Conclusion

How can we theorize materiality without reducing it to discourse? This is the question addressed in Mark Hansen’s *Embodying Technesis: Technology beyond Writing* (2000), in which he argues that the great majority of theorists of technology—among them, Heidegger, Freud, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari—have implemented a “reductive strategy that allows for a progressive assimilation of technology to thought.”¹ In other words, technology is invoked as a trope for, or an instance of, different forms of alterity, such as Heidegger’s Being, Freud’s unconscious, Derrida’s *différence*, and Lacan’s *objet petit a*, but it remains subordinate to an overriding theoretical project on subject constitution.² Such theories, Hansen argues, remain faithful to “the logocentric foundation of philosophical humanism—the privilege of thought and/or the thinking agent” and thus fail to account for what he refers to as “the robust *materiality* of technology,” which impacts our experience and influences our embodied lives in ways that cannot be captured in representation.³

At first sight, the strongly reflexive and metafictional approach of the texts discussed in this book, which often draw on science fiction tropes and technologies to reflect on the nature and status of the literary or cinematic text (or text-based performance practices), might seem to inscribe them within Hansen’s “technesis,” which involves “the translation of material technology in its concrete, worldly embodiment into a textualist analogue,” and the use of technology simply to expand our understanding of the nature of textuality.⁴ However, I have argued that these texts cannot fully be co-opted to serve a poststructuralist or constructivist agenda, and do not attempt to reduce technology or materiality to that which may be represented in lan-
guage or discourse. Instead, they stage the multiple exchanges that connect
the text with the material world, embedding the text within an evolution of
technology that is not subject to the evolution of culture but interacts with
it in complex ways.

The theorists whose work I have found most illuminating in this study
differ from those Hansen critiques, in their genuine efforts to posit a mate-
rial realm of experience that exceeds human language, and indeed all human
measures. Malabou's plasticity and Stiegler’s understanding of the techno-
logical basis of temporal experience are both, as Ian James observes, “at-
ttempts to think a fundamental materiality of human life which is prior to or
in excess of any economy of discourse, text, writing or of the symbolic.”5 The
new materialist perspectives developed by De Landa and Braidotti locate the
human within a matter with agentic capacities, which follows its own, inhu-
man, course of evolution. In Karen Barad’s simple summary, “Matter is not
a support, location, referent, or source of sustainability for discourse. Matter
is not immutable or passive.”6

These newer forms of materialist thinking owe a considerable debt to
Benjamin, the one theorist singled out by Hansen for his commitment to the
irreducibility of embodied experience.7 Matter is often ascribed with agency
in Benjamin’s writing on modernity and the city: objects “have the ability to
return the gaze,” while “technology has subjected the human sensorium to
a complex kind of training,” imposing its own rhythms on the city-dweller.8
This dynamic is also intrinsic to the (re)materializing operations of graphic
fiction, as we saw in chapter 2. Benjamin situates language within a broader
realm of natural correspondences, positing a mimetic faculty that antedates
the acquisition of language.9 As Hansen argues,

Benjamin historicizes the linguistic (textualist) model of the cosmos
as specific to a particular (if particularly long and important) phase
in human existence. Viewed in the broader context thus secured, lan-
guage appears as one vehicle among others for our contact with the
cosmos and one whose sway is by no means necessarily infinite. The
structural open-endedness of his mimetic history leaves room for the
introduction of a distinct postlinguistic form of mimesis that would
restore a crucial dimension of sensuousness—a practical, embodied ba-
sis—to our contact with the material world.10

This interest in historicizing language and textuality as simply one form
among many possible ways in which we come into contact with the sensory
and material world is clearly shared by many of the writers explored in this book. It is particularly evident in Aira’s *El juego de los mundos*, which takes as its central theme the shifts in human subjectivity and our relationship with the world that result from a change from a text-based culture to one organized around images and virtuality; in Sregelburd’s dramas, which often explore mathematical paradigms as alternative, extralinguistic ways of understanding order in the world; in the continuity established between literature and other technological regimes of representation in *La invención de Morel*; and in Mairal’s exploration of preliterate forms of cultural transmission in *El año del desierto*.

Technology in these texts does not sever our contact with the material world but brings it even more clearly into focus, a dynamic that is particularly evident in Oesterheld’s (Marxist) understanding of the relationship between technology, nature, and human labor, or the various prosthetic devices of Cohen’s fiction. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the cyborg or robot does not usually appear in these texts as a “menacing or threatening figure,” as it so often does (as J. Andrew Brown observes) in U.S. science fiction films from the 1950s and 1960s; neither do forms of technological simulation or artificial life necessarily sound the death knell for humanity. Many of the more recent writers and directors discussed here—Blaustein, Cohen, Aira, Sregelburd, and Spiner—embrace a posthuman condition in which technology has become, and perhaps has always been, an integral part of the circuits that traverse the boundaries of the human body, offering vast opportunities for cultural expression and intersubjective experience at the same time that it facilitates political pacification and homogenization. As Roger Bartra notes, science fiction cyborgs provide a model for an increasingly well-supported theory of consciousness that links internal brain processes with external circuits located in the environment. These texts do not call for the overthrow of robots but for a greater understanding of the processes that bind humans to the material (technological or natural) world, on the basis of which—as Stiegler and Malabou contend—we may begin to transform those relationships.

I suggest that we may read the prevalence of (post-)Darwinian perspectives in Argentine science fiction within the context of a sustained critique of capitalism and liberal ideas of progress that dates back to the nineteenth century and persists, in shifting forms, to the present day. As Alex Levine and Adriana Novoa affirm, Darwin’s theory of evolution met with some unease in Argentina. If official state discourses accorded with a Spencerian vision of the inevitability of progress wherever civilization was embraced, Darwinian
natural selection offered in its place “an understanding of civilization as the product of a process of selection whose outcome was far from universally assured.” Holmberg’s *Viaje maravilloso del Señor Nic-Nac* depicts a Buenos Aires that is more interested in gold than the spiritual and intellectual riches of the enlightened Sophopolis, but more given to destructive in-fighting than to developing the country’s natural resources. Writing a little later, around the time of the economic crisis of 1890, Eduardo de Ezcurra presents in his *En el siglo XXX* (1891) a vision of a future Buenos Aires in which technological advance has not been accompanied by social progress. The citizens of “la colosal ciudad de los pasmosos progresos y de las supinas banalidades” (the colossal city of astonishing progress and crass banalities) are almost entirely given over to mercantilism and enslaved to hyperconsumerism, and as a result, society is conspicuously lacking in social cohesion, intellectual culture, and moral values.

Ezcurra’s understanding that evolution may run “backward” as well as “forward,” toward degeneration and decadence as well as greater civilization, is thoroughly Darwinian. For Argentine intellectuals, Levine and Novoa observe, “Darwin introduced uncertainty in the direction of evolutionary change” and the fear that “not every change is a change for the better.” Social readings of Darwin articulated a concern that scientific progress might not lead to a more rational society but to a more selfish one, in which the traditional values of virtue and integrity were cast off. Buenos Aires also careers precipitately “backward” toward barbarism in *Plop, Cruz diablo,* and *El año del desierto* in ways that are, as shown in chapter 3, thoroughly imbedded with a critique of the ecological consequences of advanced capitalism (*Plop*), its deepening of social and economic inequality (*Cruz diablo*), and the cutthroat cannibalism that lies thinly disguised beneath a veneer of civilization (*El año del desierto*). Other texts, such as *Estrellas* and *Cóndor Cruz, la leyenda,* challenge the linearity that underpins the historicist understanding of modernity and capitalist development.

For Stiegler, Darwinist adaptation by natural selection is an insufficient model to understand human evolution, which has relied in greater part on our ability to transmit experience from one generation to the next, and to use technology to overcome maladaptation. Gerald Moore argues that “our failure to see this distinction has been exacerbated by the adaptationist ideology of contemporary capitalism, which suppresses adoption—the possibility of inventing an alternative future—and naturalizes adaptation as the defining characteristic of human society.” A number of the texts explored here emphasize instead the importance of adoption over adaptation, representing
technics (recorded memories in *La sonámbula*; a singing prosthesis in *Cruz diablo*; the vividness of the cinema screen in Quiroga’s stories; the worlds game in *El juego de los mundos*; the Panconcencia network and other forms of prostheses in Cohen’s novels) as means of enhancing human knowledge and experience. This emphasis on adoption opens up a possible critique of the survival-of-the-fittest discourse that underpins capitalism and, importantly, provides a potential basis for utopian thought, allowing us to imagine alternatives.

In response to her own central question—“What should we do so that consciousness of the brain does not purely and simply coincide with the spirit of capitalism?”—Malabou urges us to grasp the nature of the brain as plastic: not flexible, simply aligning itself with the “flexible” working practices of contemporary capitalism and its demand for adaptation, but offering the resilience and resistance of plasticity, having “the resource of giving form, the power to create, to invent or even to erase an impression, the power to style.” For Malabou, it is understanding the brain’s capacity to give form as well as to receive it that will enable us to resist the logic of Darwinist selection that permeates and naturalizes a certain social order. Drawing on a heritage of materialist thought, the more recent texts studied here participate in what Hansen describes as “the affirmative task of exploring new technologically mediated, posthuman forms of human agency,” or in other words, the task of grappling with the consequences of the displacement of the human in the face of “technology’s inhuman evolution.”

While an important strand in science fiction has pitted the technological against the human, the texts I have discussed are more likely to propose that, as Robert Sinnerbrink suggests in his discussion of Stiegler’s technics, “fully-formed autonomous subjectivity does not just confront technology as a readymade set of instruments,” but that technology itself has formed what we understand to be distinctively human, and made possible “our historical experience of time, memory, and consciousness.” It is the reflexive focus of these texts that therefore promotes a materialist understanding of the relationship between text, culture, technology, and nature, and that allows us to glimpse ways in which “technicity opens up, rather than simply threatens, the adventure of human individuation and collective co-existence.”