This essay, like the last, arose from an Eaton science fiction conference, but the circumstances were very different. In 1992, the conference took place in Leeds, and I was the organiser as Johnny-on-the-spot, with (the late) George Slusser, of University of California-Riverside, handling the American end, providing some funds, and arranging later publication. The theme was ‘cyberpunk and the future of narrative’. Organising the conference at Leeds was a misery. There was a university Conference Officer, who was supposed to ‘facilitate’ conferences, but his real concern was to cover his own salary, and if possible make a profit for the university, by screwing as much money out of the conference as possible. So the university overcharged for everything on its premises, and forbade anything off its premises, which led to all sorts of trouble, ruffled feathers, etc. This paper accordingly arose out of a disaster, and a contretemps.

The disaster – only a disaster in academic terms, it is true – was this. It was my first encounter with the American conference format of three 20-minute papers in a 90-minute session. I now realise, as I had not then, that this is so set in stone as to have become a ritual. I had, however, twigged that Americans expect you actually to read a paper, not just talk from notes like the British do, and think anything else is bad form. (This, by the way, is a mistake: most papers at US academic conferences are read at machine-gun speed to fit the time-scale, in convoluted written syntax, which the ear cannot take in, and frequently delivered in a monotone to the reader’s top shirt-button. The important thing is that the paper shall have been read, not that anyone should understand it.) Just the same, I duly typed out a paper, got to my session in a thoroughly frazzled state, hauled the paper out of my briefcase – and discovered it was just blank sheets, as I had picked up the wrong pile of paper. I delivered it anyway, since I knew what I meant to say, and it was called something like ‘Echoes of Ancient Epic in Contemporary
Much of it drew out a comparison between Greg Benford’s *Great Sky River* (1987) and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and very clever it all was. But then Greg, who was in the audience, said he’d never read the *Aeneid*. Under pressure, he admitted he thought he’d skimmed through a graphic-novel version of it, in Japanese, when stuck in an airport somewhere. But clearly that wasn’t enough, which just goes to show that there’s such a thing as coincidence, a valuable thing to remember. Still, my paper as delivered was a disaster.

As for the contretemps, the topic was ‘cyberpunk’, and at the opening plenary session, knowing that I hadn’t read as much as I should, I suggested that we might valuably decide on what was the cyberpunk ‘canon’. I was really asking for a booklist of suggested reading, but it was very much the wrong thing to say.1 ‘Canon’ is a dirty word in academic studies, for it suggests control, authority, fixity, whereas the ‘gesture politics’ of the trade demands diversity, freedom, and letting a thousand flowers bloom. So I got a good telling-off for being a control-freak. After which, and rather reinforcing the point made in the introduction to the last item about academic ‘gesture politics’, not only did almost all contributors talk about the same author (William Gibson), almost all the papers were about the same book, *Neuromancer*.2 Edward James – another person with a double life, as professor of medieval history and editor of *Foundation* – remarked on the irony of this at the final plenary session, and added that he had spent the 1980s rejecting articles on *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and it looked as if he would spend the 1990s rejecting articles on *Neuromancer*. Anyway, no one during the conference said anything about Bruce Sterling, surely the other major founder of cyberpunk, and I decided for the published volume to replace my failed paper with this one.

It does pick up some themes mentioned already, one of them being that Qualified Reality, as I call it, demands a lot of awareness of its readers, a lot of literary and philosophical background, and a lot of putting-things-together, as well as being deeply and deliberately unsettling. I would add that my comment in the introduction to item 1 about sf preferring the unpredictable word to the *mot juste*, the one-that-doesn’t-fit to one-that-fits, was borne out by the fact that the word in

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1 The overview I was asking for has since been provided by Mark Bould, ‘Cyberpunk’ (Bould 2005).
2 In the volume of published articles, *Fiction 2000* (Slusser and Shippey 1992), George and I managed to rebalance matters somewhat, so that ‘William Gibson’ appeared in only four article titles, with *Neuromancer* in one more. One author and one book still dominated its pages.
the title, ‘ghostlinesses’, was emended from plural to singular by the copy-editors of the published volume of papers, and nothing I could do could get it back. Copy-editors always prefer what is called in Latin the *facilior lectio*, the easier reading: sf often goes for the hard one instead. There are of course dumb sf stories, but on the whole it is not a dumb genre, and it is often a very challenging one.

Finally, one of the problems with live authors, apart from them appearing in the flesh to contradict you, is that they will keep on writing. It would be presumptuous to pick over Bruce Sterling’s very distinguished post-1992 list of publications to see how much they fitted my analysis of him here, but I have thought it only decent to write a brief update on his subsequent work. Suggestions for further reading should always be welcome, the point I tried to make at the start of the 1992 conference.
In chapter 3 of Bruce Sterling’s second novel, *The Artificial Kid* (1980), the Kid himself attends the carnival of Harlequinade, set in his world’s Decriminalized Zone. The participants are in costume: historical costumes from the future’s extended past, fish or animal costumes, with also:

the advocates of pure bizarrerie ... people with no faces, or four arms, or eight legs; people in chains, in webs, in masses of bubbling froth; people dressed as the dead, the living, the not-yet-to-be, and the never-could-be.

The scene is not a highly stressed one, and it may seem perverse to see in it a leitmotiv for Sterling’s work. But to quote the author again: ‘A symbol has meaning if someone gives it meaning’ (*Schismatrix* (1985), chap. 2). It is possible to argue that Sterling, even more than other science fiction authors, deliberately sets out to explore and to expand that area which we might label as ‘Qualified Reality’: the linguistic area of ‘to be + qualifiers’, already existent in common speech as ‘has-beens’ and ‘might-have-beens’, extended here to ‘not-yet-to-bes’ and ‘never-could-bes’, but taken elsewhere in Sterling to states which even the highly flexible English verb can barely accommodate.

Take, for instance, a short story by Sterling in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* for September 1984 (reprinted in his 1989 collection *Crystal Express*). It is called ‘Tellliamed’, and can be described with almost indecent brevity. In it an old philosopher of the period of the Enlightenment, c.1737, sits on the seashore and unwarily inhales a gift of something like coca powder sent him by a correspondent, believing that it is snuff. Not surprisingly, he then sees a vision in the sea of a ‘Dark Girl’, whom he equates with ignorance, and who complains that her reign is over and that the new philosophy of science will eclipse her. Summarised like that, the story
becomes an icon of modern orthodoxy, a ‘Whig Interpretation of History’ applied in more-than-textbook style to the history of science (that home of ‘Whig interpretations’); it is a ‘must-be-so’ story. Yet, though nothing said above is false, and nothing major has been omitted, no reader is likely to take the story just as sketched. For one thing, there is the ‘coca’; de Maillet’s vision could be/is a drug-induced hallucination, predictably enough supporting his life’s work on the one hand, on the other expressing his secret fears. More penetratingly, even an ignorant modern reader cannot help noticing a series of clashes between reality as perceived in 1737 and as it is perceived now. De Maillet’s field of study is fossils, a major evidential area for the development of the modern scientific world view; and he has seen things which we too have seen, are prepared to believe in, have a theory to account for – for instance, seashells high on cliffs and in mountains. How did they get there? By geological change, we believe/know. By the steady shrinking of the sea, argues de Maillet. Our belief, a product of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has vastly extended the timescale of the Earth, caused at the very least major problems for Bible-centred theorists, and also provided the required time space for Darwin’s theory of evolution to work in. (For an interesting account of the importance of geology in the pre-Darwinian period, see Gould 1987.) De Maillet’s belief is like ours in that it leads to conflict with Revelation: the letter he is reading at the beginning (and which has the ‘coca’-powder with it) is from a Jesuit friend, rebuking him for his ‘System of Geology’ and insisting that it cannot triumph against Dogma. But his belief is unlike ours in that it assumes that the seeds of all life must have come from the sea, which must once – the seashells prove it! – have covered the globe. Even people must once have been mermen; the orang-utans of the Dutch East Indies must surely have only recently emerged from the ocean; de Maillet is watching the sea in patient hope that he too will see an ‘emergence’.

De Maillet’s view, in our belief system, is irritating or comic in its mixture of approximation to and deviation from what is now accepted. To put it crudely, we – most Fantasy & Science Fiction readers, most readers of science fiction – are for him against literalist churchmen and against bourgeois insecurity, against him in his ‘one-way’ vision of the past, against him over evolution, orang-utans, giants’ bones and fossilised ships down iron-mines. He says things, without the ‘coca’, which we are not prepared to believe in. And what he sees under the influence of the ‘coca’, we may well believe, is a rejection of himself as well as of his opponents. To the question he keeps asking, ‘What of my System? ... Will it be revealed as truth? ... Will my work persist?’, the acolytes of ignorance only reply evasively; but one of the ironies of the story
is that it will not persist. The Enlightenment that this philosopher has fathered will reject him and send his System into oblivion.

What, then, are de Maillet and his System in terms of Qualified Reality? They are not history (‘was’), nor utter fantasy (‘never-could-be’). Rather, they represent a blind alley, by modern standards, which nevertheless at least raises the doubt whether the modern consensus is not an improved but essentially similar blind alley; the philosopher and his System are a ‘was-would-be’, or a ‘could-have-been-would-be’. They inhabit, however one puts it, a philosophic space somehow intermediate between standard conceptions. Creating that space is the point of the story.

It could be said that this is common enough in science fiction, whose job it is to examine possibilities. Yet there is a great gap between ‘Tellamied’ and, say, the lead story of that issue of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Frederik Pohl’s ‘The Blister’, or Bruce Sterling’s own Fantasy & Science Fiction story from four years later (June 1988), ‘Our Neural Chernobyl’ (this one reprinted in the 1992 collection Globalhead). In ‘Neural Chernobyl’, Sterling playfully imagines a catastrophe like Chernobyl in the field of recombinant DNA research, which leads to an AIDS-type virus spreading intelligence among the animals. In ‘The Blister’, Manhattan is about to be covered with an artificial dome, part of the progress towards a new Utopia chronicled in Pohl’s The Years of the City (1984). Both stories, in short, are set in the future, but suggest that the future has roots / analogs in the present, and is (Sterling) possible / dangerous or (Pohl) possible / desirable. But ‘Tellamied’ is set in the past; offers competing visions of the future from the past; and suggests that the present was once only a vision in the past, and not a natural or inevitable one at that. As for whether our reality or de Maillet’s is preferable, one can only say that the story throws up its hands, leaving us with a highly ambiguous image of a pebble from the shore, clutched by de Maillet as irrefutable evidence, giggled at by children as a sign of insanity. This story by Sterling occupies a much more uncertain space within Qualified Reality than the great bulk of science fiction.

Conscious awareness of such possibilities is a major feature of Sterling’s work, as of other authors within the field of ‘cyberpunk’. The notion of past visions of the future, or ‘yesterday’s tomorrows’, is the centre of William Gibson’s first published story from 1981, ‘The Gernsback Continuum’, reprinted in Sterling’s field-defining anthology Mirrorshades (1986). In this the central character is first reminded of some of the images of the future current in the 1930s: pulp-fiction covers, ‘futuristic’ architecture, sketches of twelve-propeller ‘flying wing’ airliners with ballrooms and squash courts, designed to drone across the
Atlantic in less than two days. Slowly recognising the persisting reality of these visions, the narrator finds himself one day ‘over the Edge’: he sees the ziggurat-city, the personal gyroscopes, the giant wing-liner, even the blond, smug, healthy future citizens of the 1930s, with their immortal line: ‘John, we’ve forgotten our food-pills’. Amphetamine psychosis? The explanation is offered, as is the ‘coca’ in Sterling’s story. But a friend suggests a ‘classier explanation’ to the narrator via the notion of a ‘mass unconscious’.

‘I’d say you saw a semiotic ghost ... They’re semiotic phantoms, bits of deep cultural imagery that have split off and taken on a life of their own.’

The notion of the ‘semiotic ghost’ is discussed no further, but, as with ‘Telliumed’ and its intermediate philosophic space, ‘The Gernsback Continuum’ has no function other than to create that notion. One might note that Gibson’s story in a sense goes further than Sterling’s in making the point that science fiction – old science fiction, ‘could-be’ science fiction – dies quickly and is at the mercy of changing opinions (see, further, Westfahl 1992). Conversely, Sterling’s story goes further than Gibson’s in providing no secure point, no accepted here-and-now reality to set the false vision against. In Sterling’s story, the ‘Dark Girl’ is a ‘semiotic phantom’ from de Maillet’s mind; his correspondent’s Dogma can also be seen as a ‘ghost’ of dead belief; but de Maillet’s System is a ghost too, even weaker than Dogma. The whole story is a conflict of tenuities.

Other stories by Sterling take such tenuities even further. Another good brief example is the story ‘Dinner in Audoghast’, from Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine (May 1985) (also now in Crystal Express). This is set in what one might call a ghost city – its name, of course, suggests ‘ghost’ as well as ‘ghastly’, and perhaps ‘Gormenghast’ – a city allegedly existent in sub-Saharan Africa sometime in the eleventh century. To the people chatting there over dinner, the Christian world of Europe is a fable, of cannibalism and savages; its inhabitants are juxtaposed with gorillas, these latter real but disappointing. ‘My grandfather owned a gorilla once’, observes a diner. ‘Even after ten years, it could barely speak Arabic’. The disorienting effect of this remark is reminiscent of the merfolk/orang-utans of Sterling’s earlier story, but it also helps to move Audoghast out of readily identifiable space. Are we in a little-known but real frame of history (a ‘was’)? Or are we in an alternate\(^1\) world

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\(^1\) For ‘alternate’ and ‘alternative’, see item 7, below.
(a ‘might-have-been’)? Whatever the answer, the connection with our own reality is achieved by bringing on a repulsive and leprous prophet who, Cassandra-like, foretells a string of things we recognise as truth, including the destruction of Audoghast, only to be laughed to scorn by his auditors. They are wrong, we are right, and one of the diners, a poet, senses as much, in a passage reminiscent of Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ sonnet, which is also a scene of ‘disfigurement’ like those I discuss in the ‘Fall of America’ essay at the end of this volume. But the rest of the diners console him, laughing at the vision of civilised Europeans, pointing out that there must always be a place to control the ivory trade, for ‘elephants are thick as fleas’, while, in the last resort:

‘Well, surely there are always slaves’, said Manimenesh, and smiled, and winked. The others laughed with him, and there was joy again.

This ending, of course, is fiercely ironic. It presents as true what we know to be false; it presents fact as prophesy, and fantasy as fact. Yet, oddly, it has no moral point to make (not even about slavery). If the story ‘says’ anything, it is only that people’s expectations are often wrong. It is an exercise again in Qualified Reality. And, to cut the matter short, one need say only that several Sterling stories are similarly analysable: for instance, his collaboration with Lewis Shiner, ‘Mozart in Mirrorshades’ (a switch on the ‘alternate world’ sub-genre of science fiction), or his collaboration with Gibson, ‘Red Star, Winter Orbit’ (in which present visions of space exploration have become ‘a dream that failed’, a modern version of Gernsback). But the point can perhaps be taken as established. Bruce Sterling, like other ‘cyberpunk’ authors, but more consistently and centrally, has set out to explore the domains of Qualified Reality, always perhaps implied by the creation of science fiction, but never previously as thoroughly or consciously exploited.

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Having said that, one may consider Gibson’s coinage of the phrase ‘semiotic ghost’. How appropriate to Sterling is it? Remembering, of course, that, in general and popular belief, to be a ghost it is a necessary precondition to be dead. ‘The Gernsback Continuum’ deals with dead

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2 Both these stories are in Bruce Sterling’s *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1986), but were first published in respectively *Omni* (Sept. 1985) and *Omni* (July 1983).
futures. But surely that must be a limiting case. If science fiction admits that all its futures are dead or stillborn, it removes most of its raison d’être. How can the ‘semiotic ghost’ co-exist with the classic science fiction mode?

Here Sterling’s most suggestive story is ‘Green Days in Brunei’, a 20,000 word novella from Asimov’s (October 1985) (once again reprinted in Crystal Express). This exemplifies several of the ‘cyberpunk’ features celebrated in Sterling’s Mirrorshades editorial: internationalism (the story is set in Brunei, with a Canadian hero of Chinese parentage and other characters by birth Australian, Malay or British); the notion of the computer net (it has lovers who communicate by bulletin board); the personalisation of technology (following Sterling’s editorial claim that ‘Eighties tech sticks to the skin … Not for us the giant steam-snorting wonders of the past’). This last point is in fact the science fictional centre of the story. Its hero, Turner Choi, is in Brunei to revive an old robot assembly line and put it to work making sailboats; not much of a job, in his view, ‘a kind of industrial archaeology’. But as the story unfolds we come to see that opinion as a relic of Western thinking, present-view-of-the-future thinking, created by a set of cultural prejudices. Perhaps the main point about Brunei – the reason for placing the story there – is that in such places cultural expectations, Eastern/Western dichotomies, are least powerful; Brunei is a cultural Free Zone. In one scene Turner is taken to an old ruin where the Bruneians have set up their satellite dishes. As they walk through the ruins:

Turner saw a tattooed face, framed in headphones, at a shattered second-story window. ‘The local Murut tribe’, Brooke said, glancing up. ‘They’re a bit shy’.

The contrast is repeated in Sterling’s novel Islands in the Net (1988), where again a Westerner sees, on a Caribbean island, an icon of alienness ‘plugged in’ to the electronic community:

At a sea-level floating dock, a dreadlocked longshoreman looked them over coolly, his face framed in headphones.

The Murut and the Grenadian will not interact face-to-face with Westerners; they remain aloof or alien, ‘shy’ or ‘cool’, marked off by tattoos or dreadlocks. Yet on a cultural or technological level, they do interact. They want the headphones, the screens, the Net. At the centre of ‘Green Days’, Turner Choi comes to understand what can and what cannot be culturally transmitted. The job he thought was ‘industrial
archaeology' turns out to be a chance to export and propagandise a new, 'green' way of life, in Ocean Arks that trade, haul freight and grow food on their greenhouse decks, all using renewable energy alone. The ideal might be defined as the 'electronic kampong': new technology, free access to information, old cultural patterns, non-exploitative use of resources.

One of the words Sterling uses to define this new understanding is *bricolage*, a term borrowed from the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (English trans. 1966: 16–36), who is mentioned overtly in the story. Turner Choi is a *bricoleur*, one who can make do with the leftover junk from the twentieth century. ‘That’s what bricolage is’, says the Englishman Brooke, ‘using the clutter and rubble to make something worth having’. The difficult thing is that it means using things for one purpose when (like the sailboat technology) they were originally designed for something else. Sterling’s other word for the process is the verb ‘retrofit’ – looking at things retrospectively and making them fit a new system. There is, so the story insists, an ingrained resistance to this, and in the readers as well as in the characters. The force which opposes ‘retrofitting’ or bricolage is the awareness which immediately sees something improper/unexpected/unnatural in tattoos and headphones, or dreadlocks and headphones, or Malay girls reading *New Musical Express*, or any of the dozens of other fleeting, unstressed, cumulatively significant culture clashes built into ‘Green Days’. If one were to reduce the story to maxims, Sterling would be telling us here:

(1) things have immediate uses;
(2) immediate uses are more important than cultural preconceptions;
(3) cultural preconceptions are dead; but
(4) dead things are there to be used, in line with Gibson’s famous tag, cited by Sterling in his *Mirrorshades* editorial, ‘the street finds its own uses for things’.

One could in fact say that bricolage could also be called ‘Frankensteining’. When Turner Choi builds his Ocean Arks he is using leftovers, spare parts from dead constructions. Where, then, are the ‘semiotic ghosts’ in ‘Green Days’? Surely the answer is that they are in the readers’ expectations. ‘Green Days’ is a ‘could-be’ story, like most science fiction. But, unlike most science fiction, it trades on an implicit feeling that in science fiction certain expectations will be fulfilled. Tech will be high, progress will be technological, the Western World may not be superior but Western attitudes will, the Third World – as long as it keeps to Third World
culture – will be left behind. That is the 1970s version, one might say, of the ‘Gernsback Continuum’. At the start of ‘Green Days’, Turner is still in that continuum. At the end he realises it is dead, has been dead for some time already. He had been living with a ‘semiotic ghost’; but that ghost is still in control of the minds of those readers (in practice, all of them, this critic included) not yet familiarised to bricolage, still jumping nervously at each of the culture clash pinpricks Sterling has scattered through his text.

The method pioneered in ‘Green Days’ dominates Sterling’s award-winning novel, *Islands in the Net* (1988). The most consistent thing about this book is the way it consigns to ‘ghost’ status virtually every cultural piety left to Western readers. To give only one example, we are introduced near the end of the book to a white South African Boer called Katje Selous – a name deliberately ill-omened: F.C. Selous (1851–1917) helped bring Rhodesia (i.e., Zimbabwe) under British rule, and the Selous Scouts, named after him, established a formidable anti-guerrilla reputation as a ‘Special Forces’ unit fighting for continued white rule in Rhodesia in the 1970s. However, the story’s Selous (we eventually realise) has abandoned apartheid and admitted blacks to full citizenship: one’s moral prejudices readjust. But then again we learn that the South Africa to which she is loyal is based on the premises that ‘African black people are the finest black people in the world!’, because of their Zulu warrior blood, and that the Zulus and the Boers between them have a genetic right to oversee the affairs of Africa. Is Selous a good or a bad character? The question is naive, but also unanswerable. To answer it one would have to have a secure moral base. And after being led through the maze of data pirates (bad or good?); the murder of data pirates (justified or not?) by the Free Army of Counter-Terrorism (a stooge organisation?) acting for Mali (or is it Singapore, two emergent nations of quite different cultural ‘feel’), with or without the connivance of Vienna (world peacekeepers or corrupt cartel?): well, it is reasonable to agree that the variables have become literally irresolvable by any reader, no matter how skilled or careful.

The effect of the book lies in its sudden new angles, its destruction of icons. Few issues in the 1980s could unite an American public more than dislike of Iran: near the end of *Islands*, one of its most sympathetic characters remarks as if everyone knew it already that the ‘Iranian revolt of 1979’ was a ‘brave effort’ but ‘too late … They were already fighting for imperialism’. In exactly the opposite mode, Sterling exposes to casual denigration, at different moments: career feminists; health standards enforcement; emergent nations’ aspirations; the ideology of Space Invaders; the notion of world government. When Singapore is
successfully invaded, the agency that carries it out is the Red Cross; the nuclear submarine that re-bombs Hiroshima (an iconic act in itself) is marked by icons of de Gaulle and Jaruzelski (what have they in common?), with, to add to the list later, Galtieri, Macarthur and Oliver North; near the end, the Tuareg of the Sahara are presented singing a traditional song that expresses their awareness that in prizing camels and goats for so long they destroyed their ecology, which they must now repair by butchering their herds and growing grass:

For a thousand years we must praise the grass.
We will eat the *tisma* food to live,
We will buy Iron Camels from Go Motion Unlimited in Santa Clara California.

‘It’s an old song,’ says the Iranian sympathiser. ‘Retro-fitted’.

The retrofitting in *Islands in the Net* virtually defies comprehension. Its heroine feels at one point that ‘Some pattern-seeking side of her brain had gone into overdrive’, and most readers will feel with her. Yet the point of the story is, in a sweeping way, clear. It says:

Stop. Abandon. Disassemble. Do not seek patterns. Do not think dreadlocks do not go with headphones. Forget Jaruzelski was a Communist and Macarthur an American. Assemble these data a new way, like a bricoleur. Above all, assume everything you know already, from politics to table manners, is part of a semiotic system and accordingly unreliable insofar as it has a place within that system.

*Islands in the Net*, one might say, is a semiotic vision, indeed a vision of a new semiotics. But where ‘The Gernsback Continuum’ or ‘Telliamed’ centred on ‘semiotic ghosts’ and dead systems, Sterling’s novel locates those ghosts within its readers’ minds. It is a tour de force, and a deeply unsettling one, to present a whole near-future world in which virtually no carry-over at all from the present can be relied on.

Lack of carry-over may give a clue, finally, to answering an odd question about Sterling’s work so far: why is he interested in themes of ‘ghostliness’ other than the metaphorical or semiotic ones already discussed? *Islands* has zombies, one Stephen King-style death on screen,
and Optimal Personas, who appear for all the world like spirit-guides. But the themes of age, survival, and what one might call ‘negotiated death’ have been with Sterling all through his career, and raise a question as to how they fit in with Qualified Reality or bricolage. Take, for instance, Sterling’s second novel, The Artificial Kid. An irreverent mind might say that this has been constructed for the purpose of provoking Freudian interpretation. The lead character, the ‘Artificial Kid’, is so called for various reasons, but ‘kid’ is a true description of him: he is facially hairless, shrill-voiced, pre-pubescent and kept so by drug treatment. His real age is 28. Or is it 98 – the number of years he has been practising with his ‘nunchuck’? Actually, he is in another sense nearly 300, for the Kid is ‘artificial’ too: he has been produced by memory transfer from a much older man, Rominuald Tanglin, alias R.T., or, of course, ‘Arti’. What is the relationship between R.T. and the Kid? In the tapes he has concealed in the Kid’s computer, he addresses the Kid always as ‘kid’ or ‘son’. Is this merely affectionate, literally true, or a wild understatement, the Kid not being R.T.’s son but his identity? No wonder, a Freudian would say, that the Kid stays pre-pubescent. In his case, achieving independence from his father/namesake/alter ego is practically impossible! As the Kid says, ‘It’s like having a ghost at your elbow’.

The Kid is, however, surrounded by ghosts. The founder of his world is one Moses (it would be a poor Freudian who could see no meaning in that), known to have been frozen centuries before, but then killed in his ‘cryocoffin’ by assassins. During the Kid’s adventures, though, it becomes clear that one of his companions is the resurrected Moses Moses, an evident ‘father figure’. Another is Professor Crossbow, the Kid’s old tutor – a sexual neutral, so a neutral-tutor – long vanished ‘under the surface of the Gulf of Memory’. A third is Anne Twiceborn (again, a name of aggressive significance), a young woman infatuated with the Kid’s ‘father’ R.T. A totally dominating father; a dead–alive father figure; a neutral father figure; an aspiring stepmother: one need go no further to suggest that The Artificial Kid is an almost parodic version of the genre known as ‘family drama’ (see Brewer 1980), its underlying drive, of course, being to allow the Kid to break free of paternal domination, reach pubescence, achieve sexual union (with Anne Twiceborn), and so supplant his father and achieve independent existence. ‘Supplant’, however, may be the wrong verb. In view of his special relationship with R.T., ‘exorcise’ might be more accurate, or even (with full consciousness of its double meaning) ‘lay’. The Kid has to ‘lay’ his stepmother to ‘lay [to rest]’ his father’s ghost. Meanwhile, in the background, Professor Crossbow and Moses Moses are fusing, to become two examples of the
same joint personality; and in yet another twist Crossbow Moses (though not Moses Crossbow) fuses with ‘the Mass’, a kind of planetary gene pool that promises its members a form of immortality. My cells will be dismantled, Crossbow Moses remarks:

‘But that does not constitute death. My genetic content would be preserved. In all likelihood I would eventually be recreated. Whether I would be re-born in the full sense of the word depends on your definition of identity. I would be a clone. But all neuters are clones, of course.’

He is promised, then, a kind of continuing survival, purely physical. R.T. arranged for himself a kind of survival, purely mental. Moses Moses in his ‘cryocoffin’ tried to combine the two, and both the Kid and Anne Twiceborn have their own ideas about survival as well, whether religious, electronic or genetic. Yet, however the cards are shuffled, it is clear that Sterling is interested in the notion of ‘carry-over’; he does not accept life/death as the simple, traditional dichotomy.

Similar points could be made about Sterling’s third novel *Schismatrix* (1985), and the other stories from the ‘Mechanist/Shaper’ universe in which that is set. *Schismatrix* shows strong interest in ‘negotiated death’, its characters frequently disappearing (but reappearing), replacing death by ‘fading’ (a process in which one cannot be sure whether a friend has died or not), transforming themselves into electronic impulses or mindless flesh (the sentence ‘The room was full of flesh’ in *Schismatrix*, chapter 6, is not metaphorical), or dropping in and out of oblivion like visitors to Elfland in a traditional fairy-tale. In both *Schismatrix* and its associated stories, too, Sterling’s interest in DNA as a literal fact of which the word ‘soul’ is an image, is almost obsessively strong. His fiction often seems to oscillate thematically between the notions of termination and survival, betraying on the one hand fascination with / horror at the persistent hanging on of the very old, but on the other deep reluctance to see anything or anyone cut off or terminated without passing on something (individual DNA or cultural legacy) to the future.

What have these themes of ‘ghostliness’ got to do with ‘semiotic ghosts’, Qualified Reality, or bricolage? One suggestion would be this:

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Sterling is actively opposed to the idea of system, still worse System (as in ‘Talliamed’). He is very strongly aware of the ‘pattern-seeking’ quality of human minds, and does his best to disrupt it in every way, including stylistically. Yet he knows that systems have a strong tendency to perpetuate and propagate themselves, whether genetically like DNA or intellectually like human cultures. What he likes to show is systems breaking down (‘Talliamed’), about to break down (‘Audoghast’), or broken down (Islands). His ideal is the person who picks up the pieces and starts again, the bricoleur. What he fears is the successful imposition of dead systems on the future, as with ‘semiotic ghosts’. The themes of ‘ghostliness’, generation conflict, or ‘negotiated death’, are all, as it were, mediations between these two extremes. The person living on may be a despot, like R.T., or a sage, like the hero of Schismatrix. Probably the difference lies in the readiness or otherwise to abandon an intellectual system while preserving continuity of personality. ‘People outlive nations’, says Lindsay serenely in Schismatrix, faced with failure and ruin. His reward for readiness to start again is to become, at the very end, a ghost, observing his own skull and bones being looted by an alien bricoleur. To Sterling this is a consummation.

Other facets of Sterling’s fiction could be drawn into his argument, notably his liking for parody of or satire against the general assumptions of science fiction itself, viewed as a series of ‘Gernsback Continua’: Schismatrix begins with the motif of an ultralight aircraft wheeling in the sky of a low-gravity hollowed-out asteroid, familiar from earlier science fiction such as Arthur C. Clarke’s Rendezvous with Rama (1973); but, of course, with Sterling the ultralight crashes, just as his spaceships have roaches, his ‘hydroponics’ all go sour, and his aging space people are clogged with dirt. Such jabs are all aimed at making readers drop their ballast of (science fictional) cultural assumptions, to float free (balloon images recur in Sterling) into the larger space of Qualified Reality. Nevertheless, the final point here should come from an interview with Sterling recorded in Interzone 15 (spring 1986): 12–14. ‘Don’t you think’, the interviewer asked, ‘that sf, far from being a vision of the future, is a reflection of the present?’ Sterling realised at once that this question conceals the assertion that science fiction is metaphorical, a mode for discussing the discontents or pressures of the present day in suitably veiled form: that it is, in short, a skewed version of what is, a ‘will-be’ or a ‘might-be’. He reacted to the question with strong disapproval.

‘I resent it when my ideas, which I have gone to some pains to develop and explore, are dismissed as unconscious yearnings or a funhouse-mirror reflection of the contemporary milieu. My
writings about the future are not “about the future” in a strict sense, but they are about my ideas of the future. They are not allegories.’

The question, Sterling continued, ‘is part of an ongoing critical attempt to reduce sf to a sub-branch of mainstream literature’.

It may seem idle to add comment to these very clear statements, but the last remark shows the strong desire, already identified above, for science fiction as a whole to preserve its distinctive fictional space. As for the longer quotation, one might underline the phrases ‘unconscious yearnings’ and ‘funhouse-mirror’. The former reminds us that even Freudian analysis (as of *The Artificial Kid*) could in Sterling’s view be radically altered by technology: not even fathers, families or primal scenes are immune to change. Meanwhile, the rejection of ‘funhouse-mirrors’ might take us back to bricolage. The future will not be the same shape as the present, just bulged or lengthened or distorted, it will be a whole new assembly: the mirror will be shattered first. Yet no image easily catches the distinctive novelty of Sterling’s work. In it, both this present world and the worlds of classic science fiction are ‘ghost worlds’. Qualified Reality is elsewhere.

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Every work is deeply considered and highly original. It would be presumptuous to try to sum them all up in a brief coda like this one, and excessively so to go through this impressive corpus ‘marking’ it for similarity to/deviation from the kind of creative trajectory outlined above. Nevertheless a few things may be said, with decent awareness of their selectivity. One is that while the 1990 collaboration with William
Gibson, *The Difference Engine*, was not the start of ‘steampunk’ – the word had been coined a few year earlier – it did establish some of the sub-genre’s conventions; and steampunk is a clear case of the ‘might-have-been’ version of what is above called ‘Qualified Reality’. Another critical guess which has been corroborated is Sterling’s habit of contradicting generic sf expectations, whether of the 1970s or the 1990s, or later. He repeatedly shows a crumbling USA. *Distraction* opens with the US Air Force manning roadblocks to shake down passing motorists, because they haven’t been paid, and both that novel and *Heavy Weather* portray a country overrun by nomadic tribes.

More surprising, even, in terms of sf expectations, are repeated statements that science is over. There is ‘no such thing as pure science’ (*Distraction*, ch. 8). In sf terms that could just mean that science is always impure, affected by political requirements, but Sterling means something more. Science needs to de-centre, cease being official, become street-science instead of being the preserve of – from the story ‘Our Neural Chernobyl’ in *Globalhead* – ‘white-coated sociopath[s]’. Low-tech and high-tech must/will also come together, as they do in the 1997 Hugo-winning story ‘Bicycle Repairman’ in (satiric title) *A Good Old-Fashioned Future*. That story also at least floats the idea that big science is not the only thing that needs to go, for even in the postmodern era ‘We’re now in the grip of a government with severe schizoid multiple-personality disorder’. In the story this has a technological confirmation, but seems to be meant to ring true without it.

The truly remarkable vision of Qualified Reality is, however, *Zeitgeist*. The frame for this is another fixer, like the hero of *Distraction*, running an international girl-band modelled on the Spice Girls. The band, G7, has ‘absolutely no talent, soul, inspiration, or musical sincerity whatsoever’ (ch. 7). It is, in a word, completely ‘phony’. But this is good. ‘Basic modern trend of the industry.’ A support character enthuses, ‘We are manufacturing reality’ (ch. 1). But this is not just the usual PR hype. It turns out that Starlitz and his daughter Zeta really are manufacturing reality, in so far as ‘reality’ any longer has any meaning. Zeta has poltergeist abilities, but even beyond that, ‘impossible’ events happen repeatedly. The way Starlitz puts it is to say that reality is all a matter of narrative: assembling ‘a cogent narrative’ (ch. 2), rejecting the ‘consensus narrative’ (ch. 5), living in a narrative ‘increasingly polyvalent and decentered ... rhizomatic’ (ch. 3). Starlitz insists that ‘the deeper reality is made out of language’ (ch. 5), for which view among contemporary theorists see item 2 above, pp. 133–4. Part of this, and reinforcing the rejection of ‘big science’, is getting rid of ‘mechanical objectivity, proper observation, the scientific method,
reproducible results, and all of that scary crap’ (ch. 5). Sf heresy, and not just in the Gernsback Continuum!

The book ends with the appearance of a self-labelled *deus ex machina* (though he does have a kind of technological explanation), and what seems to be a case of death-reversal, which as far as I can see does not. For the latter see remark made on p. 60 above. And *Zeitgeist*, more than any other book I have read, posits existence in an ‘intermediate philosophic space’, see also p. 52 above. There is no doubt, at least, that Sterling continues to push the boundaries of science fiction. I think now, in 2015, even more than I did in 1992, that he is (despite very stiff competition) the genre’s most innovative and original author currently writing. Though not a comfortable one.
SF and Change