

# Introduction

On the exhausted subject of Frederic Jameson's postmodern theory, Sean Homer writes:

The central problem with the cultural logic thesis is that it remains at too high a level of abstraction; on the one hand, Jameson presents a persuasive account of an individual subject's experience of the disorienting world of global capitalism, and, on the other, a very generalized theory of the structural transformations of the system itself. What this work lacked, and the monumental *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* failed to deliver, was any systematic account of the mediations between the individual subject and the world system. (186)

This lack of mediation is hardly a flaw. Jameson aims to cognitively map the "strange new landscape" of late capitalist reality in broad, exteriorized terms (xx). Building on his 1984 essay, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," he describes the condition of postmodernity in terms of its various media and economies. The focus of his project is not the individual subject. It is the diverse productions of subjected communities of individuals. Homer critiques the ambivalence of Jameson's thesis. But this is precisely his point,

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as Jameson explains: “*Postmodernism* is not something we can settle once and for all and then use with a clear conscience. The concept, if there is one, has to come at the end, and not at the beginning, of our discussions of it” (xxii).

Scott Bukatman uses this logic in *Terminal Identity*, a study of subjectivity in postmodern science fiction. He contends that the flourish of electric technologies in the 1980s have led to “a deep cultural ambivalence... across a wide range of phenomena,” citing Jameson as a harbinger of his theory. Like Jameson, Bukatman expresses an anxiety about the condition of perception, ideology, language, being, and power in the postmodern world. His theory is far more specialized, however, concerning itself exclusively with cyberpunk science fiction. The thesis of *Terminal Identity* predicates that “it has become increasingly difficult to separate the human from the technological” and that “it has fallen to science fiction to repeatedly narrate a new subject that can somehow directly interface with—and master—the cybernetic technologies of the Information Age” (2). For Bukatman, science fiction maps the coordinates of the postmodern subject as produced by virtual and cybernetic forces. It is from this angle of incidence that *Technologized Desire* makes its departure.

While Bukatman localizes his project to a particular kind of science fiction, its scale is rather large, drawing on a range of contemporary cultural theories of the postmodern in order to interpret media such as literature, film, video, television, comics, and computer games. *Terminal Identity* is arranged thematically and reads narratives that address image-culture, virtuality, spatial relations, body and mind invasion, and the figuration of the cyborg. Bukatman avows that cyberpunk texts contain the most effective representations of terminal identity, which produces an anxious, defensive subject compelled to mediate “a complex trajectory between the forces of instrumental reason and the abandon of a sacrificial excess. The texts promise and even produce a transcendence which is also always a surrender” (329).

Arthur Kroker and David Cook would call this a panic reading of the postmodern condition, a “hypertheory... for the end of the world” that aspires

to map out the entropic social economy of electronically technologized space (ii). Such a reading can be extended to the fictions scrutinized in *Terminal Identity*, most of which function as critical hypertheories. I operate under this assumption in *Technologized Desire* and approach science fiction texts as sources that can be read as technocultural phenomena as well as sources that read into the nature of technoculture. My scope, however, looks awry from Bukatman's, focusing on proto- and post-cyberpunk texts in an effort to deliberate the origins, the contemporary condition, and the supposed future of terminal identity. Additionally, whereas Bukatman discusses the terminal subject broadly, mapping its defining coordinates, my interest is more theoretical. I am specifically concerned with how the forces of technocapitalism produce the terminal subject as both self and other and how human nature has been (de)figured by the technology of the commodity form. With this in mind, I try to achieve a mediation between the individual subject and the world system that is abstracted in Jameson's *Postmodernism*.

The terms *self* and *selfhood* have been used in multiple contexts. Some use them interchangeably with *subject* and *subjectivity* as markers for the individual affected and produced by sociocultural machinery. Others differentiate the two. In his *Écrits* and seminars, for example, Jacques Lacan portrays the self as a node in a symbolic network of other nodes constituted by images and a desire for the Other (which is ironically the self), while in a discussion of Baudelaire's poetry in *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man portrays it as an authorial voice and courier of meaning (172). Jungians perceive the self as an archetype that gives birth to the ego, i.e., "a mere ground state, an auto-conspired form, out of which the more complicated ego can later distinguish itself" (Kelly, *Out of Control* 124). Donna Haraway depicts it as a liminal, unnatural, polymorphously perverse cyborg. For Michel Foucault the self is a technology that allows "individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" in order to achieve a higher emotional and ontological state (225).

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A theory of selfhood as technology is acutely relevant now considering the explosion of high media technologies in the postmodern era that have revised the nature of low technologies like language, power and production. In the last sixty years, media such as television, video, telephony, computers, cyberspace and virtuality have opened up new existential matrices. Kroker and Cook consider this formation in *The Postmodern Scene*, defining the self as a hollow shell, raped of its insides by media technologies:

The self is now like what the quantum physicists call a “world strip,” across which run indifferent rivulets of experience. Neither fully mediated nor entirely localized, the self is an empty sign: colonized from within by technologies for the body immune; seduced from without by all of the fashion tattoos; and energized by a novel psychological condition—the schizoid state of postmodern selves who are (simultaneously) predators and parasites. (vii)

Although it has validity, this apocalyptic, essentially Baudrillardian definition of the self as a schizophrenic template onto which culture has been imprinted is a postmodern cliché. Kroker and Cook imply that the self is not a technology but rather something produced (to be schizophrenic) by technology. They also imply that the self originates outside of the theoretical body it exists on. Postmodern logic of this kind implicitly disconnects the self from the subject. These chapters attempt to reconnect the two, viewing the self as a creative, technological extension of the subject. My position derives from the theory of electronic media developed by Marshall McLuhan in books like *The Mechanical Bride*, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, the latter of which contains the famous chapter “The Medium Is the Message.” Published nearly forty years ago, *Understanding Media* is more applicable now than ever to contemporary identity politics and media ecology. McLuhan opens with these remarks:

After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (149)

Foreshadowing a final phase of social implosion that has already materialized to some degree (e.g. the Internet), McLuhan technologizes the human and argues that the technological externalizes the human's internal machinery. This is not a post-industrial formation. Technological extensions have always been our definitive characteristics, beginning with the technologies of language and hieroglyphics, culminating in capitalist media technologies. These extensions constitute postmodern selfhood. Born from the machinic body of the subject, selfhood originates in the cultural atmosphere produced by the very technology that constitutes it. The technology of culture produces subjectivity and influences how the self extends from the body. Hence the self is always-already embroiled in a vicious circle of production that has reached a dangerous level in the realm of advanced capitalism. Simply put, the self has become ultraviolent.

McLuhan suggests that our electric technological extensions are progressively more determined by corporate forces and that soon they will become sheer consumer-capitalist *enfants terrible*. Like Baudrillard (although

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not to such a dire, prophetic extreme), he forecasts an age of implosion when media terminally collapse ontological, metaphysical, ideological and linguistic boundaries. Few high technologies today are not produced for some sort of capitalist gain and excess, a practice that reproduces low technologies like language according to a consumer ethic. In addition to being the ultimate medium for narrating the cybernetic subject, as Bukatman says, the science fiction genre is a solvent medium for critiquing the ways in which electric technology narrates the *consumer* subject. This is mainly how I extend and diverge from Bukatman's work: by shifting focus exclusively to the commodification of the subject and the self as it figures in science fiction. As our technetronic dependency intensifies, the genre becomes more important not only in terms of extrapolating potential futures but of representing and assessing the socioeconomic structure of contemporary life. My discussion conveys an awareness of how bodies and identities are distinguished by a mediatized anomie within a developing field of study that Patrick O'Donnell has called "cultural pathology" (*Latent* vii).

Pathology (in the form of paranoia, psychosis and schizophrenia) runs rampant in postmodern science fiction, which, jacked into the matrix of implosive, technocapitalist society, abandons the boyish science fiction of the Golden Age that was characterized by a sense of wonder and discovery. Beginning most meaningfully in the early 1960s with the New Wave, a term borrowed from the experimental cinema of French filmmakers Jean-Luc Goddard and François Truffaut,<sup>1</sup> science fiction writers like Harlan Ellison, J.G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, Michael Moorcock and Samuel R. Delany practiced a darker, more psychological method, often representing the subject as a construction of the media landscape.<sup>2</sup> This aesthetic was furthered in the 1980s by cyberpunk narratives, which Jameson has repeatedly been quoted as saying are "the supreme literary expression[s] if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (*Postmodernism* 419).<sup>3</sup> Writers associated with this subgenre include Rudy Rucker, Pat Cadigan, John Shirley, Lewis Shiner, and most importantly William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, whose respective

novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), and anthology of short fiction, *Mirrorshades* (1986), are its criterion works. Inspired by the artistic and cultural sensibility of the beat generation, cyberpunks continued to explore the psychological condition of the postmodern subject, underscoring its schizophrenic body and fixating on its production by hard technology and the theater of hyperreality. Larry McCaffery writes in *Storming the Reality Studio*:

cyberpunk authors constructed works that moved seamlessly through the realms of hard science and pop culture, realms that included chaos theory and Madonna, dada and punk rock, MTV and *film noire*, Arthur Rimbaud and Lou Reed, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Oliver North, instant reruns and AI. 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. (12-13)

Possessed by physical, psychic, linguistic and narrative violence, cyberpunk still offers the sharpest representations of cultural pathology and the most lucid critiques of technocapitalist subjectivity and selfhood. The 1990s saw the assimilation of the cyberpunk subgenre into mainstream science fiction, which was itself bleeding into mainstream pop literature (e.g. the novels of Michael Crichton), as many formerly distinctive cyberpunk tropes and contrivances began to materialize in the real world (e.g. the computer revolution, cyberspace, the cult of surgically altered identity). Neal Stephenson, Jeff Noon, Greg Egan, Steve Aylett, Warren Ellis, Steve Beard and other neocyberpunks have carried on the tradition to some degree, but the well from which they draw has lost the feeling of “the Now and the New”; as the neocyberpunk Wachowski Brothers show in the Matrix trilogy, whose innovation stems almost entirely from camerawork and CGI,

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cyberpunk cannot exist in the contemporary postmodern universe except as a chestnut. Advanced electric technology is no longer the novelty or even the curio it used to be. In the last two decades more than ever, it has not only become a standard of daily life, but an outright addiction nurtured with a profound air of *jouissance*. The sexualized obsession with the “extensions of man” (i.e. with the technological/self) is at the center of my concept of how our present day commoditocracy pathologizes the postmodern subject.

A trend in postmodern science fiction has been to posit agency from the terminal constructedness of the technocapitalist body. As I demonstrate, one way this has been executed is by dint of madness. Soft science fiction films like *Brazil* (1985) and *Army of Darkness* (1993) and the protocyberpunk cut-up novels of William S. Burroughs, for instance, deploy psychosis as a cure for the postmodern condition. Pathology ironically combats pathology. The subject does not achieve transcendence but rather a metaphysical and perceptual shift; meanwhile its body remains plugged in to the machine. More prevalent than this kind of agency is free will. Symptomatic of some recent postmodern science fiction is the desire to escape the production powers of capitalist technologies by dint of human choice. These texts suggest the human has the organic capacity to choose a selfhood distinct from the technological. They fail to acknowledge that the self *is* the technological, that the technological retroactively refashions subjectivity, and that choice is an illusion essential for maintaining systemic order. Fantasy dictates the structure of reality—this is the fundament of my concept of terminal choice, which concedes that the only choice available to the postmodern subject, despite all desire and action, is rooted in a dependency on (and devotion to) consumer-capitalism and the ultraviolent schizophrenic production of the commodity-self. Terminal choice means that free will is a fiction.

I treat the texts examined in this work as cognitive maps of late capitalist space that engage with the problem of terminal choice. Either they critique this problem, or they reify it by being subject to it (i.e. by not being aware of it), or both. Whatever they do, each uniquely illustrates a map of the

technocapitalist mediography, representing the agential desires of the human to be free of the machine and, by way of this representation, (re)affirming the machinic, anthropologic nature of the human. The first chapter addresses Cameron Crowe's film *Vanilla Sky* (2001). I begin with this text because it dynamically portrays the state of the contemporary, postmillennial mediatized body. The protagonist, a New York City publishing executive, is disfigured in a car accident and reinvented in a computer program he purchases online. Unaware that his real body is stored in cryogenic freeze and that his diegetic reality is a fantasy, he vows to become a more assiduous capitalist and partner to his girlfriend. The program experiences a glitch. Assisted by technical support, he realizes that he is living a dream and is given the opportunity to choose between returning to the real world or to another, glitch-free dream. The trouble with the film is its moral imperative. Crowe equates goodness with a return to the real world and a functional capitalist existence; he equates badness, in turn, with virtual, pseudocapitalist activity. This is a representative instance of terminal choice that sets the tone for the rest of my discussion.

In the second chapter I revert back forty years to the cut-up trilogy of William S. Burroughs: *The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962) and *Nova Express* (1964). These wild satires of American image-culture are derivative examples of the pathological postmodern condition, the reconstruction of the body by media technologies, and the spectacle of consumerism. Burroughs transmits his message via the media technology of film. He constructs a cognitive map that delineates how 1950s and 60s America used cinematic imagery to mediate social relations. The mechanics of film infuse his narratives, creating an irreality fit for the schizophrenic character of postmodern subjectivity. Burroughs essentially engages in a pathological form of play that revolts against terminal constructedness. The effect is not agential. Nor is it intended to be. Certifiable panic hypertheories, the cut-ups demonstrate that there is no escape from the machine and no choice but to live as a technopathological extension of the

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machine. This idea spills over into my next chapter, a schizoanalysis of Sam Raimi's multigeneric film *Army of Darkness* in which a department store clerk named Ash attempts to escape his meager, monotonous life. I show how Ash is a terminal subject whose journey into the medieval past can be read as a schizophrenic delusion of grandeur exposing his machinic unconscious. In his wish-fulfillment fantasy, Ash aspires to transcend his coded, capitalist self. But he only succeeds in reifying his status as a common postmodern subject. To bring Ash's experience to light, I use the anti-Oedipal theory of Deleuze and Guattari, two of postmodernity's most dynamic capitalist philosophers and stylists. Conversely, I use his experience to read against Deleuze and Guattari, arguing that their seemingly revolutionary theory is constrained by the parameters of the socioeconomic matrix they aspire to destabilize.

From this point I return to the twenty first century and concentrate on science fictions that speak more directly to the present state of postmodernity by representing potential futures that terminally historicize the past. Chapter four is a reading of Max Barry's novel *Jennifer Government* (2003). Unlike *Army of Darkness*, Burroughs' cut-ups and *Vanilla Sky*, all of which operate in diverse realms of fantasy, this novel operates in a realistic diegesis. It depicts a near-future society where the consumer-capitalist system has evolved into a fascist regime. Governed by gigantic multikorporations that have created a global free market, the subjects of this society are identified by the dynamism with which they produce and consume commodities. Barry has conceived of what McCaffery calls "the ideology of hyperconsumption" and "the next phase of capitalist expansion" ("Avant-Pop" xviii). *Jennifer Government* envisions a postcapitalist future in the sense that postmodernism is an extension of some aspects of modernism and an innovative breaking away from other aspects of it. My interest in this chapter centers on the varying levels of violence summoned by the ideology of hyperconsumption. Violence is the lifeblood of postmodern cultural pathology, and I pursue it further in my fifth and final chapter, a study of the postapocalyptic Matrix trilogy, namely the latter two films, *Reloaded* (2003) and *Revolutions* (2003). Falling

into the subgenre of “neurorealism,” the trilogy is a pastiche of tropes and clichés that constitutes the historical body of the science fiction genre, a Deleuzoguattarian rhizome that can be entered and exited from multiple doorways, and like much twentieth century science fiction (among them Deleuze and Guattari’s books on capitalism and schizophrenia), it presents a humanistic line of flight from technocapitalist oppression. The trilogy’s map of deterritorialization critiques the agential desires of the science fiction genre, which has recurrently insinuated that the human is separate from the technological and that a “natural,” non-capitalist selfhood is realizable. The Wachowski’s films represent the genre’s collective anxiety that, in the postmodern world, nature has become a machine.

Like Bukatman’s *Terminal Identity*, *Technologized Desire* encompasses a range of narratives, including stories, novels, comics, philosophy, cultural theory, and especially films. As we drown in the torrent of media that floods our daily experience, and as the technology of writing continues to be usurped by the technology of images, cinema becomes the dominant artistic and cultural medium. In many ways it is already the dominant postmodern medium, and certainly one of the largest global late capitalist enterprises. With its focus on the visualization of extrapolated and imaginary devices, entities and realities, science fiction is a perfect site for filmmakers to test the limits of media technology, particularly in terms of special effects, which have evolved at an accelerated rate in the computer age. The Matrix trilogy itself revolutionized filmmaking with its virtual “bullet-time” CGI; since the release of the first film in 1999, these effects have appeared in other films inside and outside of the genre and paved the way for newer effects, such as the “motion capture” technique of Robert Zemeckis’ *The Polar Express* (2004) and *Beowulf* (2007). In the wake of the trilogy, Stacey Abbot has argued that all CGI films fusing the body with filmmaking technologies fall into the category of science fiction despite whatever genre they claim to be. “The interdependence of humanity and technology is seen not only in the stories projected on the screen but in the production process itself,

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with its creation of ever more elaborate CGI cyborgs. The very techniques of filmmaking are increasingly the science fiction of today” (105). All this is indicative of a greater development: *the science fictionalization of reality*.

What used to be an alternative genre of scientific speculation and fantasy is rapidly becoming mainstream as its fictional *novums* continue to be actualized and normalized (and thus *denovated*) in the real world. Capitalist technologies shape these denovations<sup>4</sup> for unrelenting socioeconomic ends. It is an ever more pathological and violent form of production, anthropologism and technicity<sup>5</sup> that has spread across the social mediascape and emerged as terminal identity’s most visible modality. *Technologized Desire* explores the variables of this modality in an effort to illustrate a postcapitalist identity, if only in silhouette. We are, after all, still enmeshed in the beginnings of such a development. But silhouettes are often more revealing than the bodies they outline.