake, and in the case of the Grimms) Victorian sensibilities. Peter Ackroyd in *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (2002) argues that older English literary forms (as much as current ones) use various devices, among others violence, as primarily decorative. As such, the original function of the various horrors visited upon John Barleycorn might have been to create a more satisfactory pattern, but Noon’s *choice* to cite it as epigraph definitely sets up a tension between violence and metaphor for the contemporary reader.

Additionally, the poem’s “punchline” (pun not intended), presenting alcohol as Sir John’s final purpose and power as it does, parallels the motif of drugs and addiction that runs prominently through much of Noon’s fiction. Specifically, in this context, it conjures a thematic connection to the feathers in *Vurt*.

The epigraph is followed immediately by the three-page concrete text headed, “The Sneeze: May 7th Sunday 6.19am” (Noon, 1995:1, *unnumbered*). The phrase the event “The Sneeze”, to be repeated several times throughout the novel with minor variations, sets a humorous tone, linking the novel’s title to the most obvious effect of pollen on people. Simultaneously, it establishes the temporal setting of the novel: late spring, in Europe.

Following this, still unnumbered and written in a pop-academic style, is a section “Extracted from *The Looking Glass Wars* by R.B. Tshimosa” (Noon, 1995:5-6), which summarises some of the salient facts learnt from *Vurt*, while supplementing these with a sketchy background story.

[...] one of the most important discoveries of the last century was the ability to record dreams onto a replayable medium [...] This liberation of the psyche, in its most advanced form, became known as Vurt

[...] this ‘doorway between reality and dream’ was first opened by the amorphologist ‘Miss Hobart’, but the actual origins of the Vurt and the method by which human beings travelled there (via ‘dream-feathers [...]’) will always be shrouded in mystery

(Noon, 1995:5, *unnumbered*).

The reader of *Vurt* is likely to have a mixed response to this section. While it supports the main conclusions from the earlier novel, it also offers those conclusions even to readers not familiar with it. While the obvious *external* function of the device is to enable readers unfamiliar with *Vurt* to make sense of *Pollen*, it functions *internally* as well, by positioning the reader's fictional ego in the early twenty-second century (at the earliest). Simultaneously, it counterbalances the formalist preceding pages, as well as the formalist aspects of *Vurt* by announcing that, world-internally, the events are worthy of serious study.

Additionally, the "extract" provides additional information:

the Vurt itself [...] the 'world of dreams' very quickly achieved a life of its own. The early people of Earth were, in the main, ignorant of this aspect of the invention. It was this 'self-dreaming' attribute of the Vurt world that eventually led to that series of battles we now call the Looking Glass Wars. This book will attempt a dispassionate overview of the terrible wars between the dream and reality, a conflict in which both parties would suffer terrible losses before an eventual victor was declared.

[...] Thus it was that the creatures of the dream, as they grew more powerful, started to despise and look down upon the original dreamers. [...] The 'Vurtuals' longed for independence.

One particularly weak point in the barrier between dream and reality existed in the psychic air that surrounded Manchester, a rain-drenched city to the north-west of Singland (which was known in those primitive days by the name 'England'). It was in this fabled city that the incident now called the *Pollination* took place. This is generally believed to be one of the earliest skirmishes in the Looking Glass Wars...

(Noon, 1995:5-6, *unnumbered*).

Despite the ontological oscillation of this section, the apparently frivolous juxtaposition of academic style with unlikely, even surreal, material and its indisputable metatextual play, it actually forms a very important stepping-stone into Noon's fictional Manchester. The style and the relatively straightforward factual delivery reassure the reader that, whatever is depicted in the novel, the resulting world retains some ontological stability. As history survives and is able to reference actual-world locations, the far future sustains linear time and the basics of spatial orientation (lower order), as well as logic and human reasoning (higher order). The narrative tone also hints that a completeness and stability of knowledge has been achieved in phrases like "the early people of Earth", "a dispassionate overview", "primitive days". In fact,

the very tension inherent between the discovery of the “replayable medium” in the previous century and that century being referred to as “primitive days” hints at exponential growth in human understanding.

While affirming similarity between the world of the speaker and that of the reader, the section also provides the differences in clearly measurable terms. Stating these differences as fact allows the reader easy, if remote, access to the fictional world, functioning much like a temporal and conceptual map of the history within which the novel is placed.

The section also contains a reference that is notably ambiguous in hindsight: which “early people of Earth” is the reference to? Those of actual-world present-day Manchester, or much earlier? Simultaneously: did the world of dreams ‘achieve a life of its own’ shortly after the discovery of Vurt, or of dreams themselves?

Access: Narrator

The introductory text is followed by another temporal positioning, a segment break similar to those in *Vurt*, headed “Monday 1 May”. By implication, this establishes The Sneeze (already marked as May 7th) as a *fait accompli*, a temporal beacon that the rest of the narrative leads *towards*. This occasions its own set of questions: why is “The Sneeze” significant? Why is it inevitable? What are the events that lead up to it?

The narrative ‘proper’ provides yet another different entry point into the fictional world: a first-person narrator with an unhurried style (thus far) looking back over her life: “I have lived to such an advanced age that now, when my body is ravaged by time, and powerless, all I have left to me is this voice, this shadow, this urge to tell” (Noon, 1995:9, *first numbered page*). The narrator introduces herself as Sibyl Jones, a Dodo unable to dream either normally or with Vurt feathers, but with “the gift of the Shadow, which allowed [her] access to other people’s thoughts” (Noon, 1995:9). This led her to become “a Shadowcop in the employ of the Manchester Police, lending [her] telepathy to their interrogations” (Noon, 1995:10).

The marker, “shadowcop”, is of some interest as it shows semantic drift from the shadowcops of Vurt, who have shadow mixed in with robo.

Sibyl eventually specifies the “advanced age” hinted at in her opening paragraph: “One hundred and fifty-two years I have lived in this state” (Noon, 1995:9). Seeing that Vurt was undiscovered by the novel’s publication date (as, Roswell barring, it still is), this sets Sibyl’s narration at the mid-twenty-second century, at the earliest. Later events will allow a slightly more specific temporal positioning.

Sibyl's opening segment closes as many questions as the answers it offers:

I want to tell you this story, my daughter, this story of fragments gathered from Manchester: flowers and dogs and dreams and the broken maps of love [...] This is my story, your story; my shadow, your shadow; my life of drifting air, my book, my Sibylline book...

(Noon, 1995:10).

Like *Vurt*, the novel also uses a world-internal narrator, but unlike the earlier novel, Sibyl is virtually invisible as narrator apart from her introduction. In fact, given the extent to which the rest of the narrative accesses characters' private thoughts and experiences, Sibyl's claim of authorship is problematic, even taking into account her telepathic ability.

Access: Base world

The next narrative segment is distinguished from Sibyl's promised narrative both by the absence of epic phraseology and by its use of the present tense. In fact, the section contains several character-markers that imply that its narrative is interior monologue, in particular the hedging of statements with "It's just that..." and "but". It establishes the character of Coyote, a "black-cab driver" who takes great pride in his services, his cab, and his life. Armed with the context of *Vurt*, and Noon's often unpredictable turns of phrase, the reader suspects, but cannot be sure for two pages, that Coyote is a dogman. When this is affirmed, the fragments of race and personality fall into place:

Coyote is a top dog driver and now his jaws are slobbering at the thought of some rich meat, some golden fare, some big juicy muscle of money.

Meat and money: twin dreams, a way to pay back the debts.

[...] Debts to the banker, debts to the court, debts to the little girl who lives down the lane. This is what he calls his daughter, a sweet kid he sees now and again, and whose mother – Coyote's ex-wife – is constantly asking for more support payments. Coyote doesn't mind paying, in fact he likes paying [...]

[...]

If he can just get some capital together, some buried bones together.

[...]

He knows that most of the regular drivers insist upon money up front, but Coyote is old-fashioned. That's why

he drives a black cab. He even has the original fare-meter up and working. [...] Coyote is *unique*, and so proud of it
(Noon, 1995:10-11).

Established through equal amounts of humour and pathos, and a fair amount of incidental personal detail, Coyote's character summary emphasises his maverick but basically honourable character: "He wants to pay off the [traffic] fine – that's the human in him. [...] Trouble is, he just can't stop breaking the rules. That's the Dalmatian in him" (Noon, 1995:11).

The "Coyote" segment also introduces several other major aspects of the fictional world. Coyote is waiting in "Limbo", an undefined area outside of Manchester where "the Zombies are gathering around him in the fields of the night". He switches his radio to the broadcast of Gumbo YaYa, "a pirate DJ broadcasting a diet of 1960's classics along with classified information stolen from the cop-banks" (Noon, 1995:13). He is out here in Limbo for a pick-up passed along to him by Boda, an Xcab driver. And, although this is more comic relief than narrative necessity, for Coyote who "manages a small grin" as much as for the reader, he reads the message on his cigarette packet, a strand of world-construction that runs throughout the novel.

This particular message reads "SMOKING MAKES YOU LOOK COOL – HIS MAJESTY'S IMAGE CONSULTANT" (Noon, 1995:13). Only a hint at this point, messages from various officials assigned to His Majesty are repeated throughout the novel:

SMOKING MAKES YOU WRITE BETTER – HIS
MAJESTY'S OFFICIAL BIOGRAPHER

SMOKING IS GREAT AFTER SEX – HIS MAJESTY'S
OFFICIAL MISTRESS

SMOKING CAN MAKE THE NIGHT LESS
LONESOME – HIS MAJESTY'S PERSONAL ELVIS

(Noon, 1995:28,41,77).

Obviously, these messages set up a difference between the politically correct actuality and the fictional world, inviting curiosity as to the reason for the difference in political position. The involvement of officialdom in the marketing and approval of drugs reverberates with the problematic status of Vurt in the earlier novel, hinting at a regime either corrupt or fascist, or both.

A similar tension surrounds the Xcabs. Coyote is a "black-cab" driver both in the London sense and in the sense that he operates on the fringes of the law. The Xcabs are the legal, officially-approved and ubiquitous taxi transport system, but even on their first mention, they invoke echoes of fascist management. With "armour-plated yellow and black paint jobs [and d]esigned

by accountants”, their drivers are “drained of all previous life-knowledge, fixed up with robo implants and a complex knowledge of the streets” (Noon, 1995:13), and the system is run by a single “nebulous cab-creature calling himself Columbus” (Noon, 1995:13).

Where there is government collusion with big business, there will be resistance. This truism, reiterated in virtually all cyberpunk fiction, is exemplified in *Pollen* by Gumbo YaYa’s pirate broadcasts. YaYa resolutely airs music from the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, i.e. at least fifty years old, in sharp contrast to the “sugar-coated bones sung by sweet young bitch-girls” on FM Dog National. Or, in more general terms, in contrast to the prepackaged commercial fare offered by the official radio stations. Coyote’s interior monologues introduce Gumbo as “an anarchist trickster figure” (Noon, 1995:13), a particularly ironic point since that is the exact role of the Coyote in Native American folk tales. In various respects, Gumbo YaYa fulfils a role similar to that of the Game Cat in *Vurt*: anarchist, source of wisdom, billboard for world-creation content that falls outside of the focaliser’s knowledge or experiential field.

The exploration of the fictional world is pointedly guided by Coyote’s focalisation and stream of consciousness. Dropping a cigarette butt, he sees it “lighting up a small patch of earth” (Noon, 1995:15), leading him to thoughts about “The earth [being] one step away from death around here, since the Bad Blood had fallen. Thanatos, the big papers had called it. The cheaper ones called it Limp, or Gaga or Mothballer”. While the specifics of Thanatos are not explored yet, some of the effects are described. This far out from towns, the world is a desert where it rarely rains, and “they say there are some *holes* in the world” (Noon, 1995:15). The “holes” are left unexplored, but Coyote’s thoughts range over the inhabitants of Limbo, the Zombies, also called “Half-alivers”, who are kept out of the towns and cities by strict regulations (Noon, 1995:16). The Limbo desert is associated with death: the product of Thanatos, the home of Zombies. And yet, while Coyote waits, it starts raining, and “he catches the scent of flowers” (Noon, 1995:17) just before his passenger arrives.

The strong coding of Limbo through Coyote’s consciousness restricts access to one avenue, but invites complete immersion on the reader’s part: simultaneous immersion in Coyote’s perceptions, thoughts, world-knowledge, and the fictional world itself. Through this, the novel seeks to condition the reader’s responses to the world to match Coyote’s. As such, the sudden appearance of floral scent is highly suspicious and even threatening. From the beginning, his passenger (called Persephone) appears dangerous.

The trip back to town is narrated at a clip: Zombies attack the car, break through the windows, but are beaten down. Coyote's impressions are fragmented, combining action, perception, and interpretation into a flow of impressions that don't let up until "Frontier Town North", the northern edge of a liminal settlement circling Manchester. Here, Coyote's specialist knowledge, to which the narrative has associated the reader, is contrasted with the limited knowledge of city dwellers, who imagine "giant, electrified fences encircling the limits of the Manchester map [and] heavily armed City Guards patrolling the circumference" (Noon, 1995:24).

As does the selective focalisation, Coyote's personal pride and his imagined contrast with ordinary citizens, this knowledge offers the reader heroic stature in associating with Coyote and his knowledge. As such, the narrative, focalisation, characterisation, and exposition are all geared to gain maximum immersion from the reader, associated with Coyote's perspective and rebel sensitivity.

The reader's investment, strengthened by extensive immersion in Coyote's mode of being, is rather rudely rewarded: upon delivery of Persephone, she kisses him and "One minute twenty-five seconds later, Coyote was dead" (Noon, 1995:27).

From here on, the narrative instance apparently shifts constantly. An inserted section uses a formal tone to tell of the exchange to Vurt of a boy called Brian Swallow; after the segue to detail Coyote's death, Sibyl tells of her boss, her job, and her past, as she details her call out to investigate Coyote's death. The next segue, to a perky, punky XCab driver named Boda, is narrated in the present tense and externally, with possible slips into represented thought marked by shorter, clipped sentences.

Ideally, the composite twenty-first century Manchester becomes the base world. Its epistemological instability, resulting from the lack of stable focalisers/narrators for most of the sections, is stabilised to some extent by the stability of the twenty-second century narrators. If the twenty-second century is stable, then any ontological disruptions can be accommodated as temporary states – epiphenomena.

The base world is further stabilised through its serial continuity from and similarity to the world of *Vurt*. This is necessary, because the fictional worlds have at least three very important extruded parallel worlds: the "general" or service Vurt, the completely distinct Vurt world of Juniper Suction, John Barleycorn's home, and the virtual world, the Vurtual overlay, of Columbus' map.

5.3.2 *Spread and Penetration of Technology*

In *Pollen*, reality and Vurt have become much more integrated than they are in the earlier novel. This is most noticeable in the variety of applications of Vurt in the world of *Pollen*. As a result, the world of *Pollen* differs from actuality a great deal, although the fact that technologies have by and large been extrapolated according to actual-world logic makes the journey comparatively easy. The most common application remains entertainment, but the Soapvurts and Pornovurts of *Vurt* are only mentioned in passing. Obviously, the people who design, mix and distribute these are still in business, but *Pollen* also contains other applications.

An interesting entertainment application is Vurtball, a kind of interactive football. Boda meets Scribble's daughter Blush in a stadium filled with supporters all using silver-and-blue feathers: legal operator feathers, to use the Game Cat's distinctions. Each supporter purchases a feather corresponding to a particular player, whose experiences are broadcast and whose decisions can (presumably) be partially influenced by the mass of supporters.

Entertainment is also offered in Strangeways Feather, a prison Vurt "where they put prisoners in those days, storing their bodies in racks whilst their dreams drifted through tiny cells in the Vurt" (Noon, 1995:147), enjoying "a peaceful, even pleasant stay in His Majesty's Vurt" (Noon, 1995:203). The rationale behind this, not expressly voiced, but easy enough for the reader to infer, is that the prisons are overcrowded. Typically, these prisoners are locked in pleasant, though restrictive blue feathers (the equivalent to re-watching the same sitcom series for years), although as might be expected the warders occasionally non-officially switch the blue feathers for black ones.⁴⁸ A related technology mentioned, but not explored in detail, is the use of (presumably black and silver) "truth-feathers" (Noon, 1995:202-3) to extract information.

Where Vurt features in the first novel mostly in the entertainment context, in *Pollen* it appears very often as a support technology. Vurt has replaced telephones for most applications. Most police have personal Vurt-feathers to connect them to the data banks, dispatch, the Xcab's Switch (a combination of dispatch and control) and thereby to the Xcab map. Blush has a

⁴⁸ "Somewhere the shadow falls" in *Pixel Juice* finds a rather more disturbing way to use computer technology and penitentiaries: the main character is a sex offender whose libido has been extracted from his mind and imprisoned in virtual storage. The narrative impetus is the proposition that another offender has hacked into the prison and is using the main character's libido for his own ends.

bootleg Black Mercury feather she got from Coyote (which he'd used himself), which is widely used by illegal and/or private operators to enable travel around Manchester. The hippy DJ Gumbo YaYa has copies of *Popular Vurt Mechanic* lying about, and has designed a blue-and-silver feather called Cherry Stoner, which momentarily cancels most of the effects of the drugs he habitually takes. It allows him lucidity, i.e. it 'unstones' him.

An additional and key application of Vurt is Green Heaven feathers. Green Heaven Feathers, or green Heaven Feathers, are Vurts into which the dying can have their minds reborn after death. These feathers, of which Juniper Suction is one, are reminiscent of old mythologies. From what the reader is shown of Juniper Suction, it appears to have fairly strong similarities to the Greek Hades. It is near-impossible for the living to gain access to Heaven Feathers, and they are heavily guarded and protected.

The dominance of Vurt requires additional technologies. Television persists as support for Vurt, as does telephone. Sibyl uses Vurt-translators when she needs to access the Vurt. In a desperate bid to track down John Barleycorn and the source of the pollen, Zulu Clegg buys himself an afterlife in Juniper Suction, then has himself murdered. As he lies dying, Sibyl accesses his mind, thus also entering the Vurt. Clegg's resuscitation, to a large extent the result of Sibyl's prodding, spares him the irony: the Juniper Suction he'd bought is a bootleg.

The ubiquity of Vurt technology in *Pollen* also necessitates dedicated support technologies. Many of the Vurts have very clear boundaries, similar to firewalls in programming: they can be passed only with permission from the "administrator" of the Vurt, such as Columbus. In the parlance of the novel, these are called "condom locks" and/or "black mesh", and are used to keep unwanted users out of the Hive-map, or out of the information locked in the minds of Strangeways prisoners.

Vurt security includes dedicated staff. Where Vurt/human hybrids and cooperation are rare in *Vurt*, by *Pollen* both have become fairly common. Columbus, the operator of the Xcab (and Manchester police department) map, is ninety-nine percent Vurt, but communicates and operates in reality as an ordinary reclusive eccentric. Vurt-related crimes have become common enough that the police have units dedicated to dealing with them. These units are typically staffed by people with such a high Vurt percentage in their make-up that they generally do not need feathers to access Vurt.

Tom Dove, a Vurtcop who plays a significant role in allowing the Dodo Sibyl to access Vurt, participates in two different kinds of operations in the

novel. The first is footwork: the most common crime is apparently still piracy of Vurts. One approach to tracking down pirate Vurts is accessing the Vurt in question. Bootlegs ‘logging into’ the Vurt will cause traceable disturbances. The Vurt Tom Dove accesses is called Rio de Bobdeniro, a

rich slice of the mind. A favourite feather of the sad and lonely. It allowed the Vurt traveller to enjoy the collected dreams of Mr Bobdeniro. God knows who he was; some say a psyched-up true-life villain who killed over fifteen people. Others say he was a star of cinema. (Cinema is what people did before Vurt was discovered).

[...]

Bobdeniro’s dreams were violent and cathartic.

[...]

Tom Dove the Vurtcop was flying into the sub-feather called *The Deer Hunter*

[...]

(Noon, 1995:91-2).

Interestingly, the passage reveals detailed workings of Vurt that might not have been clear before. Any given Vurt feather is not a Vurt itself, but a ticket to accessing an independently-existing Vurt, so that all individuals simultaneously accessing a Vurt enter different “instances” of that Vurt. The Viet Cong in Rio de Bobdeniro are minor Vurt beings, existing only to play their allotted roles. By extension, when a Vurt is simultaneously accessed by numerous individuals, these Vurt ‘subroutines’ divide into various instances. And yet, every subroutine is conscious, although not necessarily able to think outside of its allotted role.

Tom Dove’s second task is to track down and return innocents that have been exchanged at random for Vurt beings and, by implication, to patrol reality against Vurt beings.

The fact that this is both common and necessary drives home another point. Vurt, as understood in *Pollen*, is far more than a series of interactive programs, or a “consensual hallucination” to borrow Gibson’s term. When Game Cat and Scribble enter/become Vurt, they don’t step into an unpopulated *terra incognita* of mindless programs, they *join* a vast number of independently-existing beings. As Tom Dove explains to Sibyl, “The stories are *alive* now, thanks to Miss Hobart” (Noon, 1995:199).

In fact, within the fictional world, Vurt is neither new nor dependent on reality. It is the realm of stories, in general, and of myths. These have been building for a long time: each time a story is told, it grows in power and in awareness of itself. In Dove’s understanding Hobart enabled the independence of the stories of their human narrators and dreamers, but he calls her not the

inventor, but “The *discoverer* of Vurt. [...] Vurt was just lying around waiting for us to find it. [...] The Vurt wants to become real. It is a living system. It carries on even when we are not dreaming about it” (Noon, 1995:199, *emphasis original*).

5.5.3 *Maps and Spatiality*

Like *Vurt*, *Pollen* strongly emphasises place, specifically Manchester. Here, too, routes are traced, landmarks sighted, and specific areas detailed. Notable among these are “the curried flavours of Rusholme” (Noon, 1995:25), and Alexandra Park itself.

In *Pollen*, however, spatiality itself becomes a theme of the narrative. The first hint of this is the reference to “holes” in Limbo, although the prominence of taxis also feeds into it. Coyote’s interior monologue implicitly contrasts him with the Xcabs’ “robo implants and [...] complex knowledge of the streets” (Noon, 1995:13) as he muses that the road he’s come to for the pick-up “isn’t even on any of the official maps [...] He has the world inside his head. Like a dog urinating on lamp posts, Coyote marks out his territory as he comes to it. *Coyote is a map*” (Noon, 1995:15-16, *emphasis added*). Even in death, the coroner follows “the flesh and blood map of [Coyote’s] body” (Noon, 1995:59).

Coyote’s map-like quality is expressed in dog-like terms, but the theme is expressed forcefully in Boda. Boda’s first description is of her passing a police van next to Alexandra Park, with the police logo on its side: “a glistening map of Manchester bound by handcuffs” (Noon, 1995:38). Her introduction is postponed by several pages as she goes about her business, thus allowing the reader access to her thought processes before offering a description. The description itself follows on her thoughts on Coyote, without her knowing that he’s dead: “Boda is eighteen years old, a few boyfriends here and there, nothing special as yet; she’s just about prepared for something good” (Noon, 1995:41). The physical description itself, again postponed, is delivered by an obviously external, intradiegetic narrator, drawing the image of a map over Boda’s life:

Boda – the way you walk, long and loose-limbed, like an angel with wings of smoke. And the way you look: hair shorn to the skull, skull laser-tattooed with twisting streets in black and white. A walking A-Z of bliss you are, all dressed in denim and felt, lace and polyvinyl chloride. Vazboot trainers on your feet and a cummerbund of velvet around your waist. A corduroy bag slung easy

over one shoulder, holding all of your world; your antique
Manchester map and your woollen hat, and your money,
your cab-licence and your smokes

(Noon, 1995:42).

As the novel progresses, maps become central to the plot. The Xcabs are run off a virtual map of Manchester, implanted into each driver and each cab, but this map stops “at the edges of the expanded city, and all the Knowledge [fades] away there, Frontier Town, so that no Xcabber could venture forth” (Noon, 1995:41). Columbus tries to have Boda killed for her knowledge that Coyote’s last fare was Persephone. With her cab’s help, she escapes from the map and Columbus’ awareness of her. This reveals another aspect of the map: it is traced onto the world by the Xcabs, who can find their way anywhere, but ONLY with the virtual map. When Boda and her cab leave the system,

The time was now 7.42 a.m. and something very strange was happening to the Manchester map. All the roads were twisting and turning in the Xcab system, breaking their connections with each other and then joining up into new shapes. There were 2000 cabs in the Xcab system, all connected, each to each. There were now 1999 broken connections. The removal of a single cab from the Hive had caused this mutation, because the part was the whole. Gestalt system. Xcabbers city-wide thought they were taking fares to the correct drop-off, only to receive abusals and refusals to pay when the cab pulled up outside the wrong destination

(Noon, 1995:49-50).

With Belinda’s Xcab missing, the Vurtual map is incomplete, the structure unstable.

Within Noon’s fiction, it should come as no surprise (but probably does) that the Xcabs map is itself a Vurt, matched as a salient structure to the fictional Manchester (as, in fact, the fictional Manchester is to actuality). Columbus has the police at his beck and call, because they also rely on the Xcab map to keep the peace and police the city. Any interference with the map also influences the police’s efforts. In Bond villain fashion, Columbus has redrawn almost all spatial understanding of Manchester through the Xcab map, leaving him with the only working knowledge of Manchester:

For too long now, the map has followed reality. Now reality will follow the map. This is why I set up the Xcabs, with Barleycorn’s help. A way through for the Vurt

(Noon, 1995:193).

Obviously, a situation in which only the Xcabs know their way around Manchester would be to the advantage of whoever controls them. But Columbus, ninety-nine percent Vurt himself, as the novel reminds the reader several times, also envisions the Hive-map as the tool of subjection of reality to the Vurt.

The Xcab map provides the vector for Persephone's pollen infection of Manchester. As the pollen redraws the map into patterns of pheromone and other biological vectors, humans lose all ability to find their way.

Pollen contains maps of roads, of bodies, of psyches, of routes, of systems, of knowledge, of worlds. As pointed out in Chapter Three, maps are conceptual structures linking different worlds in salient structures. In *Pollen*, the reader accesses the fiction through a series of nested worlds that function as symbolic maps: actuality to the twenty-second century (Tshimosa) to twenty-second century (Sibyl) to twenty-first century Manchester. Maps simplify the reader's grasp on the fictional world, easing the transition to the worlds.

5.3.4 *Maps and Experience*

Maps in the world of *Pollen* enable Boda and Sibyl, Dodos both, unable to use Vurt directly, to access the alternate worlds surrounding them, and the extended descriptions of how the maps change enable the reader to share Boda's and Sibyl's sense of wonder when they access the Vurt of the Hive-map. Using the Shadow, Sibyl 'rides' Tom Dove into Juniper Suction simultaneously to Blush enabling Boda to access Black Mercury with her Xcab. The parallel sequences, with Boda and Sibyl each using the Shadow to access Vurtmen's experience of Vurt, are very narrowly coded. Explanations offered in one narrative, for example, Gumbo explaining how Blush will enable the "trip", are brushed over in the other: while Clegg argues the importance of Tom Dove to the exercise, the reader is left to transfer understanding from Boda's narrative.

This allows the focus to fall on the tempo of the events and on the individual experiences. Both Sibyl and Boda's first Vurt experiences are described, with strong emphasis on how unique these experiences are for them. Boda, familiar with the Hive-map only as a set of coordinates and knowledge, feels invaded by the Black Mercury that Blush has taken, and compares the "organic system [...] made out of roots [with] the city [as] a flower that grows from the sap of the map" with her own experience of the map as a soothing presence. For her, the map is accessed on the terms of the Black Mercury feather: Blush takes the role of the Vurt's main character, while Boda is a passenger. Adding to the reader's v(u)rtual experience confusion of Boda's Xcab Charrie's, expressed as direct speech:

THIS ROAD IS A MYSTERY TO ME. ALL I'M
GETTING IS THE-FORD-WHERE-OXEN-ARE-
DRIVEN-ACROSS-THE-MEDLOCK-RIVER. IS THIS
MANCHESTER?

This is Vurtchester, Charrie.

SHIT.

I think we're on the Oxford Road, Charrie. Scrub that. I
think we're underneath the Oxford Road

(Noon, 1995:185).

On her side, Sibyl is aware of

[Tom Dove's] feathery hands gripping mine, and then I
was swooping down with him towards the realm of
stories.

My very first dream.

My wings

(Noon, 1995:182).

Her initial experience is similar to that of Scribble, in *Vurt*, accessing Sniffing General for the first time: "I had no hands, no arms, no shoulders, no body, no head, no face, no voice; only the insistence that I was still living, somewhere [...] A door *opens*. [...] There was no perspective in Vurt" (Noon, 1995:183).

Sibyl's sense of wonder at accessing Vurt is communicated to the reader repeatedly, with every access to Vurt she manages. These segments are, in general, highly detailed, as though Sibyl is trying to register every detail of the alternate world. This is significant in its distinction from the coding of Vurt in the earlier novel, where Vurts are very often coded as unfamiliar to the reader, though familiar to Scribble. *Pollen* "respects" the reader's own ignorance of Vurt, although, world-internally, most readers would not fall under the six percent of the population genetically unable to dream (Noon, 1995:9), they have not accessed Vurt. Sibyl, in particular, becomes a specific figure for the reader, depicting what it would be like to access Vurt for the first time.

Pollen's many maps function both as access routes and as liminal worlds. For Boda, the Hive-map is her livelihood and a comfort, but her dedication to the abstract map and the understanding of Manchester it offers inform her desire and her ability to access Columbus' new Vurt map. The Vurt map, at least in the bootleg form of Black Mercury, is both a virtual system of control imposed on Manchester and a mode of transport between actuality and the self-contained Vurt of Juniper Suction. Once in Juniper Suction, Boda's tattooed map becomes a real map they can use in the virtual world to navigate a

maze. Columbus' new map, emanating as a (virtual) pollination pattern from Persephone, is a system of access along which the Vurt hopes to infiltrate the fictional real world.

Of course, as codified, abstracted world-versions, maps are necessarily semi-independent subworlds. Maps – floor plans of buildings, city planning, route maps, and especially historically, also world maps – function as sketchy possible future worlds. That is, maps help to enable wish-worlds (of, say, Elizabeth I and Napoleon), and enable the imaginary sequences needed to plan transition from the actual world to a particular future actual world.

In this sense too the many maps in *Pollen* are subworlds. From the pollen map to the final Coyote-map, they are conceptual frames that enable transition of the fictional world from one state to the next. A sequence of these eventually lead back to the ostensibly stable future world-state from which Sibyl and Tshimosa speak. However, as the novel's end (and Tshimosa's notes) indicate, that future state is an amalgam of, or a negotiated settlement between, Vurt and reality.

5.3.5 *Modes of Being*

As might be expected in a novel with such a wide variety of modes of being and unstable focalisation, *Pollen* offers the reader ample opportunity to examine modes from at least two different sides: from the perspective of the self, and from the perspective of others.

Pollen explores in depth both the Shadow and the Dog modes of being, but more importantly, and disturbingly, it explores the fictional metaphysics that enables the various modes both here and in *Vurt*.

An interpolated version of Dog identity is shown through Sibyl's colleague Zulu Clegg, undoubtedly, but without any kind of explanation a reference to South African singer Johnny Clegg, who deliberately denies his dog side. For instance, while investigating Coyote's apartment after his death, Clegg comes across a Pornovurt feather, which he tries for a moment before approving: "Very nice. Very human. Not a sign of a bitch in heat. This man has taste" (Noon, 1995:62). Clegg himself stays in an expensive high-rise apartment with all-human amenities. At the same time, when Clegg finds out that Kracker, the chief of police is corrupt, he is "torn between the good cop mode, and his loyalty for the master, Jakob Kracker" (Noon, 1995:62), a loyalty less about personal aspects than the result of loyalty to leader figures inbred into generations upon generations of dogs.

Death

As narrator, Sibyl explains Shadow in some depth. Shadow already features in *Vurt*, but in the earlier novel very little is explained. Bridget is a shadowgirl, and Scribble runs into a “Shadowgoth” girl accompanied by some robogoth men. From *Vurt*, all the reader knows about Shadow is that it describes telepathic ability.

Even in *Pollen*, the ability is teased out over the first hundred pages of the novel or so, with among others mention of pranks she played as a child using her ability. Sibyl announces very early that she has “the gift of the Shadow, which [allows her] access to other people’s thoughts” (Noon, 1995:9). It is only after Coyote’s death that Sibyl is called in to “do [a] shadow-search” (Noon, 1995:32). Here already she hints at its nature:

I am a smoking-woman, which means I have an abundance of Shadow in me, mixed in with the flesh. All creatures have got a trace of the Shadow, but some of us have direct entry

(Noon, 1995:30).

Both Sibyl and Boda have Shadow in them, which fact allows several descriptions of how the Shadow can be used to communicate words and/or feelings, to ‘read’ both the conscious thoughts and the sensorium of another, sometimes after death. Boda uses the Shadow to talk to Roberman, a robodog whose only humanoid aspect is his posture, and whose speech is incomprehensible to most people. Sibyl uses the Shadow to calm her child “sweet, illicit Jewel” (Noon, 1995:66) by broadcasting love and reassurance before she leaves her flat (Noon, 1995:27). From the beginning, it is clear that Jewel is somehow handicapped, but the explanation is only given following a visit to the city’s North Gate, where Sibyl and Clegg see a Zombie being sprayed off an intercity carrier truck, then killed.

The Zombies are introduced during Coyote’s introduction, as a feral threat to lonely travellers. This is the world-internal view, supported by Boda’s surprise at seeing some of them visiting a bar in Frontier Town, beyond the city limits.

It is at the city gate, with “the Zombie [...] shrivelled to a crisp”, that Sibyl thinks about “my sweet, illicit Jewel, left all alone in his bedroom back at my flat” (Noon, 1995:66), and how she could protect him. The context is a fairly strong hint that Jewel is a Zombie.

Her Shadow connection to her Zombie child prompts Sibyl to explore the source not only of these two modes of being, but also of all the non-human

and hybrid modes. She explains that a plague of infertility had hit the earth. Faced with the possible extinction of all life on earth, the authorities found a solution in a virtual world: a universal fertility drug called Fecundity-10, a side-effect of which allows cross-species interbreeding.

Necrophilia too became not only comparatively widespread, but viable:

Babies were born from [those] terrible couplings: half and half creatures, expelled from dead wombs. And they were born two ways, boy or girl, ugliness or beauty. The Authorities called the boy-children *Non-Viable Lifeforms*. Zombies, Ghost, Half-alivers, these were their given names. This was my Jewel. Their ugliness was distasteful to the authorities; NVLs were banned from the cities. [...] But if the child of the grave was a girl ... well then, she would have only the shadow of death upon her. That child would be very beautiful, because of this dark presence, this body of smoke she carried within her own. And because all living things carry the shadow of death within them, shadowgirls could join their Shadow to the living. They could read the secret desires of the mind. The Authorities were fearful of the Shadow, but how could they dismiss something so nebulous?

(Noon, 1995:110).

Obviously, this situation transgresses contemporary taboos and moral standards. Equally obviously, such taboos would count for little morally and legally if the alternative were total extinction.

Because of Fecundity 10, the Shadow, like the other traits, is genetically transmittable. Sibyl had been born from a corpse/Fecundity 10 coupling, and transferred the Shadow to her daughter, the half-death of the Zombie to her son.

Life

Coyote is resurrected into a new mode of being as Persephone's pollen invasion sweeps the city. Coyote's introduction already marked him as a strong, individualistic and special character. Contrasted to Clegg, Coyote takes great pride in who he is and what he can do. Introduced through merged narrated thought, auto-narration, and free indirect discourse, the reader has extensive access to Coyote's mode-of-being and desires.

The narrative mode allows for subtle aspects of the mode-of-being-dog to slip into the narration. As observed, Coyote often uses metaphors more canine than human, such as describing the fare as a "big meaty trip" (Noon, 1995:11). Additionally, his sensorium feeds freely into his stream of consciousness: from observation of the dark clouds to night as a typical time

for his (mostly illegal) trips to his confrontation with the law; from lighting a cigarette to watching the clouds; from dropping a cigarette on the earth to considering the history of the blight of the area.

The narrative mode further serves to describe the heightened senses of a half-dog: sights, sounds, smells, are all described in a fair amount of detail. For example, “Coyote knows that [Persephone] is female, maybe ten or eleven, right on the edge of puberty. He can tell this from the smell, the smell of young girl. The scent is sweet and high, in relief against the smell of the rain, which is acrid and sour” (Noon, 1995:17). These senses are emphasised through dog-responses like “flea-jitters”, raised hackles, and unexpected sexual arousal.

On Coyote’s resurrection, his consciousness is expressed through a similar cluster of techniques. As he wakes “from green and black slumbers” (Noon, 1995:234), he has no memory or self-awareness, apart from the need to get out of his coffin. As before, his mind moves through free association. He “makes the elm [of the coffin] unfold like a flower. He *is* a flower. He must get to the air, to the sunlight” (Noon, 1995:234). Stalk first, he grows out into the light. As his petals unfold, he “has the strangest desire he has ever felt: the need for a bee. Somebody to scrape pollen from his fur, from his petals. Petals? Fur? He doesn’t know what he is. Petals and fur. This will do” (Noon, 1995:235). He shapes the petals into a “compound of flora and fauna” (Noon, 1995:235) of his original shape, but “[Somewhere] in that bouquet, a tiny trace of the human [remains. ...] This is what he must become [...] He is everything he has ever known, and a map of what he must become” (Noon, 1995:235)⁴⁹.

This description alternates agent and object: flowers, life, roots, act upon Coyote, even while they become part of him. His thoughts are alternately passive and active, depicting the tension between the outside force of growth and the growing inner consciousness. His conceptual categories show a similar mixture: “It comes to him in petals on the wind. Boda? Who was that? His last ... last what? Last bumble bee? Last furry bitch? Last cab-fare? Last girlfriend? [...] He needs the sunlight; it is his meat and his fare. He has the knowledge that he is scary, the first of his kind. A new way of being [...] This Boda fare is the sunlight” (Noon, 1995:236).

Despite the furore of mental/physical activity depicted, Coyote’s decisions, though much deliberated, are sudden and simple: “For now just travelling will do” (Noon, 1995:236).

⁴⁹ This mode of being, and to a lesser extent the style of presentation, bears some similarity to Alan Moore’s representation of Swamp Thing in the DC Comic. This is likely not coincidental, as Noon lists “Swamp Thing” as one of Barleycorn’s names.

The narrative combines narrated thought (from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, with full access to Coyote's mind) with narrated action, rendered in actives and passives, as well as a very definitive use of the present tense to anchor the depicted mode of being in the present and activity, rather than thought and projections of the future. The present is shrunk to the minutest slices of presence-of-the-future and presence-of-the-past, even as projections of possible worlds and other consciousnesses are limited to mere mentions.

Coyote's resurrection blurs all boundaries, but it also makes him into the embodiment of a pun: he becomes a true animal-mineral-vegetable man.⁵⁰

Vurt

John Barleycorn, the master of Juniper Suction, presents another radically new mode of being. As a self-conscious, god-like, but originally man-made being, Barleycorn obviously has some similarities to Wintermute from Gibson's fiction. However, the world in which he appears and his consciousness are so different from Wintermute's that he is legitimately different from a represented AI.

Barleycorn is represented through two primary modes: through speculation on the part of fictionally real characters like Tom Dove, and through his own direct speech in the closing section of the novel. However, by extension he is also represented by the effect he has on the fictional real world, notably through the actions of his wife Persephone.

John Barleycorn first appears in the epigraph-poem as a traditional, fictional character. As argued above, the poem adduces supernatural and somewhat macabre aspects to him. In retrospect, the poem is an English expression of the ancient myth that gives Barleycorn his power. However, for the first-time reader the poem appears to be primarily thematic, introducing the idea of harvest, drugs, and the cycle of death and rebirth. This is reiterated in parodic mode when the song "John Barleycorn must die" plays on the radio (1995:12).

Even in short retrospect, that is, looking back from Persephone's presence, marked with pollen, flowers, and fertility, leading up to Coyote's death at her hand, Gumbo's playing the song becomes ominous. On the first reading, though, it appears as an unfortunate synchronicity at the narrative level, or a thematic foreshadowing at the metafictional. Even the mention following, with Columbus using Barleycorn's name "in vain", "thank

⁵⁰ This might be another comix reference, as Animal-Mineral-Vegetable Man is a long-term villain in DC's *Doom Patrol*, a superhero comic with strong surrealist influences.

Barleycorn” (Noon, 1995:50), hardly allows the first-time reader much room to make connections. Used as an expletive, the reference to Barleycorn once again becomes ironic, or humorous.

Once again, on the first reading the synchronicity is strengthened, or the ontology of the Vurt is weakened, since actual-world conceptions of God are based in myth, and Barleycorn appears based in a pop song. Whichever the case, the reader has no more reason to consider Barleycorn ‘real’.

The traces of Barleycorn are more than normal foreshadowing: they are ‘hidden’, not merely placed as seemingly insignificant details, but often deliberately downplayed or placed in ironic tension with their eventual importance. Barleycorn’s tracks become nodes in a game of finding and understanding the primary antagonist. As such, they provide active variations in interpretation between different readings. On later readings, for example, these traces contribute to the reader’s understanding of John Barleycorn as an independent and, at least in part, maleficent entity. The poem is less an introduction than a contextualisation, less a thematic entry than a historical one. Likewise, the ‘coincidental’ mentions of Barleycorn’s name become, respectively, a frightening synchronicity or the first instance of reality bending to the Vurt, and an invocation of a powerful and dangerous patron.

Persephone functions as harbinger for Barleycorn, immediately noticeable as her killing a Zombie makes it clear that she is somehow powerful and dangerous. Only as Coyote dies and her killing of Coyote is interrupted by the disappearance of Brian Swallow “[at] that precise moment – Monday 1 May, 6.16 a.m.” (Noon, 1995:25) does it become clear that she is more likely than not a Vurt being. Even so, the pollen can only coincidentally be linked to her for the next hundred pages.

As Barleycorn remains ‘hidden’ from the first time reader, so does the relationship between him and Persephone. The relationship is further obscured by the inconsistent use of Persephone’s Greek name side by side with an English incarnation of Barleycorn, although Sibyl later realises that Hades is another aspect of his. On a second or later reading, of course, the pollen and murders are signs of the slow and inexorable spread of Persephone’s power, clearly articulating to the reader the full scope of the threat, which is not apparent on the first reading.

Sibyl’s investigation really gains momentum when Zulu Clegg introduces her to a botanist from Manchester University who has investigated the plants growing in Coyote’s chest. The flowers have “human genes lodged inside plant cells. [...] We have a serious problem here [...] Humans and flowers are having sex” (Noon, 1995:147). The connection between the killing

and the pollen is also articulated explicitly: “Hayfever is caused by sex. [...] It is the outcome of flowers trying to love one another. And failing. The fever is the outcome of bad plant sex” (Noon, 1995:148).

After this, Clegg reveals what he has found out from Tom Dove: that

The pollen is coming through to Manchester from a hole
in the dream.

[...]

The hayfever is infecting the Vurt as well, Sibyl. [...] From Juniper Suction. This is the world governed by John Barleycorn. You know him? He’s one of the most powerful Vurt creatures. A real demon. Tom Dove has told me the story. Juniper Suction is some kind of afterlife feather for the well-to-do. A dark story. All about Barleycorn, who was the son of Cronus, the god of time

(Noon, 1995:152).

The barrage of information, or “all the clues” as Clegg puts it (Noon, 1995:150), is as surprising to Sibyl as to the first-time reader. A number of things come together here: the initial appearance of Persephone, the disappearance of Brian Swallow, the cycle of death and rebirth, the pollen itself, as well as a motive. Tom Dove’s investigation of the Rio Bobdeniro feather, where pollen causes Bobdeniro to sneeze in the Russian Roulette scene, a highly amusing intertext at the time, is also recontextualised. The pollen in the feather means that the boundaries between Vurts and between Vurt and actuality are breaking down.

In the space of two pages, John Barleycorn is transformed for the reader from an interesting pop song to a significant threat to the fictional world. It is clear from the reactions, and from the extent to which his presence is retroactively threaded through events, that he is extremely powerful. Though trapped in his Vurt by Hobart’s rules, John Barleycorn is able to create things that breach the barriers between different worlds, including both the barriers between different Vurts and those between Vurt and real. It is not clear how omniscient Barleycorn might be, but the ubiquity of the pollen together with the image of the connection to Barleycorn running down a lone telephone line reaching down into the ground in Limbo suggests that his senses have an extremely long reach.

As a manifestation of Juniper Suction, the Xcab map accessed as Vurt also manifests primarily in terms of nature: having travelled through the rich soil of the roads, at the center of the map, “in a vast expanse of golden corn, Columbus tells Belinda that this fecund world is a projection of reality once the Vurt has taken over the governance” (Noon, 1995:192).

Persephone reveals that she has “spread throughout the flowers of the city” (Noon, 1995:212). Her extended embodiment through the city’s flowers emphasises the spread of her and Barleycorn’s power. This revelation is followed by regular mention of shoots and/or flowers present in locales where Boda and Sibyl consider themselves to be safe. This creates significant narrative tension: if Persephone has spread through the flowers, she should be able to fully observe the protagonists’ actions and plans. Knowing the extent and reach of Persephone’s power, the reader is invited to adduce occurrences to her influence.

Obviously, the pollen-map overlay which distorts reality is a function of Persephone. When Sibyl and Tom Dove have difficulty navigating the map, there is no way of telling whether this is at Persephone’s conscious direction, or merely an effect of the overlay. Such paranoid thinking is even more pertinent regarding when Boda attempts suicide: knowing that Persephone could (in theory) be monitoring the situation, the reader is led to suspect that Boda’s suicide attempt results from Persephone’s meddling.

In other words, dramatic irony, giving the reader access to world-details the characters don’t know, is used to embed the ubiquity and awe of Persephone’s power in the reader’s perception. At this point, everything goes wrong for the protagonists, Persephone appears to be all-powerful.

The coding of Persephone’s power through the pollen map sets the stage for the introduction of Barleycorn as person. Up to this point, Barleycorn has appeared as a world-internally fictional presence at best: as rumour, as legend, as conclusion to Clegg’s deductions. The shift of focalisation to Persephone allows the reader for the first time second-hand knowledge of Barleycorn, access to the memories of a character who has actually met him. She remembers the original consummation of her abduction:

Her husband, John Barleycorn, had given her pomegranate seeds to swallow, nine in number. “These seeds bind you to me, he had said. “Once and forever.” [...] he could be very angry with her sometimes, if she didn’t follow the rules close enough

(Noon, 1995:214).

This memory inscribes Barleycorn into the reader’s experience as a real character. Rumoured to be the motive force behind the events to date, this point necessitates a review of those same events. Within the context, Barleycorn is coded as a being whose power dwarfs that of all others in the novel. He is depicted as a god in his own right.

Although he doesn’t appear for another eighty pages, the reader is set to read Barleycorn behind every event from this point on. In both Persephone’s

and Columbus' thoughts, the awareness of Barleycorn is present from time to time; but it is only with Coyote hearing a voice recall him to life – itself a not inconsiderable miracle, even within the fictional world – that Barleycorn is directly represented for the first time.

The presence of death in the characters allows even the Dodos to find their way to Juniper Suction, Barleycorn's Green Heaven afterlife Vurt. Juniper Suction is presented as a strange Victorienesque treatment of the Greek legend.

In typical super-villain fashion, a trope that itself draws on Gothic fiction, Sherlock Holmes, and the trope of the mad scientist, Barleycorn launches into a retelling of his own history, and an exposition of his grand plan. His tone is patronising and self-assured:

I think, in your country, they call me Fiery Jack? Is that correct? Or else Jack O'Lantern. Or else the devil himself, Satan, the serpent. Hades. Ah, the endless bounty of the human imagination; it finally comes to rest in a few chosen words. Sir John Barleycorn [...] Yes, that is my favoured name. I am your very own god of fermentation, the spirit of death and rebirth in the soil. Really, the stories you people come up with. But does it matter? Names are for small humans. Does a flower know his name?

(Noon, 1995:292).

Barleycorn is depicted as fully in control from the beginning. He reads Sibyl's mind, and points out to her that to Coyote, Belinda, and Jewel, he is the entity they've always desired most, they are "mere playthings" (293). His monologue, around twenty pages long, explains his drives, his desires, and his origins. The gloating is itself seductive, however. Barleycorn's fondest wish is to be himself able to travel from his world to actuality, and his desire is that "one day we [dream beings] will tell ourselves. The dream will live. This is why I brought the fever to your world. I want a grip on the world. I want to *infect* you with my love" (Noon, 1995:197; *emphasis original*).

However, what Barleycorn misses, and what he eventually points out as the greatest strength of people, is a sense of *reality*. The meaning to people's lives is determined by their end, by the fact that they will die. As such, Barleycorn's life meaning – to invade reality – is a meaning generated by an act of will. In itself, his life would not have had meaning *to him*, even though it helps give meaning to those of others.

5.4 Serial Re/configuration

Pollen does not only modify its own later readings and the experiences offered by multiple readings, but also to a lesser extent modifies the reading of *Vurt*. Two aspects in particular are influenced: the Shadow and Dog modes-of-being, and the racial mixes within the novel.

Bridget is obviously read differently once the Shadow is understood. Scribble feels safe with Bridget, comforted, probably in part because he has Vurt in him, which is less dependent on life/death distinctions than “earthly” modes of being. When the Shadow is read as a reminder of the ubiquity of death, the great equaliser, Bridget comes to be experienced as either a harbinger or a tragic character.

A more important issue concerns the origins of both the variety of races and of Vurt itself. If Vurt is simply the formalisation of relationships between Earth and already manifested dreams, its roots implicitly go back to the very beginnings of mankind. It would also mean that, within the fictional frame at least, the actual-world present more likely than not already harbours Vurt beings. Periods of large-scale Vurtertainment (as depicted in *Vurt*) must increase the power of the legends – Takshaka, English Gardens, and so forth – rather dramatically. This of course also applies to actual-world phenomena: any playing of a game, and every re-reading of the books contribute to the power of the Vurt.

In *Vurt*, the hybridisation of robots, humans, dogs and so forth appears on the whole surreal, slightly out of step with the extrapolative science fiction frame. With *Pollen*, some of the gaps are filled in with the explanation that Thanatos, the death-plague, is revealed much later to be a Vurt manifestation. At Barleycorn’s abduction of Persephone, itself a repetition of the Greek myth “Demeter was so angry that she sent a deadly flower to your world, making the ground as dry and cold as her own heart. [...] That poisonous flower she sent to you, you called it Thanatos, I believe” (Noon, 1995:300).

The solution to Thanatos, Fecundity 10, itself also comes from Vurt. The ultimate fertility drug,

Fecundity 10 had broken down the cellular barriers between species. The Authorities banned the use of Fecundity 10. Of course, nobody listened. Fecundity 10 became a bootleg drug, liquid or feather, and already it was firmly at home in the gene pool

(Noon, 1995:109).

This explanation, that Fecundity 10 operates at the cellular level, incorporating itself into DNA, and literally *builds* the DNA of the offspring,

has the structure of extrapolative science fiction, but still leapfrogs the ontological boundary between the fictional base world and virtual reality. Between Barleycorn's explanation that Vurt is not itself computer-based, but should be understood as a different dimension with a separate *kind* of existence, and the idea from *Nymphomation*, that Vaz already makes connections between human and computer possible because it is composed in part of nanobots, the science of Vurt becomes but a slight bend of kind, of lower-level relations.

5.5 Some Conclusions and observations

Vurt and *Pollen* both gain considerable impact by self-consciously creating a tension between immersive and interactive aspects. Both novels make extensive use of formalist elements, in particular to frame the narratives. The initial function of the formalist frames is to check the immersive journey, inviting the reader to pause and consider the meaning before entering the narrative itself. In both cases, however, a revaluation of the frame after reading yields new insights about the meaning of the text, both world-internally and as a reading experience.

Immersion in both novels is invited primarily by offering distinctive and strongly mimetic focalisers, even if these are mimetic of non-actual modes of being. The focalisers are used to create a very strong sense of presence, emphasised by the fact that their focus is more on the *use* of fictional technologies and objects rather than explanations of how these work. The explanations are forthcoming eventually, but the focus on use heightens presence by representing a mimetic relationship towards objects. Temporarily suspending the explanations has a number of functions: it piques the reader's curiosity (interactivity), and draws the reader to speculate on the working and application of technologies (interactivity), while representing an actual-world analogous relationship towards objects.

In addition to their formal characteristics, both novels make extensive use of narrative lacunae to engage the reader. *Vurt* sets up series of technologies, each bound by its own rules, and apparently restricts their opportunities of use for the reader, inviting curiosity as to how the situation might be resolved. *Pollen* is largely set up as a whodunit, with clues left throughout the novel that prompt the reader to resolve the various crimes. Additionally, in both cases the fictional world is easy to observe, but requires significant investment to understand.

The “goal” of the various narrative and mimetic tensions appears to be to confront the reader with propositions that stretch imagination, credulity and morality. Difficult and possibly offensive on first read, *Vurt* “naturalises” a number of taboos *as virtual*: in the virtual reality of the novel’s world, the rule seems to be to enjoy, to question, and to learn.

Both novels posit interesting questions regarding identity and modes-of-being, with an underlying thrust towards understanding radically other modes of existence. The attraction here is the alien modes of perception offered by Scribble and Coyote, in particular: imaginary ways of interacting with the world that are not possible in actuality. In this quest, though, both novels confront the reader with racism. In *Vurt*, this is done by confronting the reader with Scribble’s slight bigotry.

Pollen sets these confrontations up fairly deliberately. Through association with characters or with fictional norms, the reader is led to make bigoted assumptions that are then radically undermined. In *Vurt*, the focalisation focused on Scribble tends to make the reader sensitive to the ‘humanity’ of other races together with their uniqueness. Shadows and Vurt people in particular are not portrayed as problematically distinct. When Scribble responds in a generally racist way to Barney, the discrepancy and the awareness of prejudice are embedded in the narrative as well. Even with the dogs, Scribble’s disgust has far less to do with prejudice than with *difference*, specifically in respect of sanitation. His response – and the reader’s – has been conditioned by the awareness that Tristram is part dog.

The pattern of immersion-with-reservations is also sustained in the chapter headings and epigraphs. These repeatedly distract from full immersion in the narrative, and seem chosen (presumably, world-internally at least, by Scribble) according to no fixed pattern.

Pollen uses the association with characters to code prejudices into the reader’s play of memory and expectation. Coyote and Boda code prejudices against Zombies. Even Sibyl’s love for Jewel, once the reader realises he’s a Zombie, does not translate into perceiving them as independent, intelligent beings. And yet, although Jewel does not speak, Sibyl later reveals that he managed to find his way back from Limbo to Manchester, and his mother.

And even the Zombies have surprises to offer. Seen by Coyote as mainly a danger on the moor roads, and as unwanted passengers on intercity trucks, the Zombies are initially very strongly coded as dangerous and, perhaps by allowing the reader to import more traditional fictional descriptions of Zombies as basically mindless. Bonanza’s Stetson seems like a cruel parody against this background, until he is revealed to be well read and well spoken,

with a sense of humour. More than that: for *anyone* in a world fifty years from now to make the obscure pop culture connection from 1980s television that Bonanza apparently has, would require significant investment and curiosity.

Noon does not simplify, but *complicates* the reader's access to the fictional world in a number of ways. These include formal aspects, such as extensive metafictional brackets (epigraphs, section epigraphs, section titles, chapter titles), antilanguage, language-based ontological quirks, and distortion of ontological levels. Very significantly, these are not merely formalist indulgence, but *also* become relevant at the level of representation, as *Vurt*, and, to a lesser extent, *Pollen*, deal with issues of narration, representation, and ontology. The complication of access also arises from the represented world itself, where issues of identity, humanity, and responsibility are challenged, often straddling and even breaking taboos.

6 CONCLUSION

Introduction

This thesis set out on a journey to provisionally map texts to the margins of postmodern fiction under the concept of transreferentiality. This mapping took the form of the analysis of a series of transreferential texts under a theoretical model designed to account for both the spatial and the temporal experience of fictional texts. I asked a number of specific questions. The first two were largely answered in the first and second chapters, although their elaboration remained a theme throughout:

How can the concept of ontological referent be used to reconfigure the postmodern canon?

How may the newly configured transreferential strand be theoretically articulated?

The remainder of the questions were explored throughout the rest of this thesis:

How is the reading process influenced by transreferentiality?

What strategies are employed by transreferential fictions to articulate their worlds and/or to involve the reader?

Can specific kinds themes or narrative elements be identified as typical of transreferential fiction?

How does the text communicate its world and its rules to the reader, and how does the reader experience the world unfolding around him?

How may the reader be impacted by the ideas and rules represented by the text?

In this chapter I draft the lines of form and structure onto the preliminary map, drawing together the insights and experiences garnered through the earlier chapters of the thesis.

Transreferential fiction is essentially characterised by its generation of reference worlds that are distinct from consensus actuality. Such reference worlds may, but do not have to be logically accessible from actuality, for example by extrapolation through time or radically reinterpreting actual-world systems and givens. They can be distinct in any number of ways: through technologies, social or epistemological systems, ontological rules, or the specific abrogation of actual-world verities. Most often, a combination of these factors distinguish the world from the actual, in such a way that the reader cannot reconcile the transreferential world with consensus reality.

The proposition that all fictional worlds are non-actual does not hold: (meta)mimetic fiction usually trades on the fact that readers can easily imagine the fictional events happening to themselves or people they know. SF criticism

offers a provocative corrective. Teresa L. Ebert (in Broderick, 1995:117) in no uncertain terms criticises mimetic fiction as presenting a stable, unchanging world that forms the backdrop against which the development of characters' "integrative selfhood" is staged. Through these unacknowledged conventional assumptions, mundane fiction (a term used for non-sf (e.g. Delany in Broderick, 1995:72), though not here used by Ebert) implicitly supports the status quo and the primacy of the individual within the world – in other words, enlightenment consumer capitalist principles.

Although transreferentiality is conceived as being a broad tendency in fiction, uniting fantasy, sf, allegorical fiction, and magic realism while also guiding some 'literary' postmodern texts, this study has focused on works that can be loosely grouped under both postmodern fiction and sf. To simply call them sf would be a gross oversimplification: M. John Harrison's *Viriconium* moves from fantasy-flavoured sf to something much closer to postmodern fiction in a fantasy setting; Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy established cyberpunk as a postmodernisation of sf; and Noon's *Vurt* and *Pollen* is more or less evenly perched between formalist postmodern fiction and sf.

Although in the final text the focus falls on these works, a number of other works were studied in detail, specifically:

"Postmodern fantasy"	Ursula Le Guin	the <i>Earthsea</i> sequence
Historical fantasy	Michael Moorcock	<i>Gloriana</i>
Magic realism	Salman Rushdie	<i>The satanic verses</i>
	Gabriel García Márquez	<i>One hundred years of solitude</i>
Postmodern allegory	Doris Lessing	<i>Canopus in Argos</i> sequence
Limit-texts: Postmodern fiction with a strong transreferential aspect	Peter Ackroyd	<i>Hawksmoor</i> <i>Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem</i>
	Umberto Eco	<i>Foucault's Pendulum</i> ⁵¹

⁵¹ A note on the inclusion of *Foucault's Pendulum* might be appropriate. The novel depicts the gradual transformation of a metamimetic, historiographic world into one apparently governed by magic, and certainly rife with followers of magic cults. Given the narrow focalisation through Casaubon, the epistemological uncertainty spills over into ontological crisis from very near the beginning of the novel. An interesting parallel might be drawn to Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*, which – without significantly changing actual-world history – is, in Clute's phrase, "a radical recasting of human history since the Second World War as a conspiracy of data" (2004: 95).

Additionally, a wide selection of other texts were deliberately submitted to the same reading strategies. Some of these findings are reflected in this chapter, inasmuch as they correlate with the findings from Chapters 3-5.

Focusing on sf-related texts has been a primarily strategic decision, enabling a more focused approach to a field that would otherwise have been beyond the scope of this project. SF both forms a very significant part of the field by volume, and easily sprawls into adjacent fields, as evidenced by *Viriconium* and texts like Rushdie's *The ground beneath her feet* or Peter Ackroyd's *First light* and *The Plato papers*. The decision has proven fortuitous, allowing access to the intelligent and insightful body of sf criticism.

6.1 Primary Findings

6.1.1 Mimesis: Primary Transreferential Strategies

World

Transreferential texts are set in fictional universes of which the base world, at least, is well-established by the end of the text. In all the works analysed in chapters 3-5, a high proportion of the text is devoted to the description of the world. Obviously the fictions highlight aspects that are different from actuality, but many of the texts contain passages that might as well describe parts of actuality, for example, the descriptions of nature in "Lords of Misrule" and that of Platt Fields Park in *Vurt*. In Gibson and Noon, such descriptions also function to link the fictional world to the actual, but they are not, strictly speaking, necessary. Rather, they are examples of overcoding of the world *qua* world, establishing worldliness.

It follows that the fictional base worlds contain a high level of detail, which establishes them as both comprehensive and as large worlds, since a high level of local detail implies a high level of detail everywhere in the fictional world. In Gibson and Harrison the size of the worlds is in fact emphasised by characters' journeys to different places. Noon's Manchester is *implicitly* as large as earth, but his fiction is resolutely set in Manchester, which together with the constant rain and the bewildering variety of the city create a sense that the characters are somehow trapped in Manchester.

Many of the novels, though not most of those comprising *Viriconium*, create a similar sense of restriction by presenting their reality as a collection of distinct subworlds within a fairly chaotic "medium" the characters either don't understand or don't care about. Although this is not a universal characteristic

of transreferential fiction, it is fairly common: outside of sf *Earthsea*, *The satanic verses*, and even *Foucault's pendulum* use similar spatial arrangements. The subworlds are usually significantly smaller than the base world, but may be presented as mimetically as the base world (as Rushdie does). In fact, some of the VR worlds in Gibson and Noon are *intended* to be mistaken for the base world.

Transreferential worlds are by definition significantly different from the actual, although not necessarily obviously so. Some texts (such as the Mona and Case subworlds in the *Sprawl*) downplay the difference on first entrance, only gradually introducing *novi data*. Differences occur at all correspondence tiers, although fantasy worlds are more likely to display differences on the lower level than sf, as lower level differences are rare in sf. In the texts analysed in this study, a change on one level also reverberates on other levels, as in the case of the Panther Moderns. (In magic realist fiction, changes might not necessarily reverberate to other levels, or the effects might only become apparent much later. For example, nobody initially notices Gibreel's halo in *The satanic verses*, or if they do they do not comment on it.)

Notably, apart from magic realist texts and some limit-postmodern texts, the differences are fiction-internally coherent with the world, and either explained explicitly or recoverable as extrapolation along coherent correspondence relations. Even in magic realist texts, the differences are often revealed to be congruent with the world once the reader has realised that 'the world' is in fact different from its initial introduction.

SF's extensive use of neologisms and unusual linguistic constructs (discussed at some length by Csicsery-Ronay [2008:13-43], but a recurrent theme in contemporary sf criticism) can constitute a momentary challenge to the base world. Words appear that have no meaning in actuality, or actual-world constructions turn out to mean something different from their 'mundane' usage. In sf, the ability to reconstruct the correspondence relation that restores this apparent violation of the lower level is an important competency demanded from the reader and key to the experience of reading sf.

In all, the fictional base worlds are presented with a high degree of worldliness, as if they had an existence entirely independent of actuality. This is further emphasised by the use of representational characters, and by focalisation strategies that highlight presence. In many cases, technologies or other processes continue to develop offstage, and worlds contain elements that remain unexplained to the reader, even while the characters treat them as perfectly normal.

While they are clearly different from actuality, transreferential worlds are, if anything, presented with *more* attention and mimetic detail than most worlds of 'literary' fiction.

Denizens

In most of the texts studied, the characters are presented as conditionally representative. They are represented as immersed in their world as much as mimetic characters are in their analogue-actual world, using the full range of character codes and signifieds of character – or convincing reasons for why codes are constrained or inactive. Case's modality of desire, for instance, is focused almost entirely on his ability to access cyberspace. In most cases, the (literary) code of metaphor and metonymy is constrained to primarily metonymical aspects, with metaphoric use reserved for sublime or dramatic moments.

In Gibson, Noon, and Harrison familial relations are restricted, whether as a result of personality or occupation, but this appears to be coincidental. Although not uncommon in sf, restrictions on familial relations reflect their relative importance and stability in the fictional world, which in turn has as much to do with prevailing social conditions (in both the contemporary actual and the fictional world) as it does with selective complexity of the world. In magic realist fiction and fantasy family relations are often important.

As with the fictional worlds, various strategies are used to condense the representation of the characters. Most commonly, events, description, and characterisation are rolled into one. The code of description in particular is used selectively: one character described in detail transfers the principle of 'describability' to others. Many texts make use of intertextual references and types to condense characterisation. This strategy is very common in sf, but postmodern fiction in general often uses intertextual references in characterisation (*Foucault's pendulum* being one pertinent example).

Transreferential fiction often features non-human characters, or human characters with abnormal thought processes. In these cases, character codes are often elided, replaced or dramatically altered. Wintermute, for example, can choose and turn on its own descriptions, and while strictly speaking it has no family, it functions within one and longs for contact with its own kind. In lieu of direct access to its consciousness due to Gibson's choice to keep it otherised, its pervasive presence implies a complex consciousness.

Many characters are 'minimalist', to use Broderick's phrase, in the sense that their range of interests tends to either be more restricted than that of modernist characters or left implied in turns of phrase or perceptual moments. If characters have less complex personalities, their psychological codes are very often overcoded, granting the reader regular access to their consciousnesses. Free indirect discourse and represented thought are common modes of representation, often with significant parts of the description of the world filtered through the character's consciousnesses.

In general, at least some of the characters in a transreferential text are presented mimetically. This sustains belief in the fictional world, while inviting the reader to emotionally invest in the characters.

Access

The initial access to worlds is usually modulated to allow fairly rapid immersion in the fictional world, whether this is emotional immersion by associating with the character, spatial immersion, or temporal immersion. Two main forms appear: access *in medias res*, where the initial immersion is sudden but immediately requires narrative or emotional commitment to the world; and the use of an ontological ‘waystation’ of some kind, a space halfway between the fictional world and the actual, often low on *novi data*. In fantasy this is often a map or history of the fictional world. Histories often occur in sf as well, but maps are uncommon, with the frequency dependant on literary fashion. SF’s ‘waystations’ tend to be spaces that are ‘naturally’ fairly similar between fiction and actuality, such as the bar in *Neuromancer* or the aircraft in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.

It is very common for transreferential texts to filter access through the consciousness of a character. This allows the simultaneous representation of the fictional world and of the character, allowing much higher narrative density. The presence of a mimetic world-internal consciousness also confers worldliness on the fictional world, since the existence of fictional objects is ‘confirmed’ by a consciousness experienced as similar in kind to that of the reader. Generally the more mimetic a focaliser, the greater the emotional investment it can command, increasing the sense of urgency of the narrative moves. (This is comparable to the difference between hearing of an assault on a stranger and seeing it happen to a friend).

Focaliser-characters are important to providing the illusion of presence, which helps stabilise the fictional world. Their specific spatial perspective – Case’s walk through Ninsei is a good example here – focus the reader’s grounding in the fictional world to specific spatial relations to the fictional world. Additionally, when focalisers use or handle objects, which they do with a very high frequency in Gibson, Noon, and sf in general, the object often does become viewable in three (virtual) dimensions. Whether an object is actually described from different angles or not, the illusion is created that it is present, distinct from the rest of the world, to the reader as much as the character.

Focaliser-characters very often function as guides by virtue of such emotional and spatial immersion. *Novi data* are filtered through their consciousnesses, allowing a naturalistic avenue for introducing the names of fiction-specific objects or organisations. This in turn allows the revelation of the function of *novi data* to be spun out across fairly long stretches of narrative

without breaking the reader's immersion. If a *novum datum* appears in a character's thoughts or words for the first time, the reader has a guarantee that the guide understands it and that it will be explained eventually, like cyberspace in *Neuromancer*. Without a guide, or with a guide unfamiliar with the *novum datum*, the reader remains constantly aware of a mystery that might go unsolved. (This is often played for laughs in humorous sf. In the film *Demolition Man* [1993], the protagonist-focaliser, who is from a period thirty years earlier than the film's main action, is confronted with "three shells" that substitute for toilet paper. The system is obviously familiar to all the other characters, but it remains a running joke interrupting spatial immersion throughout the film *because* the viewer doesn't know whether the technology will ever be revealed [it isn't]).

One effect of filtering the world through a focaliser is that the reader's access to information can be controlled fairly tightly, both as far as concerns the world and with regard to the narrative events. Many transreferential texts use this effect to create a sense of paranoia and to heighten suspense. It is of course common in cyberpunk, where paranoia in the face of conspiracy is a common trope, but in the "extended canon" studied it appears in all the texts bar *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Marriages of Zones Three, Four, and Five*. Of special note are the Saladin Chamchawala sections of *The satanic verses*, and *Foucault's pendulum*, where it is practically the point of the novel.

This is not a *necessary* effect of single-focaliser texts. In Lessing's *The Sirian Experiments* (1981) and *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (1982) the focalisers have access to virtually all the relevant *information*, but their *understanding* is too restrictive to grasp the implications of what they perceive.

As mentioned above, transreferential texts often include unusual or non-human characters and states of mind. The combination of controlled focalisation and the complex characterisation techniques allows the modelling of such modes of being. Many of the novels contain at least one passage where the focaliser's awareness radically filters sensory impressions and merges them with more subjective elements. In these passages, narrative time, space, and reference often become also become distorted. Such passages try to submit the reader to a state of mind analogous to that of the character represented.

Exploration

The guided access into the fictional world – whether by map, gradual introduction, 'waystation' or specific guide, or a combination of these – generates a high degree of spatial and temporal immersion. As such one of the primary tasks of the fictional ego is to explore the world, to get to know its scope, possibilities, structures, contents and nature. As sf criticism repeatedly

points out (for example, Csicsery-Ronay, 2008:54-6) this exploration and process of gaining knowledge is an end in itself, one of the central ‘beauties of science fiction’.

The immersion also guides the reader through the fictional world along a predetermined path generally coinciding with the narrative, so that elements of the world are revealed according to the narrative logic. This order is often relevant not only in dramatic terms, but also in shaping the reader’s final evaluation of the fictional world. *Vurt* and to a lesser extent *Pollen*, for instance, generates a world that on first reading seems almost formalist in its apparent disregard for the lower and, to some extent, basic order. It is only after completing *Pollen* and, ideally, *Nymphomation* that the world comes into proper perspective, allowing it to be read as a more or less coherent ontology.

The fact that transreferential fiction establishes an autonomous ontology as reference world creates a key difference during reading. In (meta)mimesis, the ‘world’ is a redescription of actuality, with specific emphasis placed on elements relative to the narrative. Somewhat like highlighting specific words in a text, the reader is tempted to ignore the details of the world except as signifying a particular mood or bias: because the actual world is always there as reference world, it fades into the background.

In transreferential fiction, the reader reconstructs the world as an independent ontological referent. Rather than inducing complacency, this process requires commitment on the part of the reader, which in turn invites the constant revision and revisiting even of parts of the world that are no longer present to the point of reading. Instead of *passing by* the descriptions of the fictional world, the path through the world remains present as a continuum, and the part of the world that has already been constructed can be revisited in mind. The texts also demand such revisiting by postponing explanations of fictional elements: every new thing learned might colour already reconstructed areas of the fictional world.

Concomitantly to the habit of continually constructing the world, and as extension of the modelling of modes of thought, transreferential fiction is particularly well suited to inducing ways of thinking. The constant re-evaluation of the ontological givens means that particular ways of looking do not have to be explained: the reader can be coerced into learning them. Thus, for example, the only ways to reconcile the facets of “The Jewel on the Edge of the of the Western Sea” (Harrison, 1988:167) are to either view *Viriconium* as a formalist text constantly playing with itself; or to entertain unusual ontological possibilities, such as the existence of multiple dimensions, or of reality being dependent on the consensus of its users. The concretisation (not realisation, since Lessing gives the game away in her introduction) of Johor’s cosmological perspective some hundred pages into *Shikasta*, or the realisation

that Ambien II is physically viewing a polar reversal in *The Sirian experiments* induces a sense of ontological vertigo, of the fictional world allowing a perspective entirely outside of human spacetime. This perspective is then applied to events closer to the human scale. *Foucault's pendulum*, even if Eco's initial impetus was to critique conspiratorial thinking (and, perhaps, poststructuralist thinking), *teaches* the reader to think in terms of paranoia and conspiracy: any fact can be seen to form part of an overarching pattern. Whatever the specific pattern, it leads to Casaubon's impending final transformation.

Although it is set in non-actual worlds, transreferential fictions deploy highly specialised strategies to generate the impression of worlds in their own ways as real as the actual, or at least as real as any literary representation of the actual world. Their alternate-world settings necessarily make them more difficult to access than narratives set in versions of actuality, but it also makes them more mysterious and therefore, to a select readership at least, more attractive. The use of strategies like increased levels of detail and degrees of presence, as well as the complex presentation of their characters ameliorates the initial difficulty of access and allows deep immersion in the fictional worlds. In transreferential works mimesis often functions in ways significantly different from that of texts set in actuality. However, for the reader willing to adapt to such strategies, transreferential works are highly mimetic of non-actual realities.

6.1.2 Formalist Strategies and Reading Challenges

As a species of postmodernist fiction, transreferential fiction shares many of the ontological devices identified by Brian McHale. As McHale shows the case to be in cyberpunk (1992:224-242), most of these are embedded at the level of the fictional world. The frequency at which such devices occur and their occasional foregrounding suggests some similarities with formalist fiction.

Mise-en-abyme and other multiple-world structures are common. This very often takes the form of computer-generated or computer-related virtual realities, but also appears as "real" embedded worlds. It is also common for transreferential universes to be subdivided into numerous microworlds, very often at the level of fictional socio-political organisation.

Many transreferential fictions, and certainly the more self-conscious ones, are carnivalesque to some extent. The use of multiple narrators or focalisers is common, as are passages apparently quoted from texts in the fictional world, similar to Noon's "Game Cat" sections: reports, textbooks, histories, poems and songs, official instructions and the like appear in a great many transreferential texts. (Stephenson's *Snowcrash*, an otherwise not particularly formalist text, contains a dissertation of several pages on the new rules governing the toilet paper for a government office.) "Found texts" like these are often also structurally or visually marked, as epigraphs, chapter headings, or framing devices of other kinds.

Transreferential fictions also often contain *trompe l'oeuil* sections that start *in medias res* and turn out to be dreams, visions, hallucinations, history, stories and other types of fragments. Strange loops, while less common generally, are often incorporated as key plot elements in both early cyberpunk and its inheritors like Noon and Neal Stephenson, often as virtual beings becoming or trying to become real. A related strategy is the presentation of technologies that on first notice apparently disrupt lower tier correspondence relations, only to be eventually explained so as to be (more or less) compatible with actual-world physics. Noon's Vaz and Fecundity-10 are perhaps the most dramatic examples of this device.

The texts almost always enable the retrospective naturalisation of such transitions as fictionally real, so that the hesitation mainly amplifies the different ontologies within the fictional world. Highlighting the different ontological levels the reader needs to track such ontological glitches heighten interactivity, while demanding renewed immersion. However, the occurrence of formalist devices also occasions a momentary hesitation in immersion, a suspicion that the real world is calling you back.

Ontological irruptions flag fictional elements for re-examination, but their naturalisation and the immersion demanded by most transreferential fictions also generally disincentivises an external reading, or even a "double reading" where the reader is ironically "pretending to be hallucinated" while being aware of the mega-texts (*pace* Clute). Rather, I would suggest, transreferential fiction marks particular events for *later* re-examination, both reminding the reader that the time spent reading ought to somehow be reconciled with *Care*, and compartmentalising the reading into alternating stages of internal reading and external refiguring.

6.1.3 Interactivity and Immersion

Transreferential texts deploy a powerful suit of mimetic strategies to maximise immersion. Characters are often represented not only with access to their inner lives, but with access to their processes of perception and reflection, so that their consciousness within the world seems to guarantee its worldliness. This is further enhanced by the texts' insistence on presence in the fictional world, communicated through perspectivism and an emphasis on physical objects and environments. Highly detailed descriptions of fictional worlds support the various correspondence tiers, while the presence of temporal patterns – geological, historical, social, technological, and personal – that unfold in complimentary relations to each other and the world generate the impression that the world exists and changes independently of the specific action depicted, and of the reader's perusal of the text.

The very same complexity and density, especially explored as it is in non-actual worlds, demands significant interaction on the part of the reader. Neologisms have to be unpacked and occasionally reverse-engineered, technosocial and socio-political interdependencies have to be recognised and examined, and narrative patterns have to be tracked against characters' motives (which, in turn, might be heavily influenced by the world). The fictional contract and various narrative devices guide this interactivity, so that rather than preventing the reader from immersion, it commands a greater dedication to the immersion in the fictional world.

If transreferential fiction invites immersion, it does not do so unequivocally. While some mimetic elements are sustained, others may be perverted or elided, or subverted by the introduction of explicitly formalist elements (like the layers of formal frames in Noon's *Pollen* leading up to the formalist concrete prose of "The Sneeze"). Formalist elements like these threaten to break immersion, thus marking events in the narrative, characterisation or world-building with momentary interactive 'glitches' (figured in *The Matrix* by the same cat moving across the screen twice). Rarely sustained, these glitches seldom actually break immersion, but they do invite recourse to the reader's critical facilities.

Postmodern transreferential fiction is prone to layering meaning through intertextual references or the blurring of different ontological levels. Unless such layering is glaringly obvious, the immersion will carry the reader past, relegating formalist elements to the secondary layer of meaning generated by the text, marked for later re-examination. In the most 'developed' examples, as in Noon's work, the text is experienced as a virtual reality of sorts, stable enough as constructed world but boundless enough for repeated thought

experiments, in which the reader's ethical and social choices do impact their experience of the fictional world.

Interactive elements further include the stretching of the reader's extended present across different or sustained narrative moves. With his mind already engaged at several levels of immersion and interactivity, the reader becomes more receptive to textual modellings of thought processes. The modelled thought processes are never simply mimetic of actual-world thinking: invariably, they involve the experience of unusual or challenging ideas.

Transreferential fiction balances immersion against interactivity, often by selectively maximising the mimesis of some elements, while allowing others to be presented through formalist strategies. This effects a reading mode that is simultaneously immersive and open to challenging propositions. On the cusp between transreferentiality and formalism, texts like Noon's *Vurt* and *Pollen* generate worlds that on first reading hesitate between immersion and interactivity, but which on second reading resolve into immersive worlds that enable a high degree of interactivity – and flexibility – in the reading process.

The “estrangement” of transreferential fiction does complicate reading, but this estrangement both presents a challenge and provides its own rewards. In most transreferential texts, access is modulated in such a way that the primary elements of estrangement – for instance, the existence of alien races – are subsumed into the fictional contract. The existence of aliens is rapidly “naturalised” in the fictional world, resulting in each specific alien race by itself embroidering on the *novum* rather than renewing its shock. Within this immersion, though, formalist devices or truly confrontational content such as Scribble and Desdemona's incestuous relationships provoke the “cognition” that Suvin (1979) identifies as central to sf.

6.2 Secondary Findings

Content

Although the definition of transreferentiality has emphasised ‘reference worlds’ as a formal condition, the alternate worlds central to it also function as content. In addition to all sharing non-actual but worldly alternate worlds as setting, transreferential fictions across different subgenres display some recurring narrative givens.

Transreferential fiction features many ‘hackers’, voracious seekers of knowledge often eager to explore new ways of thinking: Case and Mona, Scribble, Casaubon, Saladin Chamcha, Clement Harcourt in Ackroyd's *English*

Music, Ambien II in *The Sirian Experiments*, Captain Quire in *Gloriana* (Moorcock's fiction, both genre- and literary-, abound with such characters).

Abnormal states of mind occur in virtually all transreferential texts I have read. Very often these are portrayed as native to non-human entities, whether artificial beings in sf, or supernatural entities in magic realism and fantasy.

Transreferential fiction not only focuses on alternate worlds, but very often depicts changes in the ontological structures of those worlds. Thus, in cyberpunk and related fiction, the world is transformed through micro-level informational descriptions and other singularities. In magic realism, some cataclysmic event changes either the status of characters or that of the world forever, although here the ramifications are often magical-ontological and political at the same time. In many fantasy texts, large-scale change threatens but is often averted, as in *Harry Potter*, various Conan stories, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrel*, and many others. In Le Guin's *Earthsea*, the first three books deal with cataclysm averted (although not change, *The Farthest Shore* implies), while the last two scale down to the personal to show changes in gender relations and the nature of magic happening. In limit-transreferential texts, the cataclysm is more often personal, but of no less ontological consequence for the characters: Casaubon finds a world of conspiracies, helps shape them, and ends the novel expecting death, while Ackroyd's Hawksmoor apparently merges into his seventeenth-century counterpart Nicholas Dyer.

Times of change and strange modes of being herald the appearance of sublime and grotesque events or entities, which in sf, magic realism and fantasy often take the form of god-like figures. One figure that appears very often, in metaphor or in 'person', is the god of knowledge and travellers, whether he is called Hermes, Anansi, Legba, or Enki (in Stephenson's *Snow Crash*). In limit-postmodernism, comparable characters equally herald change, but are often not *in themselves* god-like, but instead herald some inscrutable and unstoppable change.

The transcendental level of transreferential fiction is unusually active. For one thing, transcendental beliefs are often mentioned as part of the social texture of the fictional worlds – it's rare to find a universe in which all the aliens are atheists. More importantly, characters themselves also believe in inexplicable things (even if this is the omnipotence of an AI), and these beliefs are often grounded in real ontological truths that impact the lower levels of the worlds. In many cases, some transcendent, or at least both extremely powerful and inscrutable entity or force has a real presence in the fictional world. (One recent example is the indestructible, reality-warping Shrike in Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* [1989]). Such experiences are often modelled for the reader, in order

to explore or subvert ideas. The cognitive dimension Suvin identifies in sf, it seems, is a tendency belonging more broadly to transreferential fiction as a whole.

Serial Worlds and Extra-Textual Immersion

The texts analysed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 were not specifically selected with their serial nature in mind, but especially in sf and fantasy, serial worlds are common vehicles for transreferentiality. Serial worlds, at least when they are well-written, are not static, but appear to develop from instalment to instalment. Of course the narrative becomes increasingly more complex, with more interwoven narrative moves, many of which span several novels. The more a series progresses, the more difficult it becomes for a reader unfamiliar with the preceding texts to process both the narrative and the world. Thus series tend to form their own ‘mega-texts’, in a fairly strong sense, with characterisation (for example) built up through a great many references.

In well-written serial worlds, the increased complexity and density of the internal ‘mega-text’ enables extremely complex ontological ‘arguments’. In *Viriconium*, for example, the different texts are set in play against one another without the narrative explicitly proposing the multiverse until very late in the series. Characters and readers have more opportunities to learn, more opportunities to question, and more options to exercise.

Partly for the sake of narrative economy and partly to enhance the immersion of ‘experienced’ or loyal readers, later texts in a series rely ever more strongly on the internal ‘mega-text’ and in the process present extreme difficulties to a reader unfamiliar with it. This increasing complexity and increasing difficulty of access affects the reception of the fictional world. The scale and density becomes an ever closer approximation of the spatio-temporal experience of the actual world, increasing the ‘realism’ of the fictional world. As access becomes more difficult, dedicated readers are rewarded by a kind of implied prestige, as being ‘veterans’ of the series. This in turn grants the fictional world ontological weight in actuality as well; the ‘virtual community’ of readers becomes a group with a shared knowledge of a non-existent world. As ever, corroboration of one’s ideas lend them greater ontological weight.

This, in part, explains the transtextual – transreferential – commitment that readers display towards non-actual worlds, enabling immersion independent of the textual medium, and allowing fictional premises to reorganise their view of the world.

6.3 Implications of Transreferentiality for Approaches to Reading

The tension, or rather cooperation between immersivity and interactivity, and mimesis and functional disruption thereof in transreferential fiction vindicates Ricoeur's insistence on a dual reading. Many aspects of transreferential texts – the suspense, the momentary belief in propositions, the alternate modes of being – cannot be experienced in full during an external reading. Rather, these experiences rely on the reader's willingness to accept totally, if temporarily, the autonomy of the fictional world.

This is a truth grasped, but not clearly articulated in the ironic postmodern climate of the late 1980s and the early 1990s by Elias, Tschachler, Susana and the others collected in D'Haen and Bertens' collections *British postmodern fiction* (1994), and especially the tellingly named *Narrative turns and minor genres in postmodern fiction* (1995). The formalist fiction so beloved of "high postmodernism" (to ironically coin a phrase), and the reading strategies it required and taught does not represent the pinnacle of fiction. Rather, it expressed a need to develop the competency to go beyond the text actually printed on the page and to examine its premises critically – a desire, apologists would say, already common among sf fans.

The insights provided by reading transreferentiality first in an immersive and then in a critical idiom holds some implications for sf criticism as well, as most sf is by definition transreferential. In sf criticism, the idea of the mega-text is commonplace, and Clute, Broderick, and (less assertively) Csicsery-Ronay, among others, insist that sf texts can only be properly understood against the mega-text. As a corollary, they suggest that sf reading consists of a constant checking of a particular text against the mega-text. I find the mega-text to be an extremely powerful concept for writing, reading, and as a critical tool; but I do have some doubts as to both its status in practical reading and the degree to which it remains exclusive.

The dynamics of transreferential texts, and the common requirement of immersion to actually gain the full experience of the world and the experiences of wonder, paranoia or epiphany offered by the narratives, suggest a relation more complex and dynamic than that suggested by the insistence of sf critics on the cultural weight of the mega-text and the 'knowing wink'.

SF is full of easter eggs, but there is a difference between sly references like those of Pratchett, and embedded easter eggs like (to name only an obvious

one) the reference to Pynchon that opens *Neuromancer*. The latter is not necessarily *supposed* to be noticed by even ‘an accomplished reader’ on the fly during immersive reading; rather, it is there for exactly the kind of reader who wishes to return to the text during refiguration. In many cases, rather than allowing on reference breaking the reading frame, I suspect readers suspend the extra- or intertextual reference of easter eggs, only critically re-examining them during refiguration.

If we attach too much value to the megatext, we not only lose sight of some of the unique offerings of sf and transreferentiality in general; but the question arises: Where do you distinguish between the mega-text and the normal semantic relations of words to actuality? Is an ‘accomplished’ reader one who is able to separate while reading his knowledge, say, of computer systems from that of sf films from that of the megatext? Or is it one who has exactly *internalised* elements from the sf megatext, such as spaceships and doomsday weapons?

My definition and analyses of transreferential fiction suggests that, usually, the ‘best’ reading is not one that is ironic and half-removed, but one that alternates between internal and external reading, the latter most likely performed after a reading session (which might, or might not, correspond to chapter divisions and narrative moves). There is also evidence that many elements are imbricated into the reading contract, and thus taken during reading as ‘already accepted’ as a standard correspondence relation, rather than continually re-invoked. Thus, once we have accepted that a voice actor can change into a demon, or that humans can change their gender in a fictional world, we do not keep on reminding ourselves that these things are impossible in actuality.

The idea that ‘future history’ is always playful because it cannot be proven (Clute in Csicsery-Ronay, 2008:83; Csicsery-Ronay, 2008:83-97) is a very salient example of this problematic. *Viriconium* uses the sf frame *not* to free history, but to invoke the progression of the actual world to its entropy. Noel Carroll (in Ryan 2001:156) describes the reading of fiction as dependent on holding propositions unasserted (in terms of ‘truth’ and reality). Carroll’s point is that “[e]motional responses [...] are not sensitive to the distinction between asserted and unasserted propositions”; but it should follow that the models and imagined ontological structures built on those propositions are not “sensitive” to such distinctions either. If we read fiction by holding facts unasserted then there is no significant internal difference between pretending to believe in, say, Stephen Dedalus and pretending to believe in Iain Banks’ Culture. Believing in the latter, at least, allows us to hope for a better future.

If this opinion seems naïve or reactionary (from some points of view) it is worth considering that even in the US, where sf fans are particularly involved, the number attending panels at conferences represent a small, though by definition vocal, minority. The always ironic sublime described by

Csicsery-Ronay (2008:146-162) and the apparent exhaustion of sf noticed by James might not result from the texts themselves as much as it emerges from the reader and critic's over-reliance on writerly strategies of reading.

In this, sf criticism (and some sf readers) seem to have paralleled the history of postmodern criticism exactly: a greater reliance on theory has led to a greater expectation from the fiction and a more ironic reading. Consequently, too self-reflexive and ironic for the good of the genre, sf theorists fear the literature is nearing exhaustion.

It is entirely possible that any apparent "exhaustion" results from the clarity of distinction between sf as a genre and popular fiction breaking down. Reality has caught up with sf, and the distinct marketing of sf might be an exhausted commercial strategy. If so, the threat is not to sf as a tradition or even a mode, but to the marketing and celebration of sf as a distinct genre: in other words, to the fanbase, which is being largely supplanted by pop culture-saturated sci-fi fans at conferences. At the same time, the sf fanbase, its knowledge voracity and its modes of consciousness are spreading into communities like tvtropes, where sf becomes part of a more general media- and technology-savvy way of looking at the world, which is what sf has been arguing for all along in any case.

6.4 Refiguration

Where suspense is non-existent in most formalist fiction and fairly rare in (literary) metamimetic fiction, it is common in transreferential fiction. From Noon to Gibson to Harrison to Eco to Rushdie, narrative and emotional suspense are used to increase both immersion and interactivity simultaneously: immersion, because the reader becomes more committed to the propositions of the fictional world; and interactivity in experiencing fear, joy, eroticism, concern and other mental states. This transferral of Care also invites the prospect of the reader committing to the text as thought experiment more seriously.

Hence, I would argue, readers' otherwise irrational commitment to fantasy and science fiction texts. Transreferential fiction very often moves onto and modifies the transcendent order of correspondence relations, offering explanations for the social, psychological, and ontological conceptions that structure the world. Having learned to entertain alternate explanations, many readers are willing to apply ideas, understanding, goals, and ideals learnt from fiction to their actual lives. In that sense, transreferential fiction is ideally

suited to provide material not just for complex refiguration of fictional propositions, but also for the *transfiguration* of individual perspectives and responses towards life.

It bears mention that the great religious texts are all, in many ways, transreferential: transcending representations of the actual world for a world beyond actuality, which not only provides meaning to life, but is also seen as more real than the world of action.

From an external point of view, multilayered signification, active reading, and modelling of modes of being through narrative disruption or multiplication might easily be read as formalist. From an internal perspective though, it is *highly* mimetic as convincingly represented action, but mimetic of a different order of reality. This difference brings pleasures of its own. Much more than escapism, it allows the multiplication of possibilities and the construction in imagination of alternate ways in which actuality might be organised.

Certainly it answers to two of the central personality traits E.S. Raymond, privacy activist, hacker, amateur sociologist, and writer/compiler of the Online Hacker Jargon File identifies as typical of hackers (defined as people fascinated by and usually skilled at working with computers): the pursuit of knowledge, especially arcane knowledge, for its own sake (Raymond, 2004: "Personality characteristics"); and the construction of imaginary systems of thought and logic ("Hacker Humor"). SF is a very popular genre among hackers for exactly this reason, and the broader community of "hackers" must today also include many gamers (who, themselves, may make up more than 50% of the population, according to the ESA [2011]). Csicsery-Ronay makes a case for society gradually turning to what he calls 'science-fictional thinking' (2008:ix *et passim*), which closely approximates the hacker mindset. A number of sf authors explicitly align themselves with the hacker community: Gibson, Sterling, and Neal Stephenson, with Jeff Noon aligned to the related musical phenomenon of sampling and mixing (and, through his fiction at least, to gaming as well). Not surprisingly, many other authors that have written transreferential fiction share a similar promiscuous hunger for knowledge and factoids: Umberto Eco most prominently, but also Peter Ackroyd, Doris Lessing, Salman Rushdie, Neil Gaiman, and Lauren Beukes among many others.

At some level, the very fact that transreferential fiction is set in a *different* world necessarily prompts reverse extrapolation. All transreferential texts imply certain ontological questions. For any given text, what does the fictional ego need to learn or to forget to get to its world? What is the *What If?*

question that applies? What are the consequences for the denizens of the fictional world being different from actuality? What transformative rules would be needed to turn the actual world into an approximation of the fictional? What would the consequences of such a transformation be, and are some of those rules of transformation already in play?

In this sense, transreferential texts by definition have the potential to be read allegorically. Many teach ways of reading them allegorically, and many show the consequences of doing so, or not. Much of this is in play, but the game does have a serious edge to it: once learnt, such modes of thinking can be ignored, but they cannot be unlearnt. Seen in this way, it is not surprising that some transreferential fictions have inspired reactions that are almost religious in nature.

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