Five Strands of Fictionality

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Thus far, I have described three different definitions of fictionality circulating within contemporary American culture that represent different degrees of acceptance of the traditional understanding of literature as serious, timeless, economically disinterested, and valuable for self-understanding. John Barth represents the closest embrace of these traditional values, while Alice Walker and Andy Warhol critique current institutions, and thus attempt to rethink such traditional models for the literary. Writers like Gilbert Sorrentino and Steve Katz move even further away from these institutions, since their understanding of writing as a lie undermines the traditional ground on which literature is valued. I shift now towards those definitions of fictionality that do not begin from literature but instead draw from other audiences and contexts. When these definitions address the issue of literature’s place within American culture—if they do at all—it is as outsiders. The next definition of fictionality circulating within American culture that I would like to discuss arises out of contemporary science fiction.
The position of science fiction within contemporary definitions of fictionality is paradoxical. Science fiction is deeply entwined with one of the most powerful definitions of fictionality, which emerges in the eighteenth century but reaches its literary apex in the late nineteenth century. Like fiction in its classic definition, science fiction is essentially a vehicle for investigation and decision making. Critics have almost universally defined science fiction as inherently connected to the act of creating and exploring worlds that function as logical alternatives to our own reality. As Darko Suvin asserts, “SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.”1 He concludes his introduction by insisting that this cognitive shift is the essence of our interest and enjoyment of science fiction: “Once the elastic criteria of literary structuring have been met, a cognitive—in most cases strictly scientific—element becomes the measure of aesthetic quality, of the specific pleasure to be sought in SF. In other words, the cognitive nucleus of the plot codetermines the fictional estrangement itself” (15).2

In one sense, postmodern culture seems to have taken this sort of modeling to heart. In 1990 James Der Derian described the growing dependence of the military on computerized war games for strategy as “the continuation of war by means of verisimilitude.”3 Likewise, we might think of the proliferation of focus groups used for deciding everything from which movies Hollywood makes to which tax proposals the president will take to Congress as a form of modeling. The widespread acceptance of this sort of modeling is likewise reflected in the explosive popularity of computer and video games that ask players to participate in simulations. One of the best-selling computer games of all time is The Sims, in which players manipulate virtual characters to shepherd them through career choices, furniture purchases, and social networking. At the same time, however, confidence in our ability to predict and logically plan for the future is at a low point. Frederic Jameson is, of course, best known for asserting that the increasing complexity of multinational

2. In this regard, we might recall Tzvetan Todorov’s claim in The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975) that in order for something to remain “fantastic” it cannot be allowed to slide into allegory (32). The same literalism is true of science fiction as well; this is what I take Suvin to mean when he says that the aesthetics of science fiction depend on investigating an alternative imaginative framework.
corporations has made it impossible for people to “cognitively map” their everyday reality: “this latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to map cognitively its position in a mappable external world.”

As a result of this loss of confidence in cognitive mapping, the concept of the future itself has become radically complicated. We live in an age characterized by Jerome Klinkowitz as “post-contemporary.” Likewise a recent collection of essays on “postmodern times and places” is titled After the Future. In a recent volume on Derrida’s writing, the issue of furturity itself is foregrounded as inherent to the deconstructive understanding of philosophy itself: “Philosophy is a discourse that knows all about the future, or at least about its future. It knows, and has always known, that it has no future. Philosophy knows that the future is death. Philosophy is always going to die. Always will have been going to die. From the beginning, its future will have been its end: and from this end, its future will have been always to begin its ending again.” The tendency to describe contemporary culture in apocalyptic terms is at least as old as the concept of postmodernism itself. Ihab Hassan speaks to the conflicted feelings about the future that define postmodern literature in the 1970s in his well-known essay, “POSTmodernISM”: “I am possessed by the feeling that in the next few decades, certainly within half a century, the earth and all that inhabits it may be wholly other, perhaps ravaged, perhaps on the way to some strange utopia indistinguishable from nightmare. I have no language to articulate this feeling with conviction, nor imagination to conceive this special destiny. To live from hour to hour seems as maudlin as to invoke every hour the Last Things.” Postmodernism as a critical concept comes into existence at this balance point between apocalypse and open-ended futurity. A number of critics have noted that one of the reasons why history has been treated so problematically in postmodern novels is because of precisely this uncertainty

about how to think about futurity. Hassan suggests that “futurology” will emerge as a field to challenge traditional literature departments: “How will the verbal imagination sow its seed?” (166).

At first glance, then, science fiction’s interest in cognition and speculative inquiry would seem to be at odds with many of the qualities that we associate most with postmodernism. If postmodernism can be characterized by a loss of confidence in logical inquiry free from political and philosophical bias, then science fiction’s speculative structure would seem fundamentally at odds with contemporary culture. Indeed, we might point to certain varieties of contemporary science fiction by writers like Samuel Delany, Brian Aldiss, and J. G. Ballard that go out of their way to explore irrational worlds. And yet, many of the speculative works that have emerged both in popular and in academic consciousness as embodiments of postmodern science fiction are not, in fact, the ontologically ambiguous or contradictory worlds of Delany’s or Ballard’s fiction, but rather works that seem speculative in more traditional ways. When one thinks of philosophically current science fiction, feminist work by writers like Marge Piercy or Joanna Russ, and the “cyberpunk” writing of authors like William Gibson and Bruce Sterling are likely to come to mind first. This is true not only of academic critics, who write on these works far more often than the more innovative and apparently postmodern narratives of Delany, but also of the image of hip and up-to-date science fiction in popular culture embodied in films like The Matrix. Why have these works emerged as embodiments of a postmodern science fiction? And, as a consequence, how do we imagine the cultural, artistic, and intellectual role of the fictionality in a speculative genre?

**Reading the Matrix**

*The Matrix* (1999) has come to embody in popular culture a certain type of brainy speculation on the nature of contemporary media culture that tells us a great deal about the apparent relevance of science fiction. Like film adaptations of several Philip K. Dick novels—*Blade Runner* (1982) or *Minority Report* (2002)—*The Matrix* typifies in a popular imagination that otherwise

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has little contact with science fiction novels what the genre can do. Nowhere is this emblematic use of the film clearer than in its reference to “the desert of the real.” The Wachowski brothers, who directed the film, take this line from Jean Baudrillard and insert it into the film as description of the post-apocalyptic world that is the film’s setting, and which is hidden beneath the computer-generated “matrix” that most people take for real. In turn, the film’s use of the term is picked up on and used by Slavoj Žižek in his collection of essays on the world after 9/11. For him, the film is fascinating because of the belief that there is some “real reality” behind the reality that we experience everyday.”

Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real—just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without it being so. What happens at the end of this process of virtualization, however, is that we begin to experience “real reality” itself as a ritual entity. For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen. . . . (11)

For Žižek, The Matrix embodies a broader cultural response to the creeping expansion of virtual reality, an urge to believe that behind our everyday life is something “realer”—even if that realness is itself an imagined condition. The Matrix represents a point of circulation between academic and popular thinking about contemporary culture and audiences.

For all that the film announces itself to be a speculation on contemporary culture, however, we need to reflect only briefly on the film to recognize the gap between Baudrillard’s theory of postmodern culture and its own speculative donnée. Although in America Baudrillard associates hyperreality with the American landscape and utopian aspirations, Baudrillard’s theory works best as a characterization of contemporary media culture. Baudrillard’s discussion of the increasing prevalence of simulation in this regard is both his best-known theoretical offering and what the Wachowski brothers are invoking by referencing Baudrillard. Indeed, in a blatant tip-off to the viewer about the intellectual context in which the film should be understood, The Matrix’s main character, Neo, is shown hiding a diskette containing software in a hollowed-out copy of Baudrillard’s Simulacra and

Simulation. Baudrillard remarks there (although it does not appear in the film), “Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”

Drawing on examples of Disneyland and the Watergate scandal, Baudrillard has in mind an expansion of media representation as part of a capitalism in which use value evaporates under the pressure of omnipresent exchange value. In other words, the domination of simulation is a stage of capitalism in which advertising becomes increasingly powerful and pervasive.

It is clear in that The Matrix does not mean anything of the sort in its use of Baudrillard. The film itself tells the story of a post-apocalyptic world in which human beings are hardwired into a computer-generated fantasy world so that their unnoticed bodies can be used by a race of machines to produce energy. This communal world is itself the “matrix” and is recognizable as a construction only when an individual’s body is forcibly removed from its connection to the hardware that sustains it and delivers the computer-generated experiences directly to the nervous system. In such a filmic world, “simulation” has no connection to the expansion of capitalism or the prevalence of mass media; the matrix is, instead, a simulation in a much stronger but simpler way. Indeed, in his discussion of the film, Žižek suggests the shift from Baudrillard’s description of the simulacrum to this computer-generated “matrix” is a fantasy about the presence of a real world that is waiting for us to claim it. In the film we are told that some people can sense the falseness of the world presented to them; it is this vague dissatisfaction that characterizes Neo at the beginning of the film. The film opens with a restless Neo uninterested in his day job, staying up late into the night searching for scattered information about the matrix. Later, Trinity characterizes Neo’s restlessness: “I know why you’re here, Neo. I know what you’ve been doing. I know why you hardly sleep, why you live alone and why, night after night, you sit at your computer; you’re looking for him. . . . I know because I was once looking for the same thing, but when he found me, he told me I wasn’t really looking for him. I was looking for an answer.”

To complain about the Wachowski brothers’ literalization of Baudrillard’s theory is, I think, pointless as a critique of the film itself; after all, they are under no obligation to make an authentically Baudrillardian film. More


interesting, it seems, is to ask what this shift in the meaning of Baudrillard’s simulation accomplishes, and how it affects the appeal of the film to its audience. A number of critics writing on the film have noted the irony that so much of the appeal of this film depends on its spectacular action sequences and its innovative use of computer-generated imagining (CGI) technology. In particular, the film uses a sophisticated form of stop-motion photography that seems to rotate the camera around a scene watched in slow motion. Dubbed “Bullet-Time” because of its striking use in filming scenes of gunplay, this technique is important to allowing the audience to sense how Neo and others, aware of the artificial nature of the matrix, are able to manipulate its laws—to walk up walls, dodge bullets, and so on. In her discussion of the “search of wonder” in contemporary film special effects, Michele Pierson describes the impact of *The Matrix* this way: “In contrast to the aesthetically moribund *Phantom Menace*, *The Matrix* featured this technique [of “Bullet-Time”] in a number of key action sequences combining stunts with subtle 2-D and 3-D animation, transforming the cinematographic image into as dynamic and arresting assemblage capable of arousing that old sense of wonder and curiosity about the technology—and art—of cinematic illusion in even some of the most jaded cinemagoers.”

Although its thematic handling of postmodern themes has been the most frequent occasion for both popular and academic discussion of the film, it is clear that without the striking effects and its overall style, *The Matrix* would not have attracted nearly the attention that it has.

This technique works hand-in-hand with the general theme of the film, that what we take to be reality is in fact a simulation whose rules are only apparently absolute. Indeed, one of the best-known lines from the film is Morpheus’s assertion to Neo, “Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself” (28). Having made this claim, he “unplugs” Neo from the matrix, recovers his body, and brings it to his ship where Neo has the design and operation of the matrix shown to him. Reconnected to a simulation of the matrix controlled by Morpheus, Neo comes to understand that this is a construct precisely because of the extraordinary things—filmed using bullet time—that he and Morpheus are able to do. Neo, in other words, is impressed in the same way that the audience for the film is by these striking effects. There are a number of ironies here, in that the film is most characteristic and Neo’s powers most impressive when he occupies not the real world but the computer-generated world of the matrix. Writing in

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Cultural Critique, Laura Bartlett and Thomas Byers remark, “recall that, for all the spectacular physical stunts that help make The Matrix an eyepopper, the reality of Neo’s heroism is both cybernetic and amazingly passive. He is the One not because he is a karate kid, but because he is a supreme hacker. All his amazing defiances of gravity and dodges of death come while he is, in fact, strapped and wired into a chair in a kind of trance.”15 Both the film and its hacker heroes seem to valorize the real world as a site of unlimited possibility not bounded by the rules of computer architecture, but the real appeal of both is based on the matrix and the amazing effects that this sophisticated CGI technology allows. This irony (if not outright contradiction) is not quite the same one that I noted in the way that the film literalizes Baudrillard, but they are clearly related. Both suggest that the film has redirected its critique of simulation in unexpected ways. Indeed, this should be no surprise, since the film itself is, after all, a kind of simulation that mirrors the position of the passive body connected to the matrix. If Neo accomplishes his amazing feats while being strapped to a chair, we participate vicariously while being rooted in our theater seats.

The Matrix depends, then, in a curious and not quite coherent way on its own visual style. Indeed, style is an absolutely central quality of the film. One of the film's best-known images—the one that is used more than any other in promotional material—is the posed and stylized portrait of the sunglass-wearing, leather-clad band of hackers lead by Morpheus. After all, if everything in the matrix is artificial, one can dress whatever way one wants. Style here is of a piece with the amazing physical powers that this band acquires while in the matrix. The film ends with Neo awakened to his unique powers to influence the matrix. The final scene is not, however, one in which the matrix is destroyed and masses of humanity wake from their illusion; it is, instead, of the stylishly dressed Neo alone in the matrix surrounded by everyday life, flying—the very embodiment of matrix-given power and style.

We can see the way that the film links Neo’s awareness of the matrix and a certain countercultural style if we consider the film’s introduction of Neo and his initial contact with the band lead by Morpheus. We first meet Neo asleep at his desk, with this computer evidently searching for information about Morpheus; newspapers from around the world flash onto the screen, testifying to his notoriety even within the matrix-generated world. Neo is awoken—although why is not clear—when the flashing news reports

are replaced by a typed message from Morpheus offering to explain what the matrix is and charging him to “follow the white rabbit.” As Neo frantically tries to clear Morpheus’s message from his screen, he is interrupted by a knock at his door; a group of stylishly dressed twentiesomethings have come to buy a diskette of illegal software or data from Neo. Struck by Neo’s haunted appearance, the casual leader of this group invites Neo to join them at a dance club: “you need to unplug, man” (13). The line initially carries the double meaning of taking time off and getting away from Neo’s apparently obsessive interest in computers—time that we are to sense takes up his leisure as well as work days. At the industrially themed dance club to which Neo is led he meets Trinity, a member of Morpheus’s group, while techno-punk music blares in the background. The location is clearly one chosen by Trinity and Morpheus, who have somehow manipulated Neo’s hacker friends unwittingly into leading him into this meeting.

While this scene does a certain amount of work to establish contact between Neo and Morpheus’s group and to make clear Neo’s dissatisfaction with his everyday life, more important to the film, I think, is the way that it establishes certain types of emotional links between the futuristic world of the film and the definition of the stylish in late-’90s America. Neo’s interest in hacking is metonymically rather than literally related to the themes of the matrix. If, in fact, all of reality is constructed like a computer program, there is no reason to think we would have any access to the structure of this program through the type of information networks that Neo is searching. Although the image of Neo as a hacker suggests his dissatisfaction with his everyday life, the coincidence between the structure of the matrix and his own interest in programming makes no logical sense. Likewise, Trinity’s choice of meeting place plays on our contemporary sense of the rebellion of youth culture. As we know when we get further into the film, any sort of rebellion that takes place within the guidelines established by the matrix is no rebellion at all. (Indeed, when Neo goes to visit the “oracle” who promises to reveal his destiny, she appears grandmotherly, baking cookies in what seems to be a low-rent, crowded apartment. More effectively than in the opening scene, the film here reminds us of the gap between how one appears in the matrix and how conventionally one is really behaving in relationship to that system.) Like the leather clothing adopted by Morpheus’s outlaw group, such meeting places and interests are metonymically related to the themes of the film, without themselves being causally connected. We might say the same of the role of Baudrillard in the film’s subtexts as well: it is not literally embodied in the computer-generated reality of the matrix but rather connected by certain metonymic similarities to the concerns of the film. In
all of these cases, superficial similarities (rock music = rebellion = working against the matrix) stand in for causal connections.

To suggest that *The Matrix* is more concerned with style than substance will sound like a criticism, and I am pointing to what are fairly straightforward intellectual incoherencies in the film. This might seem especially important since science fiction is traditionally understood as a genre that depends on logical extrapolation from the present to a hypothetical future. What seems to me important here is that these incoherencies do not touch what has been most compelling about the film; the critique that I have offered here will seem to most fans beside the point. Much more important in understanding the appeal of the film is that precisely the stylishness of the film appears to offer so successful and powerful a way of speaking about contemporary culture. This seems to be true of other science fiction films that have become the subject of both academic and popular discussions about the future. Films like *Blade Runner* and the *Terminator* series certainly raise thematic issues about human identity and our vision of the future, but it seems clear that their place in popular consciousness depends not only on these themes but also on the very stylishness of the films: from the mixture of a noir narrative with the hypercommercialized culture of Ridley Scott’s future to the “first computer-generated main character” of *Terminator 2*. As Pierson’s quote about the “aesthetically moribund” quality of the recent *Star Wars* films suggests, there is a strange way in which the visual style of these science fiction films comes to determine our sense of their relevance as a portrait of our future. Nothing, of course, could make less sense in the light of our traditional definition of science fiction as a logical extrapolation from the present; according to such a definition, the style of science fiction is much less important than its content—its logical premise and its coherent vision. If *The Matrix* refers to these contemporary issues more in its style than in its substance, we might well ask if this stylishness might not represent a different way of thinking about what science fiction can do in contemporary American culture.

**Cyberpunk Style**

Larry McCaffery titles his introduction to a 1988 special issue of the *Mississippi Review* “The Desert of the Real: The Cyberpunk Controversy.” McCaffery’s invocation of Baudrillard makes explicit a structure of allusion in the

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criticism that quickly shot up around cyberpunk fiction that we have already seen in *The Matrix*. I have already noted that the “desert of the real” is both the film’s most explicit citation of Baudrillard but also the point at which this film is picked up and used by Žižek as a commentary on our contemporary belief that some “realer” reality is hiding just out of reach.

The similarity is, of course, not accidental. The term *matrix* itself is routinely seen as a reference to William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, where it names what we call cyberspace today: “A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system.”18 Gibson’s novel is the ur-text of cyberpunk writing. Indeed, some have claimed that the “movement” called cyberpunk actually consists on only one writer (Gibson) and is really only well exemplified by *Neuromancer* itself.19 If we think of *The Matrix* as an attempt to use science fiction in a new way constituted by a different style of allusion, it is clear that much of the criticism that has grown up around the concept of cyberpunk (as opposed to Gibson’s novel specifically) struggles with exactly the question of the relevance of this fiction. So it is that McCaffery is able to announce in this introduction the importance of science fiction as a vehicle for understanding contemporary life. McCaffery remarks parenthetically, “if my suspicions are right . . . SF and SF-related forms are going to continue to play an increasingly dominant role in the arts: it is a relatively new form of great elasticity whose central motifs and stylistic conventions are evolving now in response to what is happening now.”20 He goes on to make a remarkably strong claim about the relevance of this fiction: “And the fact is that cyberpunk seems to be the only art systematically dealing with the most crucial political, philosophical, moral, and cultural issues of our day” (9). The wiggle room created by the word *systematically* in this passage aside, McCaffery claims an extraordinary importance for cyberpunk writing. He does so, at least in part, by following the path that the Wachowski brothers will trod ten years later: by claiming a particular allusive quality that allows this writing to handle broad theoretical problems in the definition of contemporary media, culture, and subjectivity in a narrative form.

We should not, however, single out McCaffery, since the sort of claims that he is making about cyberpunk writing is reflected by most of the contributors to this collection, as well by the general tone of most of the criticism

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19. Samuel Delany cites this criticism without identifying the source in *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 280.
produced at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s celebrating this writing. So it is that the collection *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative*, which appeared four years later, assumes that this writing will function as a turning point in storytelling. In this regard, John Huntington’s essay, “Newness, *Neuromancer*, and the End of Narrative” is exemplary. Huntington recognizes that Gibson’s novel creates a feeling of “newness” whose nature is difficult to pin down: “Those who find the novel significantly new seem to want to read it as a serious meditation on the reality that computers will someday create, but their enthusiasm is not dampened when they find that Gibson does not know very much about technology. One has to suspect that *Neuromancer*’s aura of newness derives from something deeper than its explicit ideas about the future.”21 Huntington goes on to suggest that Gibson’s newness consists of the way that cyberspace makes characters aware of their own fictionality. More important for my interest in the reception of the novel and the critical production of the category of cyberpunk fiction is the way that this fiction gets associated with millennial change, even though—as Huntington rightly recognizes—our sense of exactly what is new in this writing is only vaguely formed.

Cyberpunk writing seems to promise, then, a new form of narrative that has a particular relevance to contemporary issues—frequently involving technology, but not exclusively—that critics feel other forms of writing are not addressing directly. Part of the apparent newness of cyberpunk writing no doubt reflects the rapidly increasing importance of computers and computer-mediated communication during the 1980s and ’90s. Certainly one of the reasons that Gibson’s novel has continued to have influence is because it gets credit for coining the term *cyberspace* and providing the first literary use of what has seemed to readers to be an increasingly ubiquitous part of contemporary life. But as Gibson himself has noted, his own technical knowledge of computing is very limited; critics love to point out that *Neuromancer* was composed not in a word-processing program but on a typewriter. One of the ways that we usually think about science fiction is as projecting likely or possible futures so that we can speculate on them and consider the tensions or issues within the present. This description does not, however, apply particularly well to *Neuromancer*. In interviews Gibson has routinely noted that he did not set out to write this novel as a speculation on emerging technology. In the same issue of the *Mississippi Review* that I have been discussing, McCaffery interviews Gibson and discusses his lack of familiarity with

technology. In response to McCaffery’s question, “So your use of computers and science results more from their metaphoric value or from the way they sound than from any familiarity with how they actually operate,” Gibson responds: “I’m looking for images that supply a certain atmosphere. Right now science and technology seem to be very useful sources for these things. But I’m more interested in the language of, say, computers than I am in the technicalities of how they really operate. On the most basic level, computers in my books are simply a metaphor for human memory. I’m interested in the how’s and why’s of memory, the ways it defines who and what we are, in how easily it’s subject to revision.” Gibson claims that his novel is less a matter of speculation than a recycling of certain forms of contemporary language that suggest to him a kind of novelistic atmosphere. Late in this interview Gibson remarks bluntly, “I don’t see myself as extrapolating in the way I was taught an SF writer should” (228).

Although we can say, then, that Gibson’s importance to critics trying to define science fiction seems initially to be justified by the presence of certain forms of new technology in his books, in fact his treatment of that technology is frequently quite cursory. Likewise, as Samuel Delany has remarked, much of what seems most new in Gibson’s technology fits easily within traditions of science fiction, and only seems radical from the outside. To suggest that writers before Gibson had ignored computer technology or had failed to consider the possibilities of the cyborg body is absurd. Delany’s favorite point of comparison is between Gibson’s character of Molly, who appears in both his story “Johnny Mnemonic” and Neuromancer, and Jael from Joanna Russ’s The Female Man. “The point,” writes Delany, “of course, is that these differences and similarities—formal and attitudinal—give these writers’ works their meaning. And a sophisticated look at their texts immediately leads on to still other SF writers. The informed SF readership can experience that meaning because they are familiar with the informing range.”

23. In “Is Cyberpunk a Good Thing or a Bad Thing?” Mississippi Review 47/48 (1988), Delany compares the misinterpretation of cyberpunk to deconstruction: “Within SF discourse ‘cyberpunk’ is really in the same sort of position that ‘deconstruction’ is in within the contemporary discourse of literary criticism” (34). He explains: “move it [deconstruction] out of that context [of those for whom ‘the problems of literary criticism are of deep and pressing concern’] into Time magazine or The Village Voice and a brilliant thinker and writer like Derrida becomes a ‘nihilistic philosopher’ and a powerful social and literary critic like Fredric Jameson is dismissed as ‘a jargon monger’” (34).  
24. Delany, “Is Cyberpunk a Good Thing or a Bad Thing?” 33.
more relevant than other science fiction is simply to pick a few works out of a tradition irresponsibly. And yet this simplification has been important to critics when they try to define the particular relevance of science fiction to contemporary literature. It should be no surprise that science fiction emerges as genre of writing with claims to academic attention at precisely the moment when critics are trying to distinguish the particular relevance or difference of cyberpunk. In this regard, McCaffery’s decision to use Neuromancer as the epigraph to his essay on “The Fictions of the Present” in the 1988 Columbia Literary History of the United States is typical: science fiction emerges in this essay for a canon-forming volume as an important element of contemporary writing precisely by using Gibson as a representative of “[t]he growth and maturity of science fiction in the United States.”

Most of the traditional ways that we could define the uniqueness of cyberpunk, then, turn out to be false: it does not address some topic unrecognized by other contemporary writers, and it does not extrapolate a future in the traditional science fiction sense. There is, however, one point upon which all the critics discussing cyberpunk agree: the issue of style. Indeed, even Gibson himself remarks in the interview with McCaffery that the concept of cyberspace allows him to establish an atmosphere. Delany is more explicit, writing and speaking frequently about how Gibson’s style belongs in a tradition of other writers who have shaken up the conventions of science fiction and created excitement. In comparing the excitement generated by Gibson, Roger Zelazny, and John Varley, Delany remarks on the particular stylistic “quality” of their writing:

Though an absolutely necessary part of high writerly quality involves a skillfully wrought verbal surface, skill in writing may manifest itself in styles ranging from the simplicity of a Beckett, Hemingway, or Carver to the recommendations of a Joyce, Gass, or Davenport. Nor does the verbal surface exhaust the concept of high quality. Such quality would seem to be, rather, closer to the concept of a skillfully wrought verbal surface generated in a series of narrative situations that clearly and greatly excite a small number of readers comparatively well-educated in the history, in the traditions, and in the conventions of the particular genre.

As in his other comments on cyberpunk and Gibson, Delany is eager to emphasize the science fiction tradition in which this writing should be

considered. This tradition is manifested primarily in the particular narrative “situations” that make up the story, and these situations in turn can be traced back to the particular style of the verbal surface. The same sort of observation about the unique quality of Gibson's style appears in other critics as well, even when they approach cyberpunk without concern for the tradition of science fiction. Writing in the same *Mississippi Review* issue that I have cited frequently, George Slusser describes cyberpunk as “literary MTV”: “Images have been condensed, sharpened, creating an optical surface—a matrix of imagines that is more a glitterspace, images no longer capable of connecting to form the figurative space of mythos or story.”

Even such a breezy comment about Gibson's writing ends up emphasizing style rather than topos, theme, or even narrative.

Critics who want to reject this emphasis on style find themselves swimming against the current of popular interpretation of science fiction. When Andrew Ross discusses Gibson's short story, “The Gernsback Continuum,” he notes how this story works to contrast contemporary and past science fiction styles: “Its appeal rests on a contrast between the tough, savvy realism of contemporary SF’s fondness for technological dystopias and the wide-eyed idealism of the thirties pulp romance of utopian things to come.”

Ross goes on to show that the pulp romances so disparaged by these newer writers imagined the future in the context of social progress, and that in severing these links, cyberpunk “disconnect[s] technological development from any notion of a progressive future” (135). In other words, cyberpunk's savvy realism is unwilling to imagine plausible and socially responsible futures. At least part of the reason for this is because the vocation of this “savvy” writing is imagined not as ultimately predictive but as a stylistic exercise. The same move away from the stylistic justification for cyberpunk fictionality is made by Anne Balsamo in her feminist critique of the movement. Citing Fred Pfeil's observation that cyberpunk novels have no political unconscious but are instead acting out neurotic symptoms explicitly, Balsamo turns to Pat Cadigan's novel *Synners* as a feminist alternative to such superficially symptomatic writing: “in constructing this reading of *Synners*, not to emphasize its cyberpunk characteristics but rather to point to its feminist preoccupations, I am implicitly arguing that it expresses some form of allegorical narrative; as a work of the feminist imagination, it narrativizes certain tensions and obsessions that animate feminist thinking across cultural discourses.”

29. Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham,
Balsamo’s appeal to allegory shares with Ross’s interest in utopian futures a resolve to read science fiction against the grain of its style and to look for a more traditional justification for its fictionality.

The emphasis on style that we see throughout cyberpunk writing and its reception by critics and fans seems to me especially significant because it prefigures the role of style in that other icon of cyberpunk, The Matrix. As I have argued, this film has appealed to critics and viewers as an exemplary cyberpunk artifact, even though thematically and narratively its portrait of reality and simulation is ambiguous or contradictory. As Delany and Slusser suggest, this appeal is based on the style of the verbal surface in cyberpunk fiction; in the film, it is based on the stylish appearance of the characters and the visual innovations of “Bullet-Time.” There is perhaps no better example of the importance of style in both artifacts than the relative failure of the first adaptation of Gibson’s cyberspace to film: the 1995 film Johnny Mnemonic. Based on a script produced by Gibson himself and directly translating the plot and atmosphere of Gibson’s short story, this film has attracted considerably less interest from both critics and popular audience precisely because, I think, it lacks that striking visual style of The Matrix. This is no doubt related to the reason that the sequels to The Matrix have been considered disappointing. Regardless of the films’ narrative success or failure, visually their style simply cannot recapture the newness of the original. It is this visual style rather than some theme that makes us feel that particular contemporary science fiction films are relevant to our image of the future.

**Postmodern Symptoms**

Why this appeal to style in cyberpunk writing? The answer seems fairly straightforward in The Matrix. The industrial music at the club where Neo and Trinity meet and which provides much of the soundtrack for the film as a whole, like the stylish black leather worn by most of the characters, reflects a departure of the reality of the “normal” world. The style of the characters’ actions is not a political principle so much as an outright rejection of this world. In the world of The Matrix, our only political choice is literally to drop out. It is in this sense that the film deserves the problematic term cyberpunk; by defining its aesthetic and political action in terms of a style of rebellion rather than a theory of change, The Matrix reflects the way that critics have...
imagined novels by Gibson and others to be a style rather than a cognitive exercise.

When critics characterize the relevance of cyberpunk fiction, they frequently fall back on a similar language of theory-less praxis, of a stylish rejection of the status quo. McCaffery ends his introduction to the *Mississippi Review* issue by defending this writing against critics who “have constantly pointed towards c-p’s appropriation of devices associated with other genres . . . as exhibiting c-p’s superficiality and its collective failure of imagination.” McCaffery turns this into a positive: “What such criticism ignores, however, is c-p’s postmodernist spirit of free play (*jouissance*) and collaboration, its delight in creating cut-ups and collages (à la Burroughs) in which familiar objects and motifs are placed in startling, unfamiliar contexts.”

Leaving aside the accuracy of McCaffery’s characterization, what seems to me most striking about this defense of cyberpunk is the way that it mutes all questions of thematic or narrative innovation for the sake of establishing its “spirit.” Appeals to a spirit seem to me precisely what is contained within the characterization of cyberpunk—what is most important is the style with which things are done. *The Matrix*, Burroughs’s fiction and punk music all describe a reality that has been “pulled over our eyes” by those in power; consequently the only possible response is to break down the structures of power and representation, without being concerned about what results. The cut-up in this regard (which I discussed briefly in the previous chapter) is a certain style of writing that explicitly denies the importance of what is said for the sake of how it is said. Whether this is, in fact, what really makes Gibson’s writing compelling is another matter. Delany may well be right that the reasons that cyberpunk writing excited fans of science fiction have little to do with such broad claims about resisting power. Nonetheless, it seems to me clear that a significant reason why cyberpunk has attracted the interest of critics working outside of the tradition of science fiction as well as the fascination of the general public through *The Matrix* is precisely because this writing is available to the sort of stylistic characterization that McCaffery offers.

In foregrounding style as a reflection of the broader cultural conditions, cyberpunk is in good company. Indeed, many of the most popular statements about postmodernity treat the characteristics of contemporary texts as symptoms of changing social conditions. Charles Newman’s early critique of postmodernist fiction, *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (1985), exemplifies the tradition of critiquing postmodernist works

as mere symptoms of a larger culture. Newman’s account, he announces, is “nothing so juicy as a sensibility, only a dim pathology of the contemporary.” It is in this way that Lyotard’s description of postmodernism as incredulity toward master narratives likewise is usually understood, as a statement of the way that current forms of writing reflect a loss of confidence in certain philosophical claims. Defining postmodernism as essentially a cultural symptom rather than an aesthetic or political choice has been one of the most controversial elements of Frederic Jameson’s revolutionary theory of postmodernism. Perry Anderson notes that the central accomplishment of Jameson’s theory is to define postmodernism as a reflection of its economic conditions: “The first, and most fundamental, [decisive move] came with its title—the anchorage of postmodernism in objective alterations of the economic order of capital itself. No longer mere aesthetic break or epistemological shift, postmodernity becomes the cultural signal of a new stage in the history of the regnant mode of production.” Defining postmodernism essentially as a symptom of its economic conditions nonetheless brings with it significant problems over which critics have fought ever since. Not only does Jameson’s theory have trouble accounting for the timeline of the historical causality that it implies, but it also raises questions about how some elements of culture can reflect on that culture productively. The ambiguities of this sort of symptomatic reading of postmodern artifacts have been critiqued by Brian McHale. Examining the claims made about postmodernism by Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson, McHale notes that both treat some works as merely symptomatic while associating others with commentary or resistance. In particular, McHale asks of Jameson, “If postmodernist texts are, like all cultural products in all periods, from a dialectical perspective both complicit with the dominant culture and critical or resistant to it, then what are the grounds for making the complicit moments stand synecdochically for the text as a whole in one case . . . while choosing to have the critical moments do so in another case?”

34. Anderson notes, for example, “If postmodernism was the cultural logic of late capitalism, should they not coincide fairly closely in time? Yet Mandel’s *Late Capitalism*, on which Jameson based his conception of a new stage in capitalist development, dated its general arrival from 1945—while Jameson put the emergence of the postmodern in the early seventies” (78–79).
35. Brian McHale, “Postmodernism, or the Anxiety of Master Narratives,” *Diacritics* 22, no. 1 (1992): 28. McHale goes on to note that this is especially a problem in Jameson’s dismis-
This problem of exemplarity is implied when we describe postmodernist texts as symptoms of cultural or economic changes. Lyotard, to some extent, avoids these problems by staying at a fairly high level of abstraction—writing about the "postmodern condition" in general without addressing particular contemporary artifacts whose awareness of this condition would need to be defined. This seems likewise to account for the relative success of Linda Hutcheon's considerably less sophisticated explanation of postmodernist works as "using and abusing" their conditions of representation. By according such works a degree of agency, Hutcheon provides critics with a more satisfying account of contemporary cultural production—even if the implications of this "use" are not fully developed. John Duvall describes the contrast between these two critics this way: "Hutcheon's postmodernism, which focuses on the intentions of artists to comment critically on their contemporary moment through their interventions in aesthetics and poetics, is more clearly linked than Jameson's to what he himself means by modernism; in other words, Hutcheon's postmodernism, like Jameson's modernism, represents the arts' response to the material conditions created by modernization."  

Like so many of the debates about postmodernism, this argument about the relationship between a text and its culture reflects a larger theoretical debate. Giles Gunn notes that this issue of how a text reflects its cultural moment is at the heart of debates about historicism in contemporary literary theory. In *Thinking Across the American Grain*, Gunn contrasts the old and new historicism: "The new historicism can be differentiated from the old by virtue of the way it construes the text as the site of a particular kind of production rather than a specific kind of reflection. The 'old historicism' was—and is—defined most simply, and not inaccurately, in the well-known words from the preface to Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, as the attempt to provide 'a history of man's ideas and imaginings in the setting of the conditions which shaped them.'"  

As this passage makes clear, old historicism need not define all texts and individuals as passive dupes of a cultural moment, nor treat every action as a mere symptom of its time. For Gunn, the
old historicism tells a moral story of artists struggling to resist their shaping conditions.

Although we may be tempted to see Jameson’s use of “conditions” and “symptoms” as a weakness for his theory, what seems most interesting about the now-tired debate between the virtues of Jameson’s and Hutcheon’s definitions of postmodernism is the degree to which Jameson’s symptomatic reading reflects the way that writers themselves often talk about their work. In this way, Donald Barthes’s comment in a short story, “Fragments are the only forms I trust,” was used for years by critics as a way to gloss his disjointed writing style.38 The manifestoes turned out by writers since World War II frequently reflect this passive language of symptoms. When Raymond Federman describes the future of fiction as a time when “all distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between the conscious and the subconscious, between the past and the present, between truth and untruth will be abolished” it is in part symptomatic of the culture: “real fiction happens, everyday, in the streets of our cities, in the spectacular hijacking of planes, on the Moon, in Vietnam, in China (when Nixon stands on the Great Wall of China), and of course on television (during the news broadcasts).”39 The sort of symptomatic generalization that is kept at some distance in Federman’s theory is embraced much more directly and unproblematically by writers who seek to mediate between popular audiences and literary culture. In his 1975 anthology, John David Bellamy offers an account of American fiction that unreservedly accepts a symptomatic explanation: “But perhaps the most revealing explanation for the recent obsession with forms and visions can be located in the vagaries and intense dislocations of contemporary American experience. As early as 1961 that erstwhile American realist Philip Roth began saying that the toughest problem for the American writer was that the substance of the American experience itself was so abnormally and fantastically strange.”40 In the first chapter I spent some time discussing the reception of John Barth’s “Literature of Exhaustion” essay and his insistence that


it had been misread as a statement of despair. One way to account for this misunderstanding is to suggest that critics came to Barth's essay expecting a symptomatic explanation—postmodernism reflects an exhausted American literary culture—and ignored Barth's insistence that such writing "confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work."\textsuperscript{41} We can say, then, that the reception of Barth's essay is an example of conflicting definitions of fictionality circulating within American literary culture today.

The language of symptoms reflects not only theoretical issues but also the struggle between various disciplines with a claim to account for writing and culture. The outright embrace of symptomatic explanations of postmodern style often falls to what Andrew Ross calls "Pop intellectuals": "In the mind's eye of the media, the Pop intellectual with new groovy ideas was required to be somewhat hokey, not entirely legitimate, at least not in the mold of the 'eccentric but responsible academic' media type."\textsuperscript{42} Good examples of such popular intellectual discourse is Andy Warhol's explanation of contemporary culture discussed in the second chapter, or Robert Venturi et al.'s calls for a postmodern architecture.\textsuperscript{43} The language of symptoms seems to appear most frequently when critics, artists, and writers are explaining contemporary texts without recourse to particular disciplinary procedures. Such manifestos reject the traditional discipline of literature or architecture, and so are left without any formal framework for defining their aesthetics. We can say, then,

\textsuperscript{41.} John Barth, \textit{The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 69–70.


\textsuperscript{43.} Venturi et al.'s famous call to embrace popular models like the Las Vegas strip and the motel and move away from sculptural architecture associated with modernism rests on a broad theory of the changing nature of contemporary life: "Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things" (Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, \textit{Learning from Las Vegas}, rev. ed [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977], 3). In particular, Venturi calls architects to embrace popular modes of construction as an expression of the change in conditions of contemporary life. Noting the distance between a Vegas casino and the road ("near enough to the highway to be seen from the road across the parked cars, yet far enough back to accommodate driveways" [34]), Venturi et al. reach a simple conclusion: "The scales of movement and space of the highway relate to the distances between buildings; because they are far apart, they can comprehended at high speeds" (34–35). The authors' theory is engaged in the history of architecture, but the portions that are most easily digested by a general audience are those that treat contemporary architecture as a symptom of cultural changes. Precisely because this theory has been used as a starting point for discussion not only by architects but also by critics and readers from a variety of fields, it usefully marks the transition to a popular intellectual debate.
that in work by popular spokespersons for and against postmodernism that art and literary works are taken to be symptoms of larger patterns within the society.

When applied to literature, the reading of texts and styles as symptomatic seems especially to mark a dissolution of belief that a particular set of disciplinary techniques is necessary to understand and evaluate a text, and to position this definition of fiction on the tipping point between literary institutions and popular culture. A case in point is Michael Berubé’s critique of the popular representation of canon debates during the early 1990s. Berubé is strongest in his condemnation of The Atlantic’s decision to publish Dinesh D’Souza’s “Illiberal Education.” “D’Souza’s attack on the academy,” Berubé claims, “relies on ignorance—his own, and ours.” As an example of this ignorance, Berubé cites D’Souza’s breezy characterization that deconstruction is “hostile to all texts” and refuses to deconstruct works by women, minorities, and other deconstructionists. Berubé concludes:

If someone were to publish an essay which claimed that Paradise Lost never really talks about theology, or that psychoanalysis fails to make use of the works of major Greek dramatists, certainly we would recognize such a person as a cultural illiterate. But because no one at The Atlantic, including even the journal’s fact-checkers, is aware of the past twenty-five years’ profusion of deconstruction work on Marx [and others] . . . D’Souza is allowed to get away with this series of inanities . . .

That The Atlantic would have published D’Souza, and at such length, is an important sign of the extent to which public discussion of American academia is now conducted by the most callow and opportunistic elements of the Right; it’s also, sad to say, an important sign of how low are our minimum standards for serious public exchange on the status of American criticism. (141–42)

Regardless of whether his critique of D’Souza is entirely just, Berubé is right, I think, to argue that general culture has lost confidence in the discipline of literature itself and that the canon debates reflect in large part a simplification of theoretical issues by those looking at it from the outside. In this sense, the increasing popularity of book clubs is also a part of this recent trend to depersonalize the study of literary works. While any discipline can be restrictive, it seems that an attempt to define an adisciplinary fiction-

ality likewise leads to problems and restrictions. The equation of texts and symptoms reflects this urge towards a reading of literature that is located within the popular arena and independent of particular disciplinary and institutional rules.

**Why Is Science Fiction Symptomatic?**

We can say, then, that science fiction emerges onto the scene of American writing at just the moment when the relationship between texts and their culture is at its most theoretically uncertain. When I say that science fiction emerges at this moment, I mean simply that in the mid-1970s science fiction begins to achieve some degree of critical respectability that it did not previously have. At the same time, science fiction increasingly appears in popular culture as a vehicle for serious aesthetic interest. As I conclude this chapter, I would like to consider why science fiction of all the varieties of contemporary writing has been chosen to carry the banner of cultural symptoms.

McHale has argued convincingly that cyberpunk writing reflects a dual motion within contemporary fiction: the evolution of contemporary “literature” toward using more of the themes and topoi of science fiction, and the incorporation within this particular strain of science fiction of traditionally postmodern stylistic devices. “Cyberpunk SF,” McHale concludes, “can thus be seen . . . as SF which derives certain of its elements from postmodernist mainstream fiction which itself has, in its turn, already been ‘science-fictionalized’ to some greater or lesser extent.”

McHale’s formulation of science fiction implies a mutual evolution within these two facets of contemporary writing, the primary difference between them gradually fading. Nonetheless, it seems to me that part of the fascination with cyberpunk reflects its particular involvement in science fiction themes. What excites critics about cyberpunk is not only its themes and style but also the fact that it seems to be predictive. This is the logic behind Gibson’s prominent place in the predictive collection *Fiction 2000*.

If we consider the uses to which cyberpunk writing, and Gibson’s novels in particular, are put, it becomes clear that it is precisely science fiction’s traditional role of predicting the future that is essential to its appeal as a critical object. In the cultural studies interest in the cyborg and the posthuman, cyberpunk writers in general, and Gibson in particular, figure largely as occasions to think about technology, society, and subjectivity. Consider,

for example, the texts cited by Donna Haraway in her well-known “Cyborg Manifesto” (1985): Anne McCaffery’s *The Ship Who Sang*, Russ’s *The Female Man*, and Delany’s *Tales of Nevrøyn*. Haraway bypasses other texts for the sake of science fiction in part because she is interested in science fiction as an oppositional literature outside of the mainstream: “Students facing Joanna Russ for the first time, students who have learned to take modernist writers like James Joyce or Virginia Woolf without flinching, do not know what to make of *The Adventures of Alyx* or *The Female Man*, where characters refuse the reader’s search for innocent wholeness while granting the wish for heroic quests, exuberant eroticism, and serious politics.”

Whether or not Haraway is right about the difference between modernist and science fiction writing, it is clear that science fiction functions as an example for Haraway because it seems to her more engaged in projecting a political and social future. The same pattern is true in other collections of essays that focus on the future of humanity, like *Posthuman Bodies* (1995) or *The Cyborg Handbook* (1995), where (with a few exceptions) the examples are routinely drawn from science fiction writing. Attending to the issue of the cyborg body, these critics imply, involves an interest in the future of identity and corporeality that science fiction texts are best positioned to address.

Why, we might ask, are science fiction texts the site where these debates are handled? Why not, for example, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which certainly works through a certain kind of cyborg existence? Joseph Tabbi notes precisely this shift in the literary sites where these issues are considered: “If Gibson carried the aesthetic of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (and much else from alternative cultures of the seventies and eighties) into the science fiction genre, the motifs in *Neuromancer* now circulate primarily through *The Matrix*.”

The answer, it seems to me, is fairly straightforward and speaks to the continuing function of the disciplinary definition of science fiction: novels like *Neuromancer* and Piercy’s *He, She and It* are taken to be a form of thought experiment, if not an outright prediction of the future, because they are read first and foremost as science fiction narratives. Because of this, they are understood to raise questions about the literal structure of the future and the ramifications of technology, rather than being parsed for less direct,

thematic engagements with technology like Pynchon’s novel. This is of course ironic, since we have seen that at the same time critics justify the importance of contemporary science fiction in terms of its style more than its substance. In this strange formulation, science fiction is important because it promises to predict the future but understanding it as a symptom defines its fictional-ity without reference to the future. Given the anxieties that I noted at the outset in our notions of the future, this hybrid, compromise definition may be its primary appeal. In this sense, cyberpunk’s symptomatic style is a way of negotiating science fiction’s predictive function without appealing to the future. Indeed the very nature of the symptom—as an entanglement with the past that predicts the future by causing continuing effects—nicely embodies the contradictions that surround a postmodern future.

Based on my discussion in the previous section, it seems clear that science fiction is the form of contemporary fiction best able to symptomatize contemporary culture precisely because it is thought of as already outside of the norms of literary study. Although many critics praise science fiction for its resistance to institutional norms—as opening up the claustrophobic space of traditional canons and genres—to take science fiction as the model for contemporary fiction in general means to undermine literary institutions and methodologies broadly. This is why, it seems to me, that popular audiences would turn not to general “fiction” less marked by genre categories (like Gravity’s Rainbow) but instead to a film like The Matrix to think about the impact of technology on our lives. The Matrix is accessible as a symptom of larger culture in a way that Pynchon’s novel is not; as an example of science fiction, it is free from the baggage of institutional expectations that accrue to books labeled “literary.” Because it is marked as popular rather than literary, such fiction is available to ways of reading outside of traditional disciplinary norms. It should also be clear that in the process science fiction is being positioned as an alternative to both the mythical, archival, and lying fictions that I discussed in the first three chapters. While the novels and stories discussed in those chapters were defined through their relation to literary discourse, science fiction is positioned as marginal to this discourse, and thus demanding a form of reading that reflects less disciplinary attention. It is for this reason that this definition of fictionality is a step away from literary institutions and towards alternative contexts and audiences for reception and interpretation.

Science fiction is defined as important for its style, then, and readers

49. Joanna Russ defines science fiction as “outsider” art in To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 90.
are encouraged to treat it as a symptom requiring no specialized disciplinary training to appreciate. This is how I would interpret the wild popularity of Donna Haraway’s essay on the cyborg, an essay and critical concept that clearly struck a cord with readers. In defining the cyborg as an “ironic political myth,” I would argue, Haraway subtly draws on the tradition of associating science fiction and style. Haraway states that these myths are a kind of intellectual tool: “The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture” (175). Not only do cyborgs provide alternative tool-stories, but they embody storytelling in some more fundamental sense: “Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs” (176). If the cyborg is a tool for thinking differently, then the myths that Haraway is interested in are less about a set of beliefs—hence the cyborg is ironic—and more about a way of behaving intellectually. In other words, Haraway’s cyborg is more a matter of a style of thought than a particular belief or conclusion. That style should form the basis of the cyborg should not be a surprise. We have seen over and over that science fiction—and especially the appeal to style in science fiction—embodies the attempt to think about the relevance of stories to the present after their traditional disciplinary function has been problematized.

Haraway also makes clear—in case it hasn’t been clear all along—that the struggle with science fiction’s vocation and the attraction to texts as cultural symptoms is ultimately an attempt to define a particular justification for fictionality today. Haraway is quite explicit in associating the cyborg with a shift in our traditional thinking about the line between the real and the imaginative: “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction” (149). As a “condensed image of both imagination and material reality” (150), the cyborg blurs the line between the real and the imagined. Doing so is essential to Haraway’s claim that such myths offer intellectual tools. In defining the invented as an expression of a certain style that embodies the cultural moment, Haraway, like other critics and writers concerned with science fiction today, responds to changes in the status of the discipline of literature and offers a new justification for fictionality.