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Hello From The Chat Man

B. Diane Martin

Whether you are an old friend or attending for the first time, on behalf of the Readercon Committee, let me welcome you to Readercon 8. It's been two years since the last Readercon. Our thanks to all those who dropped a note to let us know how much they missed us last year.

David Shaw and I are thrilled to have William Gibson and Larry McCaffrey as the Guests of Honor at the last Readercon we serve as chairs. David and I will be moving into the genteel semi-retirement allowed us by the organization. We will be devoting our time to a computer and online gaming company started with several friends. But, as Eric and Bob have explained to us on numerous occasions, once you've run a Readercon you can never stray too far away. So thanks to all of the Committee members, guests, and attendees who have made these past few Readercons memorable as well as successful.

Two years ago I challenged our supporters to get involved in the governing of Readercon as well as helping out at the convention. I'm sorry to say that very few people have responded. We are here this year but we still need help.

The reason why Readercon is so different from other organizations is that we don't have a paying membership. We are a not-for-profit volunteer organization. We don't sit through meetings governed by Robert's Rules of Order. We encourage people to volunteer for positions they want to work in. I don't know about you, but this is the type of organization I'd like to be involved with.

Anyone who can offer time during the year to work on a project (you don't have to come to meetings to volunteer your time to research GOHs bios, track down an obscure piece of writing by our Past Master, call a publishing house to try to get an ad for our Souvenir Book, or come up with a great panel idea), or to work for a few hours during the con - please get involved. The rewards are truly incalculable.



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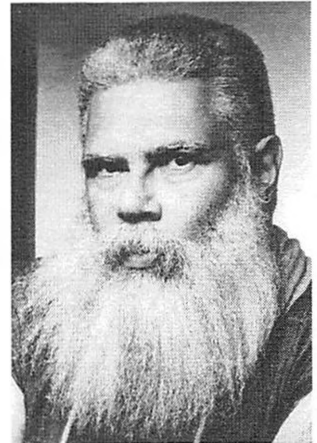


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Like many wannabe SF writers in the summer of 1977 I was there at the very beginning, which was the third issue of a magazine called *Unearth*. *Unearth* only printed stories by previously unpublished writers, so we were the core audience and possibly the only audience. The cover story of issue three was "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" by William Gibson.

Instead, he beat the beginning-middle-end crowd at their own game. His instant rise is so much a part of the lore of the field that I feel as if I was there for that too, but in reality the next time I read anything by Gibson was in September 1985, far along the rapid pop-star trajectory of his career, when the Hugo and Nebula had finally bumped *Neuromancer* to the top of my reading pile.

Re-reading it now, it's much more of a William Gibson story than it was then, a small and elliptical slice of his now-familiar world, just as the byline itself is now instantly recognizable instead of almost instantly forgettable, but even as an anonymous and self-contained work it stood out from the rest of the issue. Exquisitely crafted but dense to the point of difficulty, substituting the unfolding of static memory for beginning-middle-end, a dystopia only made more vivid by the exhilarating clarity and science-fictional niftiness, it was aggressively literary, and seemed stuck in *Unearth* not because it was unskilled but because it was uncommercial, too "academic" and "downbeat" for the aggressively anti-literary publishing climate of the time. I'd like to claim that I knew better, but if you had asked me at the time I would have come up with the same verdict Gibson did, that he would be a commercially marginal cult author at best.

It would be the last time I'd put off reading anything with his name on it. Reading Gibson was a hedonistic experience. Many authors obey a puritanical ethos: reading them is the work you perform in order to earn the reward of aesthetic pleasure when the story is done and the full design is revealed. Gibson's fiction offers that kind of reward, but – and I suspect this is what makes most of his critics uneasy – the text is intensely pleasurable in itself. Mentally engaging his electric language and imagery and thought is a high.

Like many readers in the fall of 1985 who had caught on late, after *Neuromancer* I scrambled to find his short stories, not yet collected in *Burning Chrome*, and learn anything I could about the author. That kind of curiosity is the objective precondition of media stardom. Since Gibson isn't the first SF writer to fulfill it, the full why and how remain a subject of debate. It's never bothered me, though, if only because it seems natural that a writer whose greatest fascination is the pop culture apparatus should fascinate the pop culture apparatus in return.

Meanwhile, Gibson has written three more novels, *Count Zero*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, and *Virtual Light*, and a collaboration with Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine*. I suggested that "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" was less of a William Gibson story when it was published than now, and that seems to happen eventually to all his work. That is, my understanding of it keeps changing. In 1986 I could write of *Neuromancer*: "But the most interesting thing about Gibson is his unusual attitude to his high-tech SF innovations. Almost all his characters are cyborgs, constructs, or clones, but none of them have identity problems. Gibson is pro-technology and pro-change. His characters have all adapted to his future, and most are excited by the new possibilities it opens." Writing in 1991, my view had completely reversed: "The technology, simstim and cyberspace, is memory concretized. The characters are haunted by memory. Some live in memory-worlds. Some are memory-things...The stylistic feel of his work, that elegant, bluesy emotion that lies underneath the cool of the writing like water under ice, is suddenly clarified; it is based on the emotions associated with memory: nostalgia and regret." Now, after *Virtual Light*, with its great symbol of the bridge, it has been changed again. The retroactive deepening continues.

Barnaby Rapoport

This process makes William Gibson a particularly exciting Guest of Honor. I expect to walk away from Readercon 8 with a body of work that is more complex still. Besides – who knows? – I may get to steal one of the sheets from his bed.

Gibson, William (1948 –) No other SF writer has ever gotten more cultural and literary bang for the buck from a single novel than William Gibson did with his *Neuromancer* (1984). Freshly told, deftly written, intelligently conceived, seeded with marvels and challenges, insights and assertions, the book deservedly captured SF's Triple Crown of Hugo, Nebula, and Philip K. Dick awards. It lofted Gibson to a pinnacle of media familiarity seldom visited even by Heinlein, Asimov, Herbert or Clarke, rendering him something of a spokesman for a whole cohort of unlikely fellow travelers. Released with exquisite timing on the cusp of larger sociocultural and technological waves, this maiden effort of Gibson's allowed the bubbling-under cyberpunk phenomenon to emerge as a literary movement, a fashion and style statement, a lifestyle option, and now, a decade later, a marketing category. Much to Gibson's credit, he has managed somehow to remain unperturbed by all the hullabaloo surrounding his work, going on to produce further craftmanly novels and screenplays, none of which has exactly replicated his initial impact.

Born in the US but a Canadian expatriate since 1968, Gibson was a relative oldster when his first story was published in 1977 ("Fragments of a Hologram Rose," in *Unearth*, a small press magazine which also printed beginner's efforts by Blaylock, Di Filippo, and Rucker). Gibson spent the next several years turning out the distinctive short stories later collected in *Burning Chrome* (1986), some shared with collaborators such as Sterling, Shirley, and Swanwick. (One piece therein, "Johnny Mnemonic," was translated to film in 1995 by Gibson himself and artist-director Robert Longo.)

Upon the bombshell release of *Neuromancer* – composed, legend has it, on a battered manual typewriter – Gibson went quickly from a figure of insider's cult attention to a public icon.

Drawing upon inspirations as diverse as Raymond Chandler and the Velvet Underground, Joseph Cornell and the Sex Pistols, the story of Case the cyberspace cowboy and Molly the razor-nailed assassin, hot on the digital trail of a software McGuffin, was a fastpaced, unrelenting thriller that amalgamated lowlifes with high tech in a manner that would soon degenerate into cliché in the hands of imitators. Coining the term "cyberspace," Gibson went on to render that new venue in lustrous clarity, inspiring a whole real-world industry with the Grail of sensual data immersion.

Most remarkable was how closely the book limned contemporary trends and emotions, beneath its futuristic veneer. As critic John Clute has remarked, every SF novel, whatever the ostensible date of its future, conceals a set of timebound assumptions. More so than any other writer – with the possible exception of Bruce Sterling – Gibson managed to work with up-to-the-minute headlines and issues, imparting an urgency and immediacy perceived by millions of readers.

Following closely on the heels of *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988) introduced new characters – including touchy and possibly insane Artificial Intelligences into Gibson's Sprawl, allowing for the exploration of further niches in this wired future.

With Bruce Sterling, Gibson next ventured into a massively annotatable steampunk alternate history. Their *The Difference Engine* (1990) postulated that the analog computers of Charles Babbage became a Victorian reality, leading to a dystopian world of pollution and social stratification whose grimed face mirrored the worst aspects of our own world.

Virtual Light (1993) returned to a near-future scenario in which bike messenger Chevette Washington becomes involved in deadly schemes upon her theft of a pair of VR sunglasses. The book's depiction of city spaces, including a quake-damaged Golden Gate bridge full of squatters, continued Gibson's insightful focus on the potentials and perversions of urban life.

The first writer to shine a blinding light on postmodern corporate ethics, digitized realities, and deracinated, disaffected socketed loners, Gibson is SF's genial yakuza boss.

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John M. Ford is the author of the World Fantasy Award-winning *The Dragon Waiting* and "Winter Solstice, Camelot Station," Nebula Award finalist *Fugue State*, and such widely diverse works as *Growing Up Weightless*, *Casting Fortune* and other tales set in the Liavek shared world, and *How Much for Just the Planet?* (one of the very few *Star Trek* novels in which no one dies ... of anything but embarrassment).

Ron Walotsky has produced exciting and insightful cover art for almost 30 years, most recently for *Ancient Echoes* (Robert Holdstock), *Panda Ray* (Michael Kandel), *Temporary Agency* (Rachel Pollack), *The 37th Mandala* (Marc Laidlaw), and *Primary Inversion* (Catherine Asaro). His latest projects include a collection of the Comic Images "Starquest" series game cards. He is also the Artist GoH for the upcoming World Fantasy Convention in Chicago.

Tom Smith is a Midwestern musician with a flair for parody, a keen sense of the absurd, and a truly evil genius for sneaky puns in such songs as "(When I Grow Up) I Want to be Peter Lorre," "Domino Death," and "Divine Irregularity." You have been warned.

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"Thoughts and Observations on William Gibson"

OR

"What If John Lydon Had Become England's First Cyborg Prime Minister?"

By Paul T. Riddell

Several years ago, I read Greil Marcus' horribly bloated and ponderous book **Lipstick Traces**, and noticed that we all would have been better off had the publisher slapped the final thesis between hard covers and used the rest as toilet paper. While Marcus isn't known for brevity or cohesiveness, he made one priceless observation about the effects of the punk movement on popular culture. Although punk music and society have at best a marginal effect today, the underlying attitudes have covered the globe. In effect, the early punks managed to change the face of the planet without realizing it. The only traces remaining on the surface were like the lipstick traces on a cigarette butt, but the party at which the butt was dropped spread out into the streets and made everyone's life a little more interesting.

While Marcus otherwise is a twit (anyone wishing for a good book on punk and its effects would be better off buying George Gimarc's **Punk Diary**), that thesis stuck with me for a while. More than anything else, it explains William Gibson.

Science fiction apologists like to prattle about how SF has changed our lives, mostly through predicting various technological advances. Sure, SF writers predicted the first moon landings, but nobody wrote serious pieces about the ponderous bureaucracy of the agency responsible for Apollo 11, nor did anyone consider that we'd drop garbage on the lunar surface for five years and then never return. Hell, I'm still waiting for the manned Mars bases that NASA promised us we'd see by 1980. While SF may have acted as an influence on astronomers and engineers, these were the folks who read Burroughs and Weinbaum and then wanted to explore Mars to see what Mars was really like. They might not have expected the results radioed back from the Viking probes, but they also didn't expect to see thoats or funny barrel people yelling "We are v-r-r-r-iends!", either.

For all of the effects of the New Wave on SF, the movement never got far outside of the genre. Nobody outside of SF knows Norman Spinrad or Thomas Disch, Michael Moorcock is still known more for his Elric novels than for his much superior SF or comedies, and the only work of Harlan Ellison anybody recognizes is the movie adaptation of "A Boy and His Dog," and that's only because Don Johnson starred in it (I still know people who think **A Boy and His Dog** is a Disney film, but then I know people who think the *Necronomicon* is a real book, too). Even in SF, the New Wave never got far: besides allowing authors to sneak in a lot of gratuitous sex and violence for the terminally socially retarded, most of the SF published today might as well have been published in the Forties. Sure, Phil Dick wrote some incredible work, but he's now known more for inspiring the boring **Blade Runner** and thoroughly godawful **Total Recall** than for any of his novels.

Had the genre now known as cyberpunk started in the Sixties or the Seventies, it would now be a minor footnote in Nicholls' **The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction**, nestled somewhere safe where the True Believers wouldn't have to deal with it. Some writers tried what might now be considered cyberpunk: Norman Spinrad's **Bug Jack Barron** and Harlan Ellison's "Catman," among many others, helped fertilize the soil from which Cyberpunk would spring. However, those were simpler times, when we all believed in the basic decency of humankind. Dystopias were based on economic or ecological collapse, and they nearly always assumed that things would get worse. Never would anyone even suggest that things would get bad, but corporations and governments would want to keep things that way.

Gibson's success with his first novel **Neuromancer** lay not only with his prose, which brought to mind a society in decay comparable to Fritz Leiber's Lankmar, but also with his timing. **Neuromancer** came at a time when computers first entered the marketplace at affordable prices: instead of having to depend upon college or business mainframes, the average joe could tinker with the possibilities of computing in his or her home. (Yes, we laugh now, but I remember when owning a VIC-20 or a TI 99a was a big deal for a high school or college student.) The disparity between incomes of the rich and poor were starting to be noticed, thus making it easy to believe in insanely rich families building orbital stations for the sole purpose of making themselves exempt from the laws that ruled the masses. Most important of all, **Neuromancer** came at a time when the typical computer-addicted student realized that conformity was a straightjacket in the workplace, and an enterprising computer jockey could get a lot further with talent and a bit of lunacy.

Then, as now, some people missed the point of all of this. The screaming of old-time SF writers and editors wailed through the halls in much the same way glam rockers and **Rolling Stone** reviewers glibbered and meeped about punk (interestingly, the word "cyberpunk" was a disparaging one disdained by the people who wrote the stuff, as "punk" was to the people

playing it). They swore that cyberpunk wouldn't last, that it wouldn't have lasting influence on the genre.

Sadly, cyberpunk didn't have much permanent effect on SF. The best way to tell when a particular movement in SF is really and truly dead is when a role-filling game comes out to commemorate it (which is why I don't hold my breath for another "Star Wars" movie), and cyberpunk spawned two of the damn things. Out of the multitude of writers whose work could be shoehorned into the cyberpunk classification, most aren't writing cyberpunk any more. Quite a few moved into the Victorian fiction now known as "steampunk" (which Gibson and Bruce Sterling joined with their 1991 collaboration **The Difference Engine**), while others moved on to writing nonfiction and screenplays or stopped writing altogether. Right now, cyberpunk as a subgenre of SF is dead, save for the few writers who managed to swipe cyberpunk clichés and graft them onto traditional stories.

Well, that's SF for you. On the outside, though, cyberpunk caught the attention of everyone but traditional SF readers. Since Gibson et al came along at just the right time, their ideas changed the face of our world. **Neuromancer** popped up during the early days of the Internet, back when most people still referred to it as "ARPANet", and the vision of an all-encompassing web of computer communication led to the current boom in business on the World Wide Web. Most computer books involving the Web start with the mention of "William Gibson created the word 'cyberspace' in 1982..." Fashion trends picked up on cyberpunk, too: since only computers could live and thrive in the world we've made, the trends toward lots of black leather and chrome continue to peak, or is there another reason why **The Terminator** still has so much emotional power? Some people took the satire of living on the computer as a directive, but then, as **BOING BOING** pointed out long ago, anyone who prefers computer sex to the real thing won't leave his/her genes to infect future generations. (With hope, that means Trekkies will become extinct in five generations or so, but that's what they said about rabbits and cane toads in Australia, too.)

Gibson acted as a catalyst in ways we'll never imagine, nor even be able to catalogue. His writing allowed a resurgence of Brian Aldiss' and Philip K. Dick's work, as well as allowing the opportunity for Misha, Bruce Sterling, Paul Di Filippo, and Ernest Hogan to bloom. John Shirley and K.W. Jeter may have started writing long before Gibson did, but **Dr. Adder** never would have seen print if not for the critical mass instigated by Gibson. Today, **Neuromancer** is considered one of the great seminal SF novels, right up alongside Bradbury's **The Martian Chronicles** and Frederik Pohl's **Gateway**.

As far as popular society is concerned, though, Gibson's influence expands to cover a multitude of subjects. Most of the development of the Web is due to impressionable students reading his stories and novels; instead of whining and complaining after reading Robert Anton Wilson, they read Gibson and thought "You know, we can do this". Most of the work in virtual reality owes its influence to Gibson's "cyberspace decks", as VR went from merely recreating real situations to creating things impossible anywhere outside of a computer. True, Gibson takes a lot of crap from uninformed gits about the movie adaptation of "Johnny Mnemonic" (if the original author is to blame, then why didn't Roger Zelazny get lynched for **Damnation Alley** or George R.R. Martin for **Nightflyers**?), but the memes he implanted in the collective psyche still bounce around: just look at **Strange Days** or **The Net**.

Okay, so this goes both ways: if not for Gibson, we wouldn't have **Wired**, **Mondo 2000**, R.U. Sirius as a spokesman for cyberspace, the movie **Hackers**, and the predicate "cyber" on everything. However, if getting the print joys of **Science Fiction Eye**, **Nova Express**, **2600**, and the late lamented **BOING BOING** mean having to put up with another mindless issue of **Wired**, it's a fair trade. I'm even willing to forget Billy Idol's album **Cyberpunk** if the same influences brought us Paul Di Filippo's "Ribofunk Manifesto".

A lot of writers end up changing the world years after they died: Jules Verne and H.P. Lovecraft are two golden examples. William Gibson, though is lucky enough not only to be an influence on human social evolution in his own way, but to be alive to watch it happen.

-Paul T. Riddell is a Texas-based essayist and alleged humorist who likes giving SF fans a hard time. Contrary to popular opinion, he is not the son of Texas Senator Phil Gramm.

No city can exist without bridges. In the 1990s we are increasingly aware of meditations on bridges that have been nurtured by Anglo-American literary history; Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), Hart Crane's "The Bridge" (1930) Ian Banks's *The Bridge* (1986), Terry Bisson's *Talking Man* (1986), and even Robert James Waller's mega-hit *The Bridges of Madison County* (1992). But I have never encountered a more brilliant construction of a bridge than in William Gibson's fourth solo novel *Virtual Light*. In it Gibson beautifully envisions the near-future, hyperrealistic, junk-artistic atmosphere found on a post-earthquaked San Francisco Bay Bridge. In the year 2005 California was split into two states – SoCal and NoCal – by a huge earthquake called "the Little Grande" that closed the Bay Bridge to traffic linking San Francisco and Oakland. This event allowed ex-hippies and the homeless to take over the bridge space where they build a new self-governing community.

What makes the setting so fascinating is that this new tribe of "bridge people" radically re-design the bridge. Their Dadaistic architecture is labeled "Thomasson" by Yamazaki, a Japanese anthropology student from Osaka University who is doing research on the formation of the bridge culture.

As is often the case with Gibson it must have been by virtue of his own secret connection with Japanese subcultures that he has chosen the otherwise incomprehensible term "Thomasson." The term signifies the latest phase of the Japanese Neo-Dadaist movement championed by Genpei Akasegawa from the 1960s through the 90s. Whereas he once reappropriated the American Dada-Surrealist Joseph Cornell in his second novel *Count Zero* (1986), here Gibson attempts to bridge the distance not only between city and suburb, city and islands, but also between reality and unreality, Occidentalism and Orientalism, San Francisco and Tokyo.

In retrospect, bridge culture can be characterized by informational traffic as well as by informational distortion, distortion that fuses the real with the unreal. Therefore, we should reinterpret high-tech and dead-tech cultures in *Virtual Light* from a hyper-civil-aesthetic perspective, with the ghosts of multicultural semiotics in mind.

1. Catcher in the City

Gibson describes the near future Bay Bridge as the ultimate utopia of the homeless, a reminder to us of the actual history of the Golden Gate Bridge in the mid-1980s, when a number of homeless people occupied the bridge at a time when there was a heated controversy going on over the closing of the US army base situated at the San Francisco end of the bridge. In a departure from actual history, Gibson's near-future Bay Bridge becomes well-known around the world, and it exploits its junk artistic atmosphere to attract many international sightseers. It is especially lyrical and humorous that the idiosyncratic community that lives in containers and trailer houses suspended from the bridge cables, is

financially supported by multinational corporations, which provide them not only with food and medicine, but also with advanced adhesives.

The plot itself is a variation on the quest for the Holy Grail. The main protagonists are search for the Virtual Light Sunglasses (VL) that have been brought to San Francisco by the courier Bricks. VL are unique, since their virtual reality system does not make use of photons, but connects directly to the optic nerve. If one doesn't actually have eyes, i.e., optic nerves that are still intact, one can regain one's sight virtually. Vivid scenes out of the past or images of top secret documents related to the civil re-engineering of the bridge are possible through the tremendous data-sampling capabilities of VL. This phenomenon reminds us of Robert Shaw's masterpiece "Light of Other Days" (1966) and its expanded version *Other Days, Other Eyes* (1972-74), in which the author invented the exhilaratingly high-tech device of "slow glass," through which light takes years to travel, thereby enabling us to view and savor scenes from the past. Gibson's "virtual light sunglasses" are an updated version of Shaw's "slow glass."

One night at a party, Bricks' VL are stolen from him by Chevette, a bike-messenger and an inhabitant of the bridge. Chevette committed the theft on an impulse, but is totally ignorant of what information the sunglasses possess. When her theft is followed by the mysterious murder of Bricks himself, we suspect Chevette may be the murderer as well as the thief. She is chased by the "unofficial associates" of big corporations, especially by Berry Rydell, the rent-a-cop hired by an American Vietnamese, Lucius Warbaby, of IntenSecure. Eventually we learn that Loverace is the real criminal and is responsible for the murder of Bricks, and that Lucius wants to defeat the civil re-engineering plan detailed and concealed within VL.

Gibson's basic motif has survived the decade: the greatest currency is information, while the greatest information is the very medium through which information is conveyed. We see, however, that this novel gives priority to junkyard over cyberspace, to bike-messenger over cyber-cowboy. Despite the high-tech title, what *Virtual Light* achieves in the long run is not so much an admiration of VL technology as a deeply ironic attitude towards the relationship between streamlined "technophilia," symbolized by the cityscape, and junk-artistic ludism, represented by the bridgescape.

2. From Cyber-Cowboy to Bike-Messenger

For us to speculate upon the contemporary significance of bridge culture it is helpful to start by reexamining the textual history of *Virtual Light*.

The outline of the novel was first conceived when William Gibson accepted Paolo Polledri's offer to participate in the exhibition "Visionary San Francisco" held in 1989 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The result was a short story entitled "Skinner's Room" that was based on an idea for a

or,

bridge culture that he sketched out in collaboration with Ming Fung and Craig Hodgetts. It does not matter that the author himself was not born and raised in San Francisco. Whether one is born there or not, San Francisco represents both a physical iconography of the west coast, and a psycho geography applicable to the American 60s in general.

Historically speaking, the city of San Francisco began to grow rapidly in the mid-nineteenth century, around the time of the Gold Rush (1849), in defiance of topography and distance from other urban centers. Subsequently, it came to represent a twentieth century capital, a "Paris of the West" (Polledri, 19-20), and especially, the "Flower Children's capital" of the 1960s. As Kevin Starr suggests, while Boston signifies Puritanism, New York finance and taste, Atlanta and Omaha railroad, Los Angeles show business, San Francisco represents urbanism; "San Francisco has always been dreaming of itself and calling these dreams into being" (Starr, 14-15). To put it another way, San Francisco is the self-referential metaphor of the city itself. This image may explain why Gibson was attracted to the civil-aesthetic potentialities of San Francisco, and why he wrote "Skinner's Room," in which Skinner, the leader of the first generation of bridge people, was the first man to scale the towers of the fallen bridge, where he sings in the rain and builds his "room" atop one of the cable towers.

It took Gibson three years to expand the short story into a novel. The author seems to have taken a great deal of time developing the character of the girl who takes care of Skinner in the short story version, naming her "Chevette" and featuring her as the heroine of the novel. To clarify the alluring contrast between high-tech and low-tech cultures in the text, the author must have felt it necessary to foreground Chevette and the San Francisco subculture of bike-messengers that she belongs to.

(Of course, the job of bike-messenger itself is not new; it developed rapidly in the decade between 1980 and 1990. In a hilly city like San Francisco, bike-messengers are preferred to cars or fax machines, since even the heaviest traffic jam doesn't prevent them from carrying spot commodities or top secret papers from one point to another. San Francisco required bike-messengers, they flourished, and in the near-future one encounters bike-messengers in the Haight in bars such as the "Zeitgeist on Friday". Gibson himself comments on the significance of the bike-messenger culture: "I'm inclined to believe what somebody says in the book about why there are still bicycle-messengers. I think there'll always be people needed to physically carry information around, mainly for security reasons" (Gibson, "New Futures, Just on the Horizon," 4).

In retrospect, since 1981 when he published one of his first stories, "Johnny Mnemonic," Gibson has long been obsessed with the role of the courier who carries information around without knowing what he carries. As Poe's detective skillfully resolves the mystery by understanding the *signifier* of the pur-

loined letter, not its *signified*, so Gibson's couriers brilliantly achieve their purposes by valuing the *container* of secret information, not the secrets themselves. In this respect, Gibson's signifier-mania makes the low-tech job of bike-messenger match perfectly with the junk-artistic culture of the bridgescape.

From its beginning cyberpunk literature has persistently dealt with the paradoxical relationship between high-tech and low-tech cultures, as seen in Gibson's *Cyberspace Trilogy* and in an early short story "Winter Market" (1985). Without the ultra-functionalism of the cyberspace cowboy, the hyperaesthetics of low-tech junk-artistic luddites would not have been possible, and vice versa. We cannot easily separate these two paradigms; and we find the logic of each closely intertwined. This is why bike-messengers like Chevette hold the same status as cyber-cowboys or computer hackers in general, individuals who are not marginal but crucial to the high-tech cityscape.

3. Gibson, Süsskind, Akasegawa

Gibson's phantasmagoric description of the bridge culture is rather nostalgic, recalling not only the psychedelic bridge in Brighton, but also the classy Parisian bridge arcades of the eighteenth century as detailed in the German writer Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume* (1985). Let us compare Süskind with Gibson:

This bridge was so crammed with four-story buildings that you could not glimpse the river when crossing it and instead imagined yourself on solid ground on a perfectly normal street – and a very elegant one at that. Indeed, the Pont-au-Change was considered *one of the finest business addresses in the city*. The most renowned shops were to be found here; here were the goldsmiths, the cabinetmakers, the best wigmakers and purses makers, the manufacturers of the finest lingerie and stockings, the picture framers, the merchants for riding boots, the embroiderers of epaulets, the molders of gold buttons, and the bankers. And here as well stood the business and residence of the perfumer and glover Giuseppe Baldini. (Süsskind, 53, italics mine)

Its steel bones, its stranded tendons, were lost within an accretion of dreams: tattoo parlors, gaming arcades, dimly lit stalls stacked with decaying magazines, sellers of fireworks, of cut bait, betting shops, sushi bars, unlicensed pawnbrokers, herbalists, barbers, bars. *Dreams of commerce*, their locations generally corresponding with the decks that had once carried vehicular traffic; while above them, rising to the very peaks of the cable towers, lifted the intricately suspended barrio, with its unnumbered population and its zones of more

private fantasy. (Gibson, *Virtual Light*, 62-63, italics mine)

While Süskind “rediscovers”, as Robert M. Isherwood puts it in *Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth Century Paris*, “one of the finest business addresses” on the Pont-au-Change in the eighteenth century, Gibson re-imagines “dreams of commerce” on the fallen San Francisco Bay Bridge in the twenty-first century. What is intriguing here is not the possible influence of one writer on another, but an instance of literary coincidence between two postmodern writers both of whom seem to have experimented with recuperating the medieval role of the bridge. As the history of London Bridge shows, the medieval bridge was not constructed so much as a means of transportation, as an invisible city where a variety of information gets exchanged very rapidly. According to William Zuk, writing about the London Bridge constructed between 1176 and 1209, “Numerous shops and dwellings were superimposed in makeshift fashion on the bridge and piers, making the bridge almost a city in itself.” (*Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 1, 595).

Gibson’s text further accentuates the medievalistic atmosphere by describing the way bridge people as well as virtual reality people become victims of witch hunts, and the way the Elvis-like martyr Shapely, is assassinated by fundamentalists. We should note that this medievalization of the near future is a perfect example of Gibsonian junk artistic decontextualization.

Since his sensational debut, Gibson has developed and reorganized the portrait of the junk artist in our cyberpunk age: Gomi no Sensei (Master of Junk) in “The Winter Market,” the Joseph Cornelian AI in *Count Zero*, the Mark Paulinian artistic factory machine in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, and the steam-driven computer producing collages of textual and historical fragments in *The Difference Engine*. To Gibson, junk art uncovers the invisible unconscious of the cyber-cityscape. But, what seems most intriguing about the junk art bridge in *Virtual Light* is that the author seems to decontextualize the very notion of Western junk art. Indeed, a close examination of the Gibsonian bridge culture, with its self-multiplying dwellings, reminds us primarily of the post-60s and post-hippie tradition of “tree house.” Skinner’s Room, that “caulked box of ten-ply fir, perched and humming in the wind” (“Skinner’s Room”, 155), located atop one of the cable towers, is undoubtedly a descendent of the spherical wooden treehouse constructed by Ian Christoph and Matt Darrieu (Peter Nelson, *Tree House* 125-126: “Their tree house seems to float in the air like some unearthly cocoon or spaceship”) that was itself inspired by Buckminster Fuller’s “geodesic dome.” But, simultaneously the junk art bridge borrowed not simply from the heritage of the post-Flower Renaissance culture, but also from the Japanese Neo-Dadaist art form “Thomasson,” as its guru Genpei Akasegawa termed it. Let us take a look at what is recorded in the notebook of Yamazaki, the young anthropology student from Osaka University

who interviews Skinner:

Thomasson was an American baseball player, very handsome, very powerful. He went to the Yomiuri Giants in 1982, for a large sum of money. Then it was discovered that he could not hit the ball. The writer Genpei Akasegawa appropriated his name to describe certain useless and inexplicable monuments, pointless yet curiously artlike features of the urban landscape. But the term has subsequently taken on other shades of meaning. If you wish, I can access and translate today’s definitions in our Gendai Yogo no Kiso-chishiki, that is, *The Basic Knowledge of Modern Times*. (*Virtual Light*, 64-65).

Let me note here that the “Genpei Akasegawa” mentioned above is not an imaginary figure created by the author, but a real person born in 1937 in Yokohama who is a well-known mainstream writer and a representative of the Neo-Dadaist movement in Japan. What matters here is that whereas Euro-American Dadaism, however avant-garde, presupposes a work of art designed by an individual genius in the conventional sense, Japanese Neo-Dadaism radically replaces the conventional notion of a “work of art” completed teleologically by an individual artist, with the revolutionary idea of “Hyper-Art Thomasson,” i.e., junk-art-like objects scattered around the cityscape, objects that become “art” by being discovered and authorized as art by ordinary pedestrians, not necessarily by renovative artists. Thomasson, then, transgresses not only the boundary between junk and junk art, but also the difference between self-proclaimed Dada artists and potentially Dadaistic but generally anonymous pedestrians. It is interesting that from the 1980s perspective Akasegawa radically reevaluated and almost comically “Japanized” Marcel Duchamp as the near-precursor of Thomasson, who “unluckily could not attain Thomassonian perfection,” but whose sense of “non-art” brilliantly “corresponded with the Japanese heritage of the tea ceremony represented by Sen-no-Rikyū,” in which the very natural world has persistently been considered full of “readymade” objects (Akasegawa, *Geijutsu Genron*, 249-259, my translation).

Since Gibson gains access to postmodern Japanese vocabulary through his wife Deborah, who has taught English to Japanese businessmen in Vancouver for years, it is no wonder that he picked up information about the great Japanese Neo-Dadaist Akasegawa. Gibson shifted his focus of junk art from Joseph Cornell and Mark Pauline to Genpei Akasegawa, disclosing an aspect of a paradigm shift that took place between the heyday of the bubble economy in the 1980s and the peak of restructuring/reengineering in the 90s; now the author seems to have appropriated the avant-pop aesthetics of Japanese art, as well as the ultra-pragmatic ethics of the Japanese high-tech industry.

William Gibson Meets Thomasson in Virtual Light

4. How San Francisco Meets Tokyo

This background perspective gives the hard-boiled plot a new twist. For instance, let us look at Yamazaki, the anthropology student who has decided to conduct research on the post-Little Grande San Francisco, hoping to discover insights into the rebuilding of Tokyo, which was itself destroyed by a massive earthquake called "Godzilla." The Japanese student seems quite thoughtful, especially when he speculates in his notebook on the semiotic difference between Little Grande and Godzilla:

When the Little Grande came, it was not Godzilla. Indeed, there is no precisely equivalent myth in this place and culture (although this is perhaps not equally true of Los Angeles). The Bomb, so long awaited, is gone. In its place came these plagues, the slowest of cataclysms. But when Godzilla came at last to Tokyo, we were foundering in denial and profound despair. In all truth, we welcomed the most appalling destruction. Sensing, even as we mourned our dead, that we were again presented with the most astonishing of opportunities. (*Virtual Light*, 126).

What Gibson unveils here is not so much a racist perspective as a deep insight into the mental history of post-war Japan characterized by concepts like "Creative Defeat" (Tsuru, 1993) and "Creative Masochism" (Tatsumi, 1994), which powerfully and ironically promoted Japanese hyper-capitalism. In this context, it is very ironic that the harder Yamazaki studies the re-engineering art of San Francisco, the more aware he becomes of how traditional "art" has been structured by the Japanese "Thomsonian" mentality.

The self-reflexive aesthetics of Yamazaki, however, beautifully correspond with the self-recycling ethics of West Coast ecologists. And it is not only Yamazaki's socio-anthropological gaze but also the top secret conspiracy hidden deep within VL to "Japanize" and "Thomasson-ize" San Francisco, following the example of the post-Godzilla Tokyo. "They'll start by layering a grid of seventeen complexes into the existing infrastructure.... Completely self-sufficient. Variable-pitch parabolic reflectors, steam-generators. New buildings, man; they'll eat their own sewage" (*Virtual Light*, 251). Thus, the novel ends by envisioning a Tokyo-ized San Francisco, that is, a self-sufficient and self-recycling city.

At this point, we should make one further remark about the narrative structure of *Virtual Light*. On the surface, the author seems to have imposed by accident the concept of a quest for the Holy Grail on the bridge culture narrative. A closer reading, however, reveals the interactive and inter-deconstructive relationship between the technological principle of *city* and the junk artistic principle of *bridge*. The self-recycling logic of Thomassonianism jeopardizes distinctions between technopolis and junkyard, city and bridge, the homeless and the Thomassonians

themselves. The Gibsonian vision of the post-information city delineates a self-sufficient society in which Japanese Neo-Dadaist art and American hyper-technology do not contradict but inter-recycle each other.

Genpei Akasegawa once stated: "Insofar as we inhabit cities, inflicted with our own consciousness, we may glimpse 'Hyper-Art Thomasson' looming between cityscape and innerscape every now and then" (*Hyper-Art Thomasson*, my translation). The entity of the city and the ghost of the city cannot be distinguished semantically, because they are inter-recycled semiotically. This logic will be endorsed by Kevin Lynch's book *Wasting Away*, in which junk and information are not incompatible but closely intertwined: the act of wasting away and information city. This is why Gibson dreams of reconstruction in the Thomassonian utopia.

5. A Readymade Book and a Self-Reflexive City

Back in the 1960s John Barth began recycling his literary heritage in works of self-reflexive metafiction in which he promoted his theory of "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967). Now in the post-80s, William Gibson, one of the representative Flower Children, is sketching a self-reflexive and self-recycling cyberscape in which self-reflexive metafiction has always been involved.

This is why the final sequence of *Virtual Light* is particularly impressive. Yamazaki descends "in the yellow lift to do business with the dealers in artifacts," tries in vain to sell "a damp-swollen copy of *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*" and ends up leaving it "atop a mound of trash" (*Virtual Light*, 321). Since *The Columbia Literary History* published in 1988 features Gibson's *Neuromancer* and describes the advent of cyberpunk in a chapter called "The Fictions of the Present" written by Larry McCaffery, this final chapter of *Virtual Light* seems to work primarily as a self-referential device typical of metafiction, in which the author ironically criticizes the very literary historical discourse of cyberpunk. In the same vein, we should also note that the scene in which Yamazaki fails to carry through the negotiation serves to highlight the copy of *The Columbia Literary History* as another readymade - Thomassonian - object. Unlike what preceded *Virtual Light* - the self-effacing art book *Agrippa* that Gibson co-created with Dennis Ashbaugh in 1992 - here Gibson's self-reflexive text illuminates Thomassonian self-reflexive city aesthetics, part of which is constituted by the very text itself. Where Kevin Starr once defined San Francisco as a self-reflexive metaphor of the city, in *Virtual Light* William Gibson redefines it as a self-reflexive metaphor of the self-reflexive city. No other postmodern novel describes the self-recycling and self-reviving magic of cityscape more vividly.

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ACADEMY LEADER WILLIAM GIBSON

■ "Ride music beams back to base."

■ Inspector Lee taught a new angle –

■ Just a chance operator in the gasoline crack of history, officer...

The architecture of virtual reality imagined as an accretion of dreams: tattoo parlors, shooting galleries, pinball arcades, dimly lit stalls stacked with damp-stained years of men's magazines, chili joints, premises of unlicensed denturists, of fireworks and cut bait, betting shops, sushi bars, purveyors of sexual appliances, pawnbrokers, wonton counters, love hotels, hotdog stands, tortilla factories, Chinese greengrocers, liquor stores, herbalists, chiropractors, barbers, bars.

These are dreams of commerce. Above them rise intricate barrios, zones of more private fantasy...

Angle of transit sets us down in front of this dusty cardtable in an underground mall in the Darwin Free Trade Zone, muzak-buzz of seroanalysis averages for California-Oregon, factoids on EBV mutation rates and specific translocations at the breakpoint near the *c-myc* oncogene...

He phases out on a vector of train whistles and the one particular steel-engraved slant of winter sun these manifestations favor, leaving the faintest tang of Players Navy Cut and opening piano bars of East St. Louis, this dangerous old literary gentleman who sent so many of us out, under sealed orders, years ago...

Frequencies of silence; blank walls at street level. In the flat field. We became field operators. Decoding the lattices. Patrolling the deep faults. Under the lights. Machine Dreams. The crowds, swept with con... Shibuya Times Square Picadilly. A parked car, an arena of grass, a fountain filled with earth. In the hour of the halogen wolves... The hour remembered. In radio silence...

Assembled word *cyberspace* from small and readily available components of language. Neologic spasm the primal act of pop poetics. Preceded any concept whatever. Slick and hollow – awaiting received meaning.

All I did: folded words as taught. Now other words accrete in the interstices.

"Gentlemen, that is not now nor will it ever be *my* concern..."

Not what I do.

I work the angle of transit. Vectors of neon plaza, licensed consumers, acts primal and undreamed of...

Kelsey's second week in Australia and her brother is keeping stubbornly in-condo, doing television, looping **Gladiator Skull** and a new Japanese game called **Torture Garden**. She walks miles of mall that could as easily be Santa Barbara again or Singapore, buying British fashion magazines, shop-lifting Italian eye-shadow; only the stars at night are different, Southern Cross, and the Chinese boys skim the plazas on carbon-fiber skateboards trimmed with neon.

Once perfected, communication technologies rarely die out entirely; rather, they shrink to fit particular niches in the global info-structure. Crystal radios have been proposed as a means of conveying optimal seed-planting times to isolated agrarian tribes. The mimeograph, one of many recent dinosaurs of the urban office-place, still shines with undiminished **samisdat** potential in the century's backwaters, the Late Victorian answer to desktop publishing. Banks in uncounted Third World villages still crank the day's totals on black Burroughs adding machines, spooling out yards of faint indigo figures on long, oddly festive curls of paper, while the Soviet Union, not yet sold on throwaway new-tech fun, has become the last reliable source of vacuum tubes. The eight-track tape format survives in the truckstops of the Deep South, as a medium for country music and spoken-word pornography.

Fifteen stones against white sand.

"The targeted numerals of the ACADEMY LEADER were hypnogogic sigils preceding the dreamstate of film."

She pauses in front of the unlicensed vendor, his face notched with pale scars of sun-cancer. He has a dozen cassettes laid out for sale, their plastic cases scratched and dusty. "Whole city in there," he says "Kyoto, yours for a twenty." She sees the security man, tall and broad Kevlar-vested, blue-eyed, homing in to throw the old man out, as she tosses the coin on impulse and snatches the thing up, whatever it is and turns, smiling blankly, to swan past the guard. She's a licensed consumer, untouchable, and looking back she sees the vendor squinting, grinning his defiance, no sign of the \$20 coin...

No sign of her brother when she returns to the condo. She puts on the glasses and the gloves and slots virtual Kyoto...

The Street finds its own uses for things – uses the manufacturers never imagined. The micro-tape recorder, originally intended for on-the-jump executive dictation, becomes the revolutionary medium of *magnetisdat*, allowing the covert spread of banned political speeches in Poland and China. The beeper and the cellular phone become economic tools in an increasingly competitive market in illicit drugs. Other technological artifacts unexpectedly become means of communication ... The aerosol can gives birth to the urban graffiti-matrix. Soviet rockers press homemade flexidisks out of used chest x-rays...

The sandals of a giant who was defeated by a dwarf.
A pavilion of gold, another of silver.

A waterfall where people pray...

Her mother removes the glasses. Her mother looks at the timer. Three hours. "But you don't like games, Kelsey..."

"It's not a game," tears in her eyes. "It's a city." Her mother puts on the glasses, moves her head from side to side, removes the glasses.

"I want to go there," Kelsey insists. She puts the glasses back on because the look in her mother's eyes frightens her.

The stones, the white sand: cloud-shrouded peaks, islands in the stream...

She wants to go there...

Collapse of New Buildings

Laney's room was high up in a narrow tower faced with white ceramic tile. It was trapezoidal in cross-section and dated from the Eighties boomtown, the years of the Bubble. That it had survived the great earthquake was testimony to the skill of its engineers; that it had survived the subsequent reconstruction testified to an arcane tangle of ownership and an ongoing struggle between two of the city's oldest criminal organizations. Yamazaki had explained this in the cab, returning from New Golden Street.

"We were uncertain how you might feel about new buildings," he'd said.

"You mean the nanotech buildings?" Laney had been struggling to keep his eyes open. The driver wore spotless white gloves.

"Yes. Some people find them disturbing."

"I don't know. I'd have to see one."

"You can see them from your hotel, I think."

And he could. He knew their sheer brutality of scale from constructs, but virtuality had failed to convey the peculiarity of their apparent texture, a streamlined organicism. "They are like Giger's paintings of New York," Yamazaki had said, but the reference had been lost on Laney.

Now he sat on the edge of his bed, staring blankly out at these miracles of new technology, as banal and as sinister as such miracles usually were, and they were only annoying: the world's largest inhabited structures. (The Chernobyl containment structure was larger, but nothing human would ever live there.)

The umbrella Yamazaki had given him was collapsing into itself, shrinking. Go away.

The phone began to ring. He couldn't find it.

"Telephone," he said. "Where is it?"

A nub of ruby light, timed to the rings, began to pulse from a flat rectangle of white cedar arranged on a square black tray on a bedside ledge. He picked it up. Thumbed a tiny square of mother of pearl.

"Hey," someone said, "that Laney?"

"Who's calling?"

"Rydell. From the Chateau. Hans let me use the phone." Hans was the night manager. "I get the time right? You having breakfast?"

Laney rubbed his eyes, looked out again at the new building. "Sure."

"I called Yamazaki," Rydell said. "Got your number."

"Thanks," Laney said, yawning, "but I —"

"Yamazaki said you got the gig."

"I think so," Laney said. "Thanks. Guess I owe —"

"Slitscan," Rydell said. "All over the Chateau."

"No," Laney said, "that's over."

"You know any Katherine Torrance, Laney? Sherman Oaks address? She's up in the suite you had, with about two vans worth of sensing gear. Hans figures they're trying to get a read on what you were doing up there, any dope or anything."

Laney stared out at the towers. Part of a facade seemed to move, but it had to be his eyes.

"But Hans says there's no way they can sort the residual molecules out in those rooms anyway. Place has too much of a history."

"Kathy Torrance? From Slitscan?"

"Not like they said they were, but they've got all these techs, and techs always talk too much, and Ghengis down in the garage saw the decals on some of the cases, when they were unloading. There's about twenty of them, if you don't count the gophers. Got two suites and four singles. Don't tip."

"But what are they *doing*?"

"That sensor stuff. Trying to figure out what you got up to in the suite. And one of the bellmen saw them setting up a camera."

The entire facade of one of the buildings seemed to ripple, to crawl slightly. Laney closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, discovering a faint trace of pain residing there from the break. He opened his eyes. "But I never got up to anything."

"Whatever." Rydell sounded slightly hurt. "I just thought you ought to know, is all."

Something was definitely happening to that facade. "I know. Thanks. Sorry."

"I'll let you know if I hear anything," Rydell said. "What's it like over there, anyway?"

Laney was watching a point of reflected light slide across the distant structure, a movement like osmosis or the sequential contraction of some sea-creature's palps. "It's strange."

"Bet it's interesting," Rydell said. "Enjoy your breakfast, okay? I'll keep in touch."

"Thanks," Laney said, and Rydell hung up.

Laney put the phone back on the lacquer tray and stretched out on the bed, fully clothed. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see the new buildings. But they were still there, in the darkness and the light behind his lids. And as he watched, they slid apart, deliquesced, and trickled away, down into the mazes of an older city.

He slid down with them.

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New meanings and patterns are beginning to emerge out of the global hive mind. . . . But whether this bright blooming buzz will finally result in some sort of wondrous human melody or simply raise the noise level a couple of notches higher, it strikes me that the place to be . . . is in the middle of it, taking it in, trying to make sense of it.

—L.McC.

Roger Fry gave us the term "Post-Impressionist," without realizing that the late twentieth century would soon be entirely fenced in with posts.

—JEANETTE WINTERSON

Larry McCaffery also sees metaphor in cyberpunk. He considers dance to be one of the basic metaphoric structures of Gibson's Neuromancer. It is the "metaphor for everything from the interaction of subatomic particles to the interactions of multinational corporations."

—RUTH CURIA
Fiction 2000

In My Education Burroughs is baffled by a dream in which he's shown a cryptic object, two medals fastened together with a short length of chain. "This is the Weemie," he's told.

What the fuck? he wonders, waking. I knew, right away: this is a Dream McGuffin.

—WILLIAM GIBSON

Jackdaw

STRIP-MINING POP CULTURE WITH LARRY McCAFFERY

by Stephen P. Brown

Two observations about the 20th century:

1 Thanks to the usual technological culprits, humans have amassed more cultural detritus in the past fifty years than during their entire previous recorded history. This niagra of text, images, objects, sounds and ideas has been endlessly recombinative—sembled and reassembled from previous bits with the aid of supremely efficient mechanical tools.

2 It seems likely that looking back on the 20th century from a long way forward, it might be noted that the central eighty year period was noteworthy for the odd fact that people at the time actually trusted the sounds and visions they created to reflect an "accurate" view of the world around them. A photograph was (mistakenly) believed to be a true record. A sound recording was (mistakenly) believed to be a true record. From the beginning, of course, the producers of these sounds and visions have lied to us; but they could not have lied successfully without our acquiescence.

They may never be able to lie again—paradoxically, the purely subjective media imagery new emerging may be more honest than anything we have seen and believed in our lifetime.

Prior to the 20th century, all forms of visual expression were subjective visions created by an artist's unsteady hand. It was assumed that pictures were interpretations—newspaper engravings of an event, for example.

After the 20th century, image and sound manipulation technologies retransform all forms of imagery back into the subjective. Right this minute we are in a transitive phase. People still tend to believe in recorded imagery, though this belief is already seeming increasingly nostalgic, even superstitious.

So, during the grand sweep of history, from past to future, during one tiny eighty year moment, people believed what they saw and heard. That gush of cultural clutter will be the last such that the average person will think to be "true." Because both the creators and the consumers of 20th century cultural debris share a tenuous belief in this representational truth, there exists threads of connection that permeate this stuff; types of understanding and basic verities that may be ultimately considered unique to our century.

The highest art will be the one which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week, which is forever trying to collect its limbs after yesterday's crash. . . . Life appears as a simultaneous muddle of noises, colors and spiritual rhythms, which is taken unmodified with all the sensations, screams and fevers of its reckless everyday psyche and with all its brutal reality.

—DADA MANIFESTO, BERLIN, 1918

*But how could we know when I was young
All the changes that were to come?
All the photos in the wallets on the battlefield
And now the terror of the scientific sun?*

—THE CLASH

Avant-pop writers have invented a new range of innovative formal strategies and narrative approaches, modeled on such things as jazz and action painting's emphasis on improvisation; punk rock's slam dance paces; hypertext's reliance on branching narrative paths; television's creation of people and pseudo-events and its emphasis on surface textures and cool, glitzy depictions; rap music's sampling techniques; and the windows-within-windows structures of computer software and video games.

—PAUL SLOVAK

The significance of these two points has not been lost on the academics, who have been scurrying over the landfill of 20th century culture with the urgency of disturbed ants, snatching up bits, linking them with other bits, and spewing oceans of theory (I am trying hard to avoid using the P word here).

For those, like myself, who are more interested in the substance of an artist's work than the form, all this activity seems vaguely funny and beside the point. The majority of these scavengers don't seem to have any idea of the "true" significance of the bits of brightly colored glass they pick up, nor even to understand why the word "true" needs its quotation marks.

But there are a few, a very small number, of these ants who scurry and recombine with intelligence and passion. Larry McCaffery is one of these. He has spent his career joyfully accepting everything the culture can throw at him without flinching. What separates him from his colleagues is taste. Larry knows the difference between good stuff and bad stuff, significant stuff and insignificant stuff. And he has the insight to see genuine connections between disparate cultural elements and articulate the hidden structures that underpin the culture. Unlike most of his surface-skimming colleagues, Larry understands and believes in modern pop culture with passionate intensity.

Larry wrote the essay "The Fictions of the Present" in the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988). This is where I first became aware of him. That essay skillfully wove together all the many strands of contemporary literature and gave serious SF its due place in the assemblage.

He's published a lot of books, including *Across the Wounded Galaxy*, a seminal collection of interviews with SF writers from Le Guin to Gibson, Wm. Burroughs to Gene Wolfe. He has edited two outstanding anthologies: *Storming the Reality Studio* is perhaps the only necessary primer on the collision between cyberpunk SF, the literary avant garde and mainstream literature. His current *Avant Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation* ups the ante another million rubles. With countless examples he uses this book to explore how pop culture has "begun to colonize those inner subjective realms that nearly everyone once believed were inviolable, such as people's memories, sexual desire, and unconsciousness."

Somehow he's found the time to be an English professor at San Diego State University; edit a subversive issue of *The Missouri Review*, edit *Fiction International*, *American Book Review*,

*I woke up this morning,
I had on blue suede shoes,
The pillow had crushed my hair
into a perfect black pompadour,
and on my arm was one blue tattoo.
My wife she brought me breakfast,
I said "Thank you, ma'am, God bless you."
I'm turnin' into Elvis,
and there's nothin' I can do.*

*I visited my mama's grave
and I headed out to Hollywood
and I signed a picture with MGM.
I play a rebellious beachboy racecar driver
who fucks a nun in the end.
In the last scene I whip out my big guitar,
and show her a little Memphis-style kung fu.
I'm turnin' into Elvis,
and there's nothin' I can do.*

—BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

*Now we're all enfolded in your arms, you
are the culture that contains us, we're
running out of time so tell us quickly,
time is short, tell us now.*

—DON DELILLO

The Age of Wire and String

*Period in which English science devised
abstract parlance system based on the
flutter-pattern of string-and-wire structures
placed over the mouth during speech.*

—BEN MARCUS

Critique; write essays and book reviews everywhere along the spectrum from *Mondo 2000* to *The New York Times*; shepard into publication terrifying works of fiction like Samuel R. Delany's *Hogg* and books in the Black Ice series. In 1993 I published a dialogue between Larry and his long-time friend and colleague, Takayuki Tatsumi, (*SF Eye* #12) that won the Pioneer Award for best critical essay on SF of 1993.

Before that historical aberration known as 20th century pop culture recedes in time, becoming as enigmatic as the scrawled graffiti of the workmen that erected Stonehenge, Larry McCaffery and those very few like him, ought to have either made sense of it all, or shown conclusively why "making sense" is the wrong way to look at it, and at us.

*Big Bennie was boot-
legging Haitian scrotum-
rats out of Havana
when the mob caught up
with him and performed
a highly visible multiple
graft in a back alley in
South Miami . . .*

—WILLIAM GIBSON
channeling
ROBERT SHECKLEY

*Simplicity refers to the
absence (or near-absence)
of complexity. Whereas
the former word is de-
rived from an expression
meaning "once folded,"
the latter comes from an
expression meaning
"braided together."*

—MURRAY GELL-MANN

*The bag lady shook her
head in despair. "We
need a new Columbus,
that's what we need."*

—LUCIUS SHEPARD

*It's now useless to try to
create change via politi-
cal institutions, . . . so
artists need to try and
work on peoples' con-
sciousness directly.*

—LMCC

*I don't look at things
like that as stealing,
I see it as grants from
industry.*

—MARK PAULINE

*She and Chevy seemed
parked at the centre of
an odd, religious
instant. As if, on some
other frequency, or out of
the eye of some whirl-
wind rotating too slow
for her heated skin even
to feel the centrifugal
coolness of, words were
being spoken.*

—THOMAS PYNCHON

AVANT-POP 101



Here's a quick list of works that helped to shape Avant-Pop ideology and aesthetics, along with books, albums, films, television shows, works of criticism, and other cultural artifacts by Avant-Pop artists themselves, in roughly chronological order.

PRECURSORS (i.e., pre-1950):

The Odyssey (Homer, c. 700 B.C.).

Homer's *The Odyssey* had it all: a memorable, larger-than-life super-hero (Ulysses); a war grand enough that its name alone (Trojan) is still powerful enough to be used to sell condoms; descriptions of travels through exotic places; hideous bad-guys (like the Cyclops) and bad gals (Circe); an enduring love affair (Penelope); a happy ending. Commentators have long regarded *The Odyssey* as Western literature's first epic and masterpiece. What hasn't been noted until now, however, is that its central features – for instance, its blend of high seriousness with popular culture, a self-conscious narrator, magical realism, appropriation, plagiarism, casual blending of historical materials with purely invented ones, foregrounding of its own artifice, reflexivity, the use of montage and jump cuts – also made it the first postmodern, A-P masterpiece, as well.

Chojugiga (Bishop Toba, 12th century).

Chojugiga – or the “Animal Scrolls,” as Toba's work is known – was a narrative picture scroll that portrayed, among other things, Walt Disney-style anthropomorphized animals engaged in a series of wild (and occasionally wildly erotic) antics that mocked Toba's own calling (the Buddhist clergy); in its surrealist blend of nightmare and revelry, Toba's *Chojugiga* can rightly be said to be the origins not only of cartoons but of an Avant-Pop aesthetics of cartoon forms that successfully serve “serious” purposes of satire, philosophical speculation and social commentary. The Narrative picture scroll was an art form originally introduced to Japan from China several centuries before Toba created his early masterpiece, which transformed the Chinese form by adding an underlying playfulness and tone of mockery. *Chojugiga* unfolds (or, more exactly, “unscrolls”) from right to left in a series of images that are related to one another both physically and narratively: hills fade into plains, roofs of houses dissolved to show the occupants inside; many of the visual conventions of contemporary cartoons are already in evidence here: thus changes in time, place, and mood were signified by mist, cherry blossoms, maple leaves, or other commonly understood symbols that are still used in contemporary Japanese cartoons. Just about anyone who's unfamiliar with this work – or dozens of others that were produced during this period in Japan – is almost certainly going to find the experience to be an “eye opener.”

The Bible (King James Version, 17th Century; originally written by various authors, Old Testament, c. 500 B.C., New Testament, 100 A.D.)

The King James Version of the Bible remains the greatest selling book in Western Literature. Although not usually thought of in terms of aesthetic innovation, the King James *Bible* pioneered many of the same formal features that are today associated with A-P aesthetics: collaboration, the casual introduction of actual historical figures into purely invented settings (“magical realism”) as well as the creation of superheroes who are introduced into actual historical settings, surrealism and fabulism, self-reflexiveness and metafictional impulses (“In the beginning was the word...” etc.) as well as other means of foregrounding its status as artifice, mixed-genre effects (theater, poetry, history, philosophical), the mingling of high and low culture, the recycling of elements drawn from popular culture for “serious” purposes, appropriation, sampling, plagiarism. Above all, it illustrates the remarkable potential that popular culture has for being re-contextualized and re-when what happens when brilliant artists and writers of popular culture use popular mythology for that would later be associated with A-P aesthetics.

The Tempest (Shakespeare, 1611)

Many of Shakespeare’s greatest plays could be seen as proto-A-P works due to their reliance on the central feature of A-P composition methods – i.e., the appropriation of familiar storylines and characters drawn from popular cultural or historical accounts and then retrofitting these into new literary forms. The best example of Shakespeare’s Avant-Populist impulses can probably be found in *The Tempest*, where Shakespeare combined elements of SF, metafiction, romance, and the fabulous journey motif to create a gripping drama about the nature of the creative process, the thin line between reality and illusion, and the kinship between art and the monstrous. It’s no accident that this particular play has inspired so many later A-P-flavored works, from numerous SF works (eg., the classic 1950s SF films, *Forbidden Planet*) to “The Magic Poker” (the centerpiece of Coover’s influential collection of A-P fictions, *Pricksongs and Descants*).

The Collected Stories of Edgar Allen Poe (Edgar Allen Poe, Vintage, 1990)

Poe is the most significant of all American precursors of A-P. Many readers continue to think of him as a crazed, drug-addled alcoholic who wrote gothic fiction about ghosts and other demons of the night; but what Poe was really doing in “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher” and his other classic “horror” stories was writing *meta*-gothic tales that parodied and otherwise employed the central conventions of gothic fiction in order to examine inner, psychological demons of guilt, sexual repression, and solipsism. Of course, Poe was also the inventor of one of the most popular and influential pop forms of them all – the detective story; of course, since this form (introduced in “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Purloined Letter,” and “The Gold Bug”) was invented by a man who was fanatically obsessed with the utter *subjectivity* of perception – and who constantly seemed to delight in placing his central characters in a position where they were forced to confront the absolute *limits* of human perception and understanding – it’s not surprising that even these very first detective stories seem more informed by A-P aesthetics as by the purer, more innocent sensibility of a “pure pop” sensibility. Certainly it is undeniable that Poe’s work had a major impact on the subsequent development of such later A-P luminaries as Baudelaire, G.K. Chesterton, Poe, and Lem as they did on pop figures such Arthur Conan Doyle and Roger Corman (who created many of the best-known, shlocky film versions of Poe stories that starred Vincent Price).

A Season in Hell (Arthur Rimbaud, 1874)

If William S. Burroughs is Avant-Pop’s true Godfather figure, then Rimbaud is Avant-Pop’s true Grandfather – this despite the fact that he quit writing poetry at age 17. Certainly Rimbaud – who was almost completely unknown in his day – has had a profound and even decisive influence on a great amount of 20th Century art: dada, surrealism, punk, cyberpunk, for example, have all claimed Rimbaud as a major source of creative inspiration. What made all of Rimbaud’s work so exciting then? Rimbaud prefigured the great Modernist movement’s recognition that the massive, technologically-driven changes that had been sweeping across Europe ever since the French Revolution necessitated the abandonment of most of the conventions that Western art had relied on since the Renaissance. In poetry, this meant a complete overhaul of how poetry was conceived and written – including a willingness of new poets to strike off into new subject matters like advertising and science. The poet, Rimbaud once wrote, must be the “thief of fire,” a “visionary” willing to pursue the muse of poetry wherever she wished to take him – even into the mind-altering depths of madness, drugs, and other forms of irrationality, for these regions produced.

A Season in Hell, written near the end of Rimbaud’s brief, incandescent career, was his greatest single accomplishment. Written as series of prose poems, *A Season in Hell* was a kind of spiritual autobiography,

in which Rimbaud pushed language's ability to conjure up the mysteries and irrationalities of the psyche farther than anyone ever had up until that point. It thus summarized part aesthetic manifesto, part farewell to a reading audience who had not yet even discovered his work, *A Season in Hell* continues to astonish and delight today because of its extremity, formal inventiveness and honesty. As Patti Smith (punk poetry's greatest writer) says in the middle of punk's greatest single song, "Horses," "Go Rimbaud, go Rimbaud." Rimbaud didn't "go" for very long, but during his short literary ride he wound up going farther – and deeper – than just about any poet ever had. No one can claim to be a *true* fan of A-P who hasn't read Rimbaud.

Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1922)

No, those amazing sets that made Madonna's "Express Yourself" video such a mind-blower didn't originate with Madonna (what did?) but with Fritz Lang, the brilliant German expressionist filmmaker who was creating A-P movie treatments of genre materials long before people like Stanley Kubrick and Francis Ford Coppola were around (cf. his other A-P treatments of murder mystery – *M*). *Metropolis* was a landmark in the history of SF film – its gleaming towers, menacing technocrats and disgruntled ordinary citizens seeking a way out of the nightmare of machinery and bureaucracies run amok all became standards of later SF films right up through George Lucas's *THX1138* and beyond. But what makes *Metropolis* an equally important landmark in A-P cinema was the way Lang recast what was essentially a stereotyped genre material into a haunting vision that burned its way into the retinas of the audience's memory long after the predictable features of plot and character had long since been forgotten. The colorized version of the restored print that was released in the 80s – which features new music by? – won't appeal to purists but is a kick nonetheless.

Duck Soup (The Marx Brothers; dir. by Leo McCarey; 1933)

The Marx Brothers shared with Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton a background of poverty and a childhood on the vaudeville stage. But while the great films of Chaplin (*City Lights*, *The Gold Rush*, *Modern Times*) and Keaton (eg., *The General*) transformed their creators into deeply tragic, sublime, and even mystical figures beneath their comic masks, the Marx Brothers chosen a very different route to their own undeniable greatness – the route of Avant-Slapstick. That is, the Marx Brothers were cheap, adolescent, vulgar, scatological, reckless, excessive, lunatic, and assassin – qualities all associated with "bad taste" which the Marx Brothers exaggerated and elevated (or "de-elevated") to such extremes that their work became a brilliant and hilarious meta-comedic commentary about the very notion of "good taste" which most of Western "high art" had always relied upon. Thus, like the crazed and deliberately "dumb" art which had been appearing throughout the 1920s, the Marx Brothers; greatest films made art out of vulgarity and outrageousness which selfconsciously mocked the pretentiousness and claims for "rationality" of serious art.

Duck Soup, the funniest of all Marx Brothers' films, has been praised by intellectuals for its surrealism and by Marxist critics for its alleged commentary about the lunacy of Western politics generally (and fascism in particular) and war. In *Duck Soup* Groucho plays Rufus T. Firefly, newly elected President of Fredonia, a country threatened by the "evil empire" of Sylvania. Harpo and Chico are double agents – spies of Ambassador Trentino (of Sylvania) and cronies of President Firefly – who roam around, with Chico spewing a delicious babble of verbal non-sequiturs while Harpo takes care of the sight gags (using a welder's torch as a cigar lighter, cutting off the ties and coattails of opponents, etc.). In the end, no film has ever wrecked such total physical, verbal and psychological damage on the world of politics. But in the end, what makes *Duck Soup* such a great innovative film really has little to do with its political or social vision and a great deal more with its sheer outrageousness and silliness. They thus helped brave the trail traveled by such later Avant-Vulgarians as Jerry Lewis, Steve Martin and (the most innovative of all contemporary American Avant-Comedians) Andy Kauffman.

LITERATURE (Fiction, Theater, Poetry, Comic Books):

End Game (Samuel Beckett, 1950)

Throughout his long career as a fiction writer and playwright, Beckett's frequent borrowings of materials from mass culture – most notably slapstick comedy routines (Buster Keaton was a particular favorite) – provided an A-P flavor even to his most radical works. In *End Game*, he appropriates a the conventions of the dominant SF form of the 50s – the post-holocaust story – as a means of developing a darkly comic allegory about isolation, human memory, and coping with a meaningless universe.

Mad Magazine (William F. Gaines, publisher, 1952)

Except for Elvis Presley's shaking hips, it was *Mad Magazine's* new style of off-the-wall zaniness that had the greatest impact during the 50s on young would-be hipster Americans – kids who were looking for an angry fix but had no outlet for their rebellious energy. *Mad* was an EC comic published by William Gaines, who had already made EC synonymous by pioneering earlier comic titles that dealt explicitly with controversial topics, violence, sex, even anti-war sentiments. With *Mad* Gaines employed his most talented EC artists – notably Jack Davis, Wally Wood and Bill Elder – and set them to work creating a brand of outlandish, darkly humorous satire of other comics (early titles included “Superduperman” and “Bat Man and Rubin”), the media, and eventually politics. The results have been described as being something akin to the Marx Brothers in terms of its freshness and irreverence, and its remarkable success (by its sixth issue it was selling 500,000 copies) helped lay the ground work by the great 60s underground comix scene of Robert Crumb and others.

The Bronc People (William Eastlake, Harcourt Brace, 1958; University of New Mexico Press, 1975 [pbk.])

Back in the 1950s, William Eastlake published a series of A-P novels and stories about the American Southwest that had a decisive impact on changing the ways that subsequent writers from Larry McMurtry up through Thomas McGuane would treat the Western genre. Eastlake's Hemingway-on-acid – or Beckett-meets-Zane Grey – approach to the Western formulas is best seen in one of his early coming-of-age novel, *The Bronc People*, which presents a highly ironic, bitterly satiric view of the white man and what he has perpetrated in America's Southwest – a region which becomes, by extension, emblematic of all of America. Eastlake's fictional world is a flat, two-dimensional landscape, full of caricatures, hilarious but improbably dialogue and events, sinister, bumbling villains, stoic Indians with names like President Taft and More Turquoise than Hope, and terrains that are alternately unearthly in their beauty (the Indian Country) and exaggerated, surreal visions of the modern urban nightmare. Also recommended: *Go In Beauty* (1955), *Portrait of the Artist with Twenty-Six Horses* (1963) and *Dancers in the Scalp House* (1975).

Snow White (Donald Barthelme, Farrar, Straus, 1966)

Back in the 60s, when Avant-Pop was still struggling to assert its significance in the face of the far more popular but less interesting phenomenon of Pop Art, the near-weekly appearances of Donald Barthelme's richly comic and wonderfully textured fiction in *The New Yorker* fueled the ambitions of – and served as an important source of inspiration for – other A-P wannabe's who previously could only hope to find tiny audiences. Barthelme's first novel, *Snow White*, was a perfect example of the A-P aesthetic – introducing all the plot elements, characters, and central metaphors (drawn mostly from the Disney film version rather than the original Grimm's Brother's fairy tale), Barthelme updated and otherwise recontextualized these familiar materials (ie., Snow White is now a thoroughly modernized feminist living in a Manhattan commune, where she has group sex in the shower with seven “dwarfs” on a daily basis and awaits the arrival of a suitable Prince Charming who can take her away from a life of boredom and drudgery). Alas, the confused gender assumptions of our postmodern world have mitigated against the whole notion of heroism and “Princeliness”; no matter – Barthelme shows the difficulties of achieving any kind of satisfactory fairy-tale endings today with one of the richest and wittiest A-P prose styles of any contemporary author. Heigh-Ho!

Zap (Robert Crumb, 1967)

Robert Crumb was the Johnny Rotten of the underground comic book scene, and his legendary *Zap* was its *Never Mind the Bullocks*. Crumb's *Zap* – originally self-published by Crumb with his friend, Don Donohue out of America's hippie capital, San Francisco, during the same year (1967) as the Summer of Love – became the catalyst for a do-it-yourself publishing revolution that, like punk, had been just waiting to happen. *Zap's* hallmarks were an attractive “Disneyesque” drawing style, contrasted with topics involving revolutionary politics, explicit sex, and drugs (including one ground-breaking, wordless strip depicting an LSD trip). The success of *Zap* made Crumb transformed Crumb into “the pope of the underground,” and soon he was pushing *Zap* into ever-more challenging and controversial areas, blasting through just about every cultural taboo known to pop culture and laying the ground work for later comic artists such as Monty Python's Terry Gilliam (an American, by the way) and filmmaker Ralph Bakshi.

Creamy and Delicious (Steve Katz, Random House, 1970)

Of all the major new artists contributing to the evolution of A-P aesthetics back in the first wave of 60s postmodernism, Steve Katz may well have been the most radical – and the figure whose achievements

have been most unduly neglected. There's a connection, here, of course: Katz's aesthetic radicalism derives in part from his immersion in the burgeoning NYC art scene of the 60s – a scene which included not only Pop Art (a major influence on Katz's sensibility) but jazz, Op Art and Happenings, and minimalism (Katz has been a long time friend, for example, of minimalist composer Philip Glass). Katz's fantastic, surreal, and early books, then, – *The Exaggerations* [sic] *Peter Prince* (1968), *Creamy and Delicious*, and *Saw* (1972) – applied features of non-literary forms like television, painting, and films to fiction-writing in ways that made them resistant enough to paraphrase that most critics simply ignored them. Consider the implications of Katz's A-P treatment of pop cultural materials in his collection *Creamy and Delicious*, which was definitely one of the early masterpieces of A-P. Like other A-P-flavored works of that period – Barthelme's *Snow White*, say, or Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* – Katz aims at demonstrating the transformational possibilities of pop materials and displays a central tension between the mythic framework's tendency to organize and rigidify its elements into teleological wholes versus the ambiguous, fragmented nature of contemporary experience, which refuses to yield to formulas and patterns. But the greater radicalism of Katz's approach is evident in various ways: for one thing, Katz added a rarely used formal element to his creations in *Creamy* – that of time. All the mythology sections were created in a self-imposed time limit of one hour – a restriction that obviously influenced the composition in various ways (for one thing, it made it impossible to do much revision). But rather than examining the prior myths and attempting to discover hidden patterns or features in the materials that would have new relevance for contemporary audiences (essentially the approach of Coover and Barthelme), Katz is more interesting in using these material – including its “content” – almost *purely as found materials that can be used as a springboard for his later improvisational treatments*. Introducing the names in this manner thus establishes a content of meaning and story-structure which Katz can then actively disrupt; this creates a kind of dialogue with the earlier text which still being free to create his own narrative line. Thus in each of his “Mythologies” sections, Katz begins by selecting a name which will be certain to evoke a rich series of associations from his audience – some of these are familiar mythic names (Faust, Achilles, Hermes, Apollo) but in keeping with the age of Warhol, others are mythic names drawn from pop culture – mostly prominently, from comic books (Wonder Woman, Plastic Man, Nancy and Sluggo). But once the stories begin, Katz defiantly divorces the names from their traditional associations – Nancy and Sluggo, for example, are shown to be a gay cowboy and a “terrible gulch-riding bandit” – and then proceeds to develop a purely invented narrative. The end result of a hilarious and wild ride that suggests that since *all* received versions of the past have been fundamentally falsified to some degree in their transmission, contemporary artists should feel free to invent whatever versions they choose.

Great Jones Street (Don DeLillo, Houghton Mifflin, 1973)

At this point, it has become increasingly obvious that Don DeLillo has replaced Thomas Pynchon as being America's most significant fiction writer. To one degree or another, all of DeLillo's works can be seen as relying on A-P aesthetics; most of his best novels have decoded or deconstructed pop cultural mythologies which people have devised to impose order on chaos. In *Great Jones Street* DeLillo wrote the first important novel about America's most influential and significant pop form of them all: rock music. Like all of DeLillo's other books, *Great Jones Street* brilliantly recasts pop idioms and lingoes as a means of examining the limits of language and human understanding – and as a means of displaying the fundamental irrationality, loneliness, violence and need to communicate that underlies all life.

Easy Travel to Other Planets (Ted Mooney, Random House, 1981)

With the possible exceptions of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Ted Mooney's *Easy Travels to Other Planets* is the book which was most successful of any books of the 80s in capturing a palpable sense of what life feels like today in a culture running on the logic of hyperconsumer capitalism. This sense principally involves life's strangeness, its sense of dislocation, its ability to overstimulate us, the fears and anxieties it instills within us (often without our even being aware of it), its frightening power to separate us from each other, its distortions of our erotic impulses. Although *Easy Travel* retains many of the surface features of traditional realism, there's also a way in which the book is almost a work of science fiction since, for all its familiarity, Mooney's world is not quite our own world – at least not literally. Rather, it's a world in which people suffer from a disease called “information sickness,” whose effects can be warded off temporarily by assuming the “memory elimination posture.” It is a world in which ice cubes fall to the ground, in which a new emotion is emerging, in which telepathy is becoming a reality, in which the wealthy nations are about to go to war over Antarctica. Mooney conveys all this by disrupting the linear flow of events, using rapid, montage-like cuts between scenes (and within individual paragraphs) which often contain wildly disparate elements presented in a simultaneous, col-

lage-like fashion. The overall effect of this presentation is to recreate the sense, increasingly common to all of us, of being bombarded with many different sorts of stimulation and information at once, of having our physical sensations being constantly strained to the breaking point. I should add that the novel also presents one of the most unusual love affairs in contemporary fiction – a shocking and highly erotically charged relationship between Melissa (a young scientist specializing in dolphin research) and a dolphin named Peter. What's more, Mooney develops this affair not as some sort of freak show but as a sensitive and utterly convincing part of a larger context of people shown to be lost and alone, and who are trying to cope with a world which seems to be spinning out of their control.

Bellefleur (Joyce Carol Oates, Dutton, 1980)

Joyce Carol Oates has written so many books (and so many different *kinds* of books) so quickly that reviewers and critics – finding themselves unable to keep up with (or even keep count of) the onrush – nearly always begin their discussion of her works with a defensive “Oh, Oates writes too quickly for her own good.” Well, maybe so – or maybe Oates will someday be regarded less as an overproducer and more akin to the American Dickens of the latter half of the 20th century. Certainly what's often been lost in the evaluation of Oates' prodigious output is the extremity of her imagination, the remarkable diversity of forms she's worked in, and the intelligence she brings to just about everything she's written. Over the years a number of her best works have been produced from the classic A-P methodology: the willingness to enter pop genre formulas (SF, gothic, vampire, sports, and detective genres are only a few that she's worked in); then, once inside this territory, exploring its archetypes, exploding the assumptions usually associated with them, opening up new passageways that genre writers didn't recognize or were too timid to mine has also allowed her to produce a major body of A-P fiction. Perhaps her most ambitious A-P novel today is *Bellefleur*, a baroque, haunting book full of magic, greed, red red passions, darker than dark obsessions, and memorable characters whose eccentricities bring to life in the manner of Dickens. What we have here might be described as “Avant-Noire” (significantly the wealthy and notorious Bellefleurs clan whose lives Oates chronicles over six generations live in an enormous mansion on the shores of “Lake Noir”). This is, however, family chronicle by way of Marquez, Nabokov, Poe, Ann Rice whose members include millionaires, mass murderers, boy-scientists, vampires, and a heroine who is born with the lower half of her male twin protruding from her abdomen. Firmly anchored in actual historical events (the War of 1812, John Brown's abolitionist activities, the building of the Erie Canal), the narrator moves forward with a kind of crazed, ferocious recklessness that captures something essential about the narrative of America itself. Full of lyricism, magic, and genuinely savagery, *Bellefleur* is a work of brooding power, historical acumen, and stylistic flourishes.

Great Expectations (Kathy Acker, Grove, 1986)

Part street-wise gutter snipe, part radical feminist critic, part punk-artist and part vulnerable woman always on the verge of being torn apart by an insensitive and rapacious phallic society, part cynic and part visionary idealist, Kathy Acker has also produced a major body of experimental, shocking, and highly disturbing “prose assemblages” (to refer to them as “novels” misses the point) which have produced perhaps the most devastating and (a point missed by too many readers) *wickedly funny* critique of life-under-late-capitalism since William Burroughs's great mid-'60s works. During the somnolent, repressive 1980s decade of Reagan/Bush/Helms/Bennett, Kathy Acker established herself as one of postmodernism's boldest and most original fiction innovators – and one of its most controversial, as well. Her major works during this period included *Great Expectations*, the first of Acker's “re-writes” of famous Western novels. Acker has referred to *Great Expectations* as her equivalent of Avant-Photographer Sherrie Levine's famous series of photographs of other famous photographs. As with much of what Acker has said about her own work, these remarks are useful but also a bit misleading. True, in *Great Expectations* Acker is, like Levine, “re-creating” a version of a well-known earlier work (in this case, Charles Dickens famous coming-of-age Victorian classic), but her novel is hardly an exact duplicate of something else. Instead, Acker uses the basic framework of Dickens' novel – its central characters and plot elements – as a kind of framing device to create an outrageous, punk-flavored examination of her own life and the life of hyperconsumer capitalism.

Madonna and Other Spectacles (Harold Jaffe, City Lights, 1988)

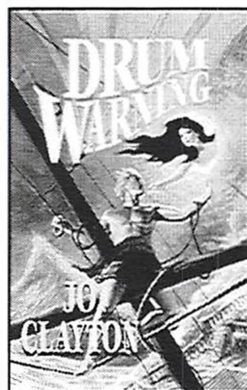
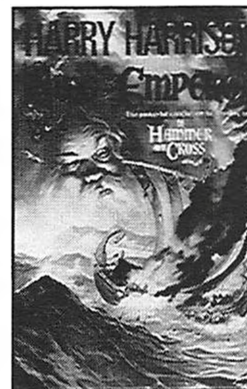
Judging from his last books, Harold Jaffe is as horny as Warren Beatty, melancholy as Hamlet, and furious as an Old Testament prophet. Jaffe's *Madonna and Other Spectacles* also displays the ways A-P artists have increasingly been influenced by recent critical theorists who have examined the interrelationship between pop cultural, economics, power, and social control (notably that Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and

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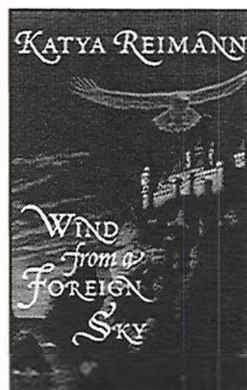
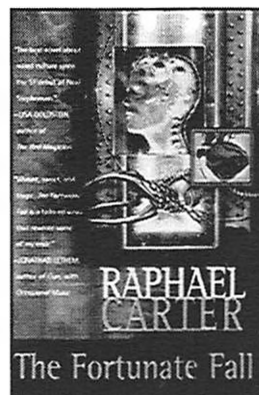
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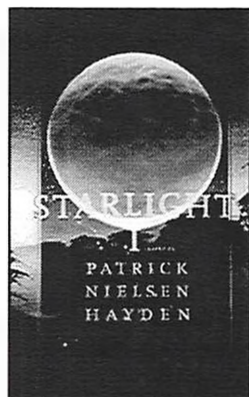
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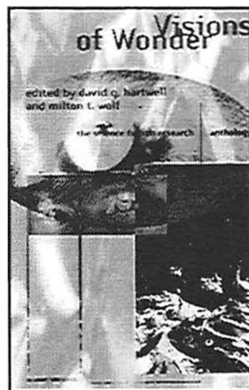
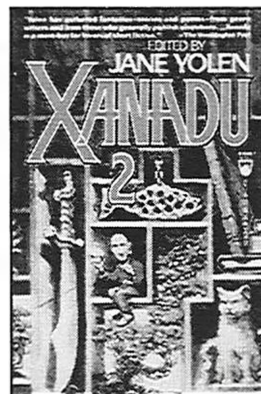
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Guy Debord, whose pioneering postmodernist study, *Society of the Spectacle*, figures in the collection's title). Here Jaffe uses the names of various well-known pop figures (e.g., Madonna, The Three Stooges, Lightnin' Hopkins, Boy George, Tonto, Hurricane Carter) as the basis for improvisational forays into the sources of racism, the denaturing of the body, and the substitution of real desire and appetite by media images. The highly unusual formal features of Jaffe's fiction are unified by his desire to find ways of bringing together planes of cultural discourse that would normally be separated, in the hope that their intersection will reveal deeper patterns of prejudice, ignorance and repression. Together with his recent *Eros Anti-Eros* (1990), Jaffe has created a body of what he has termed "guerrilla writing" which, like Kathy Acker's work, defamiliarizes familiar narrative materials as a means of relentlessly interrogating our society's underlying assumptions and obsessions. Jaffe is of course keenly aware of the current resignation and impotence among artists who have forfeited their imaginings in the manipulated hyperspace of contemporary America. Nonetheless, Jaffe's stubborn, though carefully analyzed insistence is that art still has the capacity not only to defamiliarize but to destabilize institutionalized oppressions. Hence Jaffe's poetic dictum both in his manifesto-essay "Guerrilla Writing" and in *Eros Anti-Eros*: "find a seam/plant a mine/slip away."

Girl with Curious Hair (David Foster Wallace, 1988)

When it comes to sheer, flat-out maximum-drug-strength overkill of verbal *flash* the only recent American authors to rival David Foster Wallace are William Gibson and Mark Leyner. Still only in his mid-30s, Wallace has already had the misfortune of having his work grossly mislabeled *twice* – the first as "The New Pynchon" (when his enormous, unwieldy but very promising first novel, *The Broom of the System*, appeared in 1986 when Wallace was only 24) and then as one of the "Brat Pack," when his finely crafted stories began appearing in most of the big name literary magazines a bit later. These stories were eventually collected in *The Girl with Curious Hair*, a collection whose display of stylistic pyrotechnics capable of illuminating actual human conditions, and its ability to serve as "exemplary fictions" which examine the status of contemporary literary innovation generally make it comparable to Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* twenty years earlier. And as with Coover's highly influential collection of Avant-Fictions, there is certainly a great deal more to Wallace's work than mere "flash." In *Girl with Curious Hair* he ambitiously explores themes encompassing politics, philosophy (along with math, one of his double majors in college), gender roles, and personal identity. These themes are presented through a range of unusual and poetic voices and narrative structures designed to help us focus on the A-P aspects of these large issues, as well as provide readers with the sometimes painful reminder that the process of meaning-production is often a difficult (though ultimately rewarding experience). Likewise his use of innovative formal devices – in particular, his use of flashcuts and other non-linear forms of presentation, his casual interminglings of real figures (often figures like Ronald Reagan or David Letterman, who are drawn from politics or the media) and purely invented ones, and his blurring of the mythic and the ordinary, horror and humor – can be seen devised used to represent the A-P nature of reality more accurately, and as a more subtle modeling of the difficulties involved in distinguishing pop-cultural appearance from reality or establishing meaningful connections between media-generated images and their referents.

Assassination Rhapsody (Derek Pell, Autonomedia, 1989)

Functioning like an absurdist/minimalist version of Don DeLillo's maximal treatment of perhaps the most significant media event ever – the fateful intersection of Lee Harvey Oswald and JFK – Pell's *Rhapsody* is a collection of different sorts of texts and collages based on the Warren Commission Report. A listing of a few examples suggests the remarkable range of formal methods and discourses introduced, played with, mocked, and otherwise employed by Pell: lipograms ("The Magic Bullet"); illustrations ("A Bullet-Theory Poem"); a "Biography of Lee Harvey Oswald" composed of a sequence of brief snatches of (irrelevant and banal) biographical information ("Oswald appears to have taken with him a Spanish-English dictionary"); linked to seemingly unrelated and equally banal drawings (e.g., a winter snowman holding a branch), and an Appendix of "Commission Exhibits" (these visuals include a composite of ears, mysterious maps and photographs, and a page entitled "Oswald's Underworld Ties" that displays bow ties, silk ties, etc.). But the greatest triumphs of *Rhapsody* are Pell's deconstructive versions of actual textual materials drawn from the *Commission Report*. Here, in texts such as "The Revolver," "The Nature of the Shots," and "The Long and Bulky Package of Dreams," Pell subjects materials from the original *Report* to various mechanical methods of transformation associated with artists like Raymond Roussel and the OULIPO Group (both greatly admired by Pell). The result is a series of wondrously crazed new texts which brilliantly and hilariously display the labyrinthine meandering, pseudo-logic, misplaced specificity, and rhetorical posturing that ultimately make *The Warren Commission Report* useless in terms of solv-

ing the mystery of JFK's death. Pell is another writer like Steve Katz whose work is so radical and deeply subversive of conventional thinking about fiction that it has thus far eluded critical discussion. His time, however, will come. Also recommended: Pell's recent collection of Avant-Porn, *X-Texts* (Autonomedia, 1994).

Tours of the Black Clock (Steve Erickson; Simon and Schuster, 1989)

The author of two earlier novels (*Days Between Stations* and *Rubicon Beach*) that captured a sense of Los Angeles's dizzying ability to wreak havoc on time and space, Steve Erickson reached his full creative powers in *Tours of a Black Clock*; this book combined Garcia Marquez's ability to magically exaggerate aspects of the familiar until they can be seen clearly once again with Faulkner's mesmerizing rhetoric's visionary power to explode time and space. The result is haunting and grotesque evocation of the shattered nature of twentieth century life and its ongoing love affair with fascism and violence. Its central character, Bernard Jainlight, is a fascinating, murderous monster who transforms his personal obsession with death, guilt, and sexual passion into Avant-Porn fantasies that help revive Hitler's lost dream of total power – and total submission. Erickson is one of those rare authors who is able to instantly access the deepest aspects of his own private torments and then use these as features of fictional narratives that move outward to comment on the tormented nature of larger political and social issues.

American Psycho (Bret Easton Ellis, Vintage, 1988)

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* was probably the most notorious and widely denounced American novel of the 80s. It was also a brilliant A-P novel – perhaps the first undeniably classic works of fiction to be written by one of the leading writers of the first generation of American artists who never *didn't* know what it was like to live in a mediascape composed of 57 channels, each accessible by a mere flick of the remote control, each making equal demands on our attention (and, of course, our pocket book). Ellis's Patrick Bateman is a Wall Street businessman, who wears all the right clothes, watches soap operas and talk shows, rents dozens of videos each week, knows who to get the best tables for dinner and front-row concert seats. He's also possibly a crazed serial killer who seems to get off on having sex with prostitutes, then killing and eating them (like everything else in this life of full-blown hyperconsumption, his life is something he purchases and consumes). Ellis brings all this to life via a series of startling A-P experimental formal methods that succeed in depicting Bateman's curious, flat, depthless personality in such a way as to produce the shock of recognition on our part of how close we all are to Bateman. *American Psycho* is a quintessential work of AP in that massive amounts of pop cultural images, info and details drawn from Bateman's daily life are recreated for us with a mechanical perfection, but they are placed within an aesthetic context that permits these free-floating signifiers to point to something beyond mere banality. That is, Ellis introduces such "trivia" as a means of displaying what is going on in Bate-mind – a mind which is literally "constructed" by the consumer items Bateman's consciousness encounter. These encounters are recreated for readers with the same flat, depthless, coolly neutral manner that they are presented on television, but this is hardly the way readers should receive this description. Rather these details function in much the same way they did in Robbe Grillet's A-P murder mystery, *The Voyeur*: with mounting horror, disgust, and (perhaps the final indignity for our politically correct age) most certainly with laughter. In the end, then, *American Psycho's* monumental excess becomes a devastating critique of the combination of horror and banality of precisely this excess. We thus should exit *American Psycho* with the same sense of momentary recognition expressed by Kurtz in babble so eloquent that only Beckett and DeLillo have sense come close to it ("The horror, the horror") – a recognition that hopefully also supplies a clue about how to break through this horror.

Dark City (Charles Bernstein, Sun & Moon, 1992)

Bernstein, who is one of the leading poets and theorists associated with Language Poetry, possesses the kind of mind that can use an image as a means of illuminating a section of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* one moment and then turn around and knowledgeably discuss the aesthetics of splatterpunk films the next. *Dark City* is a recent collection (his twentieth book) of poems whose compositional methods can be compared to what artists like David Blair, Negativland or Craig Baldwin have been doing – namely, recontextualizing samples, drawn from an eclectic array of pop culture, philosophy, newspaper reports, and other found materials – into new structures of meaning. Rescued in this way from their original sources – computer lingo, the cant of TV talk shows, junk mail, would-be proverbs, nursery rhymes and pop songs – these snippets of words and phrases wind up being able to speak directly to us about our society's collective concerns, fears and hopes. At times comic, at times bleak, *Dark City* is never merely ironic or cynical. In the end it winds up being a fascinating excursion into the everyday life of late-postindustrial

capitalism. The world evoked here is a kaleidoscopic, dissolving collage of semiotic traces of American culture's deepest obsessions, most revealing fears and longings. Out of the mouths of banalities comes moving, evocative images, occasional flashes of insight about the confusions and loss of belief in post-modern life which are nearly always accompanied by Bernstein's humorous, affirmative insistence that meaning and truth can still be found today if one uses the creativity that everyone possess. Mind-expanding A-P-poetry at its very best.

The Heirs of Columbus (Gerald Vizenor, University of Massachusetts Press, 1992)

The Heirs of Columbus provides a perfect example of how Vizenor has used his "trickster" literary program to construct a means of escaping victimization. This trickster approach offers a variety of ways to use the act of writing to re-shape histories. Published amidst all the self-congratulatory hoopla that accompanied the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of America, *The Heirs of Columbus* presents a magical, often hilarious new version of the Columbus story that reveals that Native Americans are the true heirs of Columbus. The story incorporates various elements of cyberpunk, detective fiction, gambling stories, talk-shows, and other features of pop mythology to create a story that emphasizes self-empowerment for Native Americans. This willingness to use history for his own purposes – to use the fissures and gaps that exist in even the most meticulously recorded historical event – is one of several aspects of his work that Vizenor shares with his A-P contemporaries like William Vollmann, Kathy Acker, and Harold Jaffe.

Glimpses (Lewis Shiner, William Morrow, 1993)

On the strength of his first novel, *Frontera* (1984) and numerous well received stories, Lew Shiner was hailed as one of cyberpunk's leading practitioners. Along with William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley and Rudy Rucker, Shiner helped American SF boldly and brashly emerge from the mean streets of SF's literary ghetto and began tooling around the mainstreets of postmodern fiction and culture, loudly broadcasting their messages of technological self-empowerment in prose equivalents of rap-cum-speed metal. During the remainder of the decade, Shiner moved away from the anti- or non-realism of SF and other genre writing toward more realistic approaches in *Deserted Cities of the Heart* (1987) and *Slam* (1990).

But the best example of the unusual kinds of formal, thematic, and personal strains that collide and interact in Shiner's – and Avant-Pop fiction's – best work can be found in his fourth novel, *Glimpses* (1992). Part traditional psychological narrative, part rock music documentary, part naked autobiography, part alternate world of the Philip K. Dickian variety, *Glimpses* tells the story of a young man struggling to come to grips with the death of his father and the breakup of a long-term romantic relationship. In the midst of these struggles, he discovers that if he concentrates hard enough, he can conjure up – and then record – songs that were never performed in our world. These songs would have eventually comprised the materials of Jim Morrison's *Celebration of the Lizard*, Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys *Smile*, and Jimi Hendrix's *First Rays of the New Sun* – three legendary "lost albums" that, for various reasons, the artists were unable to ever complete. Ultimately Shiner's hero visits these artists in their past incarnations in an effort to change the circumstances that prevented them from recording these albums, each of which might have positively influenced our culture and history if they had been released. In the process of re-entering the past and attempting to change other peoples' personal histories, Shiner's character learns something about his ability to begin making changes in his own life – as well as about certain areas that can't be changed but only accepted and dealt with.

Going Native (Stephen Wright, Farrar, Straus, 1993)

Stephen Wright's *Going Native*, is one of those rare works whose innovations in form, character-presentation, language, and theme are able to do nothing less than sum up the defining features of an entire era (in this case, our own A-P era). In *Going Native* Wright propels his central character, Wylie Jones, out onto the same open road traveled by earlier American heroes like Huck Finn, the Joads (in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*), *Easy Rider*'s Billy and Captain America, and the various alter egos of Jack Kerouac and Bruce Springsteen. This trip doesn't, however, lead to the Promised Land or the American Dream but to something closer to a postmodern version of a Boschian nightmare, or Marlowe's harrowing journey upriver in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Constructed as a carefully ascending series of episodes, each contributing to a sense of postmodern unreality, *Going Native* Wright somehow manages to suck the lifeblood out of works as diverse as *Dracula*, *Apocalypse Now*, just about every B-movie you can name (like Wells' *Touch of Evil*, for one), and many others you can't, in order to reanimate not just the "road novel" but a number of other standard American motifs (notably, the impulse to flee from responsibility, the

vener of innocence covering – if just barely so – an unspeakable brutality). All in all, then, Wright throws the greatest literary party since Robert Coover's *Gerald's Party* and has created perhaps the first unmissable classic Avant-Pop novel of the 90s.

Music:

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (The Beatles, 1967)

It was twenty years ago today – or maybe a little less – when this greatest of all A-P mind-blower albums first exploded in the ruins of western civilization – an arrival that ranks up there with Kennedy's assassination and the moon landing as one of the most truly memorable events of the 60s. The Beatles had been pushing the outer envelope of conventional pop sounds ever since *Revolver* (1965), and with *Sgt. Pepper* the envelope simply dissolved, as in an acid dream. *Sgt. Pepper* was a landmark work of A-P in so many different ways, it's hard to know where to begin a list. For one thing, the Beatles' decision to include a printed version of the lyrics on the album cover codified the fact that rock lyrics deserved to be read in their own right. This was also the first completely integrated "concept album" – not just a collection of songs but a unified work of art whose individual tracks told a story (the conceit being that they are an old-time music hall band singing songs about contemporary English life) and interrelated with one another in various ways to create a whole which was much greater and richer than just a sum of its parts; the album was also a landmark in its use of sonic montages, tape loops, and multi-track recording, and a psychedelic mind-voyage that harkened back to Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and which was loaded with sly and secret references to getting high. *Sgt. Pepper* was a challenge to virtually all artists and performers who were interested in transforming pop cultural forms into serious works of art with genuinely subversive potential – the very essence of A-P aesthetics. That this potential was worrisome to such a wide range of people is a tribute to A-P generally – in the U.S., the Ku Klux Klan put *Sgt. Pepper* on a wooden cross and set it ablaze and the Klan's Grand Wizard exhorted radio audiences to "Get out there, you teenagers, and cut off your Beatle-style long hair. Join those at the bonfires and throw your locks into the fire! Burn, burn, burn everything that is the Beatle!" One can image the ghost of Arthur Rimbaud looking down and smiling. Meanwhile Bob Larson's *Hippies, Hindus and Rock and Roll* was asking, "If the Beatles are going to pray to Hindu Gods, invite demon spirits to enter and control their bodies, and encourage Americas youth to do likewise, where might it all lead?" The answer, of course, was that, along with Tim Leary, Hendrix, and LSD, it led to the first full flowering of A-P; like other A-P bombshell's that blazed across the sky during this period – Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*, Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, Kubrick's *2001 – Sgt Pepper* effectively legitimized A-P as a major new art form capable of producing significant changes in people's consciousness. When acid-guru Tim Leary first heard the album, his response of ecstatic: "I declare that the Beatles are mutants. Prototypes of evolutionary agents sent by God with a mysterious power to create a new species." That species was, of course, the Avant-Pop Species.

Andy Warhol Presents the Velvet Underground and Nico (Velvet Underground, 1967)

Like fictional A-P innovators from the same period (Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon, for example), the Velvet Underground systematically and selfconsciously re-examined and then openly disrupted their genre's conventional assumptions about formal unity and beauty, about the "proper" way to manipulate their medium's elements into a structure, and about the nature of the creative "self" and "authenticity." Sponsored initially by Andy Warhol, whose role in the A-P's breakdown of the division between avant-garde and the mainstream is central and ongoing, the Velvets mixed musical styles (folk, minimalism, thrash, jazz, gothic rock) and messages in a way ideally suited for expressing the multiple, contradictory textures of postindustrial urban life. In their early performances in Warhol's multi-media happenings (the "Plastic Exploding Inevitable"), the Velvet's music was presented within a dissolving, multi-genre display of Warhol movies, dance, light shows, and improvisational poetry – a bewildering cacophony of avant-garde noise, light, humans interacting with images and sounds, and the Velvet's deliberately dissonant, minimalist three-7 chord progressions. These performances were composed of discrete parts – photographers taking photos of the audience, dance, different Warhol movies being continuously projected onto the bodies of musicians and other performers, etc. – all presented in a non-hierarchical simultaneity that defiantly refused to cohere in any traditional sense. Although the Velvets were, like the Beatles, interested in the way technology could be used to produce unusual sound effects and distortions, they used technology to capture a raw, "naked" sound; thus, in songs like "Sister

Ray" (on their second studio album, *White Light, White Heat*) and "European Son" (both influenced by Avant-Jazz innovator Ornette Coleman's equally unconventional notions of dissonance and harmony), they experimented with the effects of repetition, of the accumulated and chance effects of feedback, even the concepts of boredom and willful crudity (cf. Warhol's movies such as "Sleep" and "Empire" from the same period), so that a tension develops between the tight, monotonous formal structure and bursts of piercing sounds and pure noise. Often playing with their backs to the audience, and occasionally abandoning the stage altogether while their guitars continued to shriek and drone on, the Velvets also foregrounded the concepts of rock musicians as *image* or mechanical simulacrum (essentially an extension of Warhol's fascination with the mechanical and reproducible qualities of life and art, the artist-as-machine) in ways that anticipated the more elaborate and playful A-P methods of David Bowie, punk musicians, and Madonna. In short, the Velvet Underground ushered in the A-P era of self-conscious, self-referential rock – the rock music that would segue into the glam and punk phenomena of the 1970s, into the New York art rock scene of the same period that produced later A-P artists like Patti Smith, the New York Dolls, Jim Carroll and Talking Heads, and which would eventually mutate into the rap/scratch/dub and funk collage-sounds of urban blacks, the performance art music of Laurie Anderson, and the peculiar jazz/rock creations of John Zorn and Hal Willner.

The Wild, the Innocent and the E-Street Shuffle (Bruce Springsteen, 1973)

"Wait, a minute!" you're saying, "an A-P album by *Springsteen* is on this list?" Well, for people who bought into the mistaken hype surrounding Springsteen's fabulously successful *Born in the USA* (1984) – Springsteen as basically just an "ordinary guy," a conservative, flag-waving patriot (the "Rambo of Rock") whose music upholds the values (and musical tastes) of middle class America, *The E Street Shuffle* should be an ear-opener. In fact, Springsteen is one of America's most inventive and innovative composers. *The Wild, the Innocent* was his second album and remains perhaps his most experimental work to date. What's interesting in listening to this songs today is how truly peculiar and experimental Springsteen really is. What we find here are songs in which pop clichés drawn from films and rock mythology have been reprocessed into street poetry and musical textures of great power and beauty. Springsteen was one of the first figures creating self-conscious rock – rock which examined its own status and original sources even while exploring new musical avenues, connections, and so forth. Here "Uncle Billy's Circus Song" used the image of a rundown circus to examine the contrast between the public perception of rock and the gritty, sleazy realities to create one of the great of all meta-rock forms. Likewise, in "Rosalita" Springsteen created a joyous, comic version of his own trail to rock success while also developing a more universal suggestions about the ways rock can be seen as a mythic expression of larger patterns of American experience (rock as transcendence, rock as an embodiment of the American Dream, etc. etc.).

What's equally striking in this album is the ways Springsteen at this period in his career was restlessly seeking ways to blend musical idioms drawn from jazz, soul, and folk music in original ways. A song like "The E Street Shuffle" opens slowly as a piercing guitar note begins to interact with a New Orleans Dixieland riff, and as the song unfolds, we move through different musical territories – jump blues, R&B, jazz jamming – until we finally arrive at the smoky intensity of the East Coast bar-band sound that Springsteen had revitalized so successfully. The unexpected, rapid-fire movements in and out of different tempos and musical textures, the use of musical instruments which are utterly unexpected within a rock context (accordions, glockenspiels, trumpets, tubas, even violins), the richness and beauty of Springsteen's transformations of street talk into street *poetry*, the rush of startling one-liners that are tossed off, like many of the greatest lines in rock, almost as throwaway lines, while still being able to retain rock's passion, excitement, intensity – all this not of making us believe that Saturday night isn't ever going to end – all this makes *The Wild* not only one of A-P seminal albums but one of the great rock albums of any kind.

There'll Be no Tears Tonight (Eugene Chadbourne, 1980)

Chadbourne may well be the greatest of all contemporary A-P musicians. He's released over two dozens albums of his own and several other collaborative efforts with other artists like Evan Johns and Camper Van Beethoven. Although Chadbourne has had a major impact on people like John Zorn and various other musicians working on the boundaries of jazz, rock, and other pop musical forms, his work is so truly *twisted* and unique that as yet it remains largely unknown outside of a small, devoted groups of fans. Chadbourne's first album, *LSDC&W* (1969) included utterly crazed and hilarious "cover versions" of famous Beatles tunes like "Day Tripper" (it also featured a young saxophonist named John Zorn, who also appears on *There'll Be No Tears Tonight*). Imagine a cross between Les Paul, Jimi Hendrix, Chet Atkins, and Spike Jones and you'll get some sense of what Chadbourne's free, improvised country and western be-bop sounds like. Essentially he's a brilliant jazz guitarists and composer who has been working mostly

with the straightforward lexicon of country-western music because this materials offers the opportunity to crunch musical expectations and to explore a realm of instrumental freedom in songs that are so simple that they have to be split wide open, not by merely trashing them, but by looking for the hole (as they say in pro football). A brilliant jazz guitarists, Chadbourne finds holes where you never thought they existed – in songs like Johnny Paycheck’s horrifically sentimentalized, macho tunes like “Take This Job and Shove It” and “I’m the Only Hell My Momma Ever Raised,” or Roger Miller’s “Dang Me” and “The Last Word in Lonesome Is Me”; he then proceeds to fill them with whatever seems incongruously perfect: assorted squeals, squawks, buzz-saw grindings, and other out-to-lunch interludes supplied by Zorn and percussionist David Licht. What would Hank Williams sound like on LSD? For the answer, check out this album. Incidentally, since I may not get to writing an entry for any of the other important Avant-C&W figures, anyone who’s not familiar with the music of Terry Allen (whose astonishing debut album *Juarez* gets my vote as the greatest single album ever) and Ned Sublette (who played in the same marching band in Portales, NM with my wife) should run right out and start getting familiar.

Avant Pop (Lester Bowie, 1984)

My first encounter with the term Avant-Pop was when I bought an album by that name by Lester Bowie, the great alto-sax player and jazz composer best known for his work with the wildly inventive Chicago Art Ensemble. Listening to Bowie do his collaborative treatments of such pop standards as “Autumn Leaves,” was instrumental in shaping my subsequent thinking about what I was to later term “the A-P Phenomenon.” Bowie’s “Avant-Pop” provided musical evidence that jazz musicians could apply their improvisatory, collaborative methods to familiar pop structures and that the result could be zingingly ironic and funny, at other times genuinely expansive, the listener suddenly being shown how surprising and richly textured such seemingly simple whose very familiarity made it (made it impossible to feel this material could be presented in a different context or). Later jazz composers like Eugene Chadbourne and John Zorn provide more contemporary examples of artists whose sensibilities I would describe as being “avant-pop.”

Bowie’s “Avant-Pop” included a whole series of crazed, hilarious, and yet often quite gorgeous versions of such familiar, bland pop standards. Listening to the way Bowie used the basic structures and “content” of “Autumn Leaves” – a bland, catchy pop song I had grown up listening to on the radio during the mid 50s – as a springboard for producing a collaborate, improvisatory new work was instrumental (no pun intended) in beginning the process of my thinking of what I was to later term “The Avant-Pop Phenomenon.” It immediately occurred to me that such methods were analogous to those being used by post-modern fiction writers like Kathy Acker’s “re-writes” of classic novels (e.g. *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*), or the various treatments of Biblical and mythological materials by Robert Coover, John Barth, Steve Katz, and Harold Jaffe. In the case of Bowie’s “Autumn Leaves” the results of this improvisatory approach to earlier material were at once zingingly ironic and funny, and yet also genuinely expansive. Subjected to Bowie’s alchemical imagination, the bland and utterly familiar elements of this simple pop tune had undergone a remarkable sea-change into some fresh and surprising – these materials which had seemed so simple and exhausted were in fact capable of being re-cycled in such a way that had opened up them, exposing the numerous layers of resonances and aesthetic possibilities that had been lying there all along, invisible to most people’s eyes, but patiently waiting for just the right moment when an aesthetic explorer like Bowie might come along who was capable of recognizing their untapped possibilities. I was teaching a graduate course at that time in postmodernism and rock music, and I was soon using the musical works of contemporary innovators like Eugene Chadbourne, John Zorn, Laurie Anderson, rap musicians, as well as those by earlier figures like Carl Stallings (who created the musical scores for many of the great Warner Brothers cartoons) as a means to give students a better understanding of a whole series of concepts central to postmodern aesthetics and critical theory – e.g., appropriation, slippage, jouissance, intertextuality, sampling, and so on. These works were also useful in introducing students to some of the key issues relating to getting students used to some of the issues involved in the basic issues involved in the providing students with examples of the ways that postmodern artists were beginning to question the basic tenants of originality.

United States, Parts I-IV (Laurie Anderson, 1985)

Like Avant-Punk diva Patti Smith, Laurie Anderson’s career has its roots in the New York art scene of the early 70s. There are other significant points of comparison: both developed ambiguous, androgynous stage personas that confounded pop cultural sexual stereotypes; both were influenced by the Beat authors (and by William S. Burroughs in particular), as well as by Dada; and both relied upon lyrical styles that emphasized collage and reflexiveness as a means of exploring their mutual, obsessive fascination with lan-

guage generally, and particularly with the failure of language to communicate our most basic fears, longings and sensory impressions. Much more than Smith, however, Anderson's music needs to be seen in the wider context of performance art. The components of Anderson's A-P synthesis – a mixture of literature, theater, music, photography, stand-up comedy, film, architecture, poetry, fantasy, and dance – are, in effect, a veritable landscape of mass cultural forms. Especially in her large scale performance pieces that were eventually collected into her magnum opus – the two evening, eight hour long *United States, Parts I-IV* – which includes most of the songs that appeared in her first two surprisingly popular albums *Big Science* (1982) and *Mr. Heartbreak* (1985) – we see Anderson developing multi-media arrangements of text, image, movement and musical sounds that employ technologies to present a bemused, often bitterly A-P critique of technology. Like Michael Stipe of REM, David Byrne of Talking Heads, Captain Beefheart, Brian Eno, and many other recent A-P composers, Anderson's approach to song-writing takes its cue more from sculptural and painterly notions than from narrative. As she weaves together vignettes, found language and oblique references to pop culture, "serious literature," philosophy, and advertising into verbal and musical collages, Anderson relentlessly circles upon issues central to A-P: the ways mass culture problematizes language's ability to function properly; the way that our alienation and confusion are produced by mass culture and Big Science; and the ways that mass culture's constant stream of words and images serves to stimulate, alienate and exhilarate people who are exposed to them.

Lost in the Stars: The Music of Kurt Weill (Hal Wilner producer, A&M Records, 1985)

"I have never acknowledged the difference between 'serious' music and 'light' music," Kurt Weill once told an interviewer. "There is only good music and bad music." Weill was a German Jewish composer best known for his collaborations with Bertolt Brecht (eg. *The Threepenny Opera*) and who subsequently fled Hitler's takeover to establish a career in Manhattan as the creator of a series of Avant-Broadway musicals such as *Lost in the Stars* before his death in 1950. Weill was already a composer of opera, symphonies and orchestral works before he hooked up with Brecht and began crossing all sorts of musical barriers. One of the twentieth century's greatest A-P musical figures, Weill is a composer whose works have been simultaneously in the repertoire of the NY Metropolitan Opera (*The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany*), the Doors (who recorded Weill's "Alabama Song" on their first album), Bing Crosby and Willie Nelson (who both recorded "September Song"), and Louis Armstrong and 50s pop crooner, Bobby Darin (who covered "Mac the Knife").

It was therefore entirely appropriate that *Lost in the Stars* – a major retrospective of Weill's works – was produced by perhaps the most influential single figure in American A-P music: Hal Wilner. Wilner's acceptance of two key A-P dictums – that *no work of art* is ever "finished," and that there are a near infinite number of ways that "light" art can be transformed into "serious" art (and vice-versa, of course) – led him to produce a series of startling, brilliant "cover albums" in which the work of a single artist was re-contextualized and reinterpreted by an eclectic array of contemporary musicians with backgrounds in jazz, punk, folk, classical, rock and just about every other musical idiom imaginable. In *Lost in the Stars* Weill's greatest tunes were interpreted by a fascinating series of musicians such as Lou Reed ("September Song"), Charlie Haden ("Speak Low"), Tom Waits ("What Keeps Mankind Blue"), Van Dyke Parks ("Johnny Johnson Medley"), Sting ("Mac the Knife"), Carla Bley ("Lost in the Stars"), and Todd Rundgren ("Call for the Crime"). Also recommended by Wilner: *That's the Way I Feel Now: The Music of Thelonious Monk* and *Stay Awake* (covers of Walt Disney movie tunes).

Spillane (John Zorn, Electra/Nonesuch, 1987)

John Zorn is an alto saxophonist and one of A-P's music's most daring composers and original theorists. Although he is usually associated with the current enormously vital jazz scene of lower Manhattan, Zorn in fact has been producing a body of A-P work that systematically demolishes genre distinctions and high brow/low brow divisions, while opening up radically new approaches to organizing sounds. In collaboration with musicians such as drummer Bobby Previte, saxophonist Tim Berne, Keyboardist Wayne Horvitz, and guitarists Bill Frisell and Fred Frith, Zorn has created a music whose "content" and methods of improvisation and composition grow naturally out of our media age's longing to recuperate the past and its restless need for new stimuli.

Zorn's application of these notions is was first fully realized in *The Big Gundown* – an entire album of music by Ennio Morricone, who is best known for his scores of films by Sergio Leone, Bernardo Bertolucci and Brian DePalma and who is, along with Carl Stallings perhaps the most important early A-P composer. Morricone's musical compositions are usually unsettling, peculiar transformations of popular American idioms (analogous, say, to Sergio Leone's surreal, Italian versions of America's wild-west mythologies); reworked by Zorn's radical A-P composition methods, these works undergo a sea change

into something utterly distinctive, as the individual “quoted” materials in *The Big Gundown* appear and then dissolve into one another at varying paces; some are inverted, others speeded up or slowed down, while many of them are further transformed by the insertion of bizarre vocal, instrumental and other sound effects. But *Spillane* is Zorn’s masterpiece to date; it is probably also the most successful single A-P musical composition to date of any kind. The title refers to hard-boiled detective novelist Mickey Spillane, and the thirty-minute title piece is a kind of mulligan stew of musical ingredients that Zorn serves up as a musical banquet tribute to Spillane. In his album liner notes, Zorn explained the composition methods involved. After he had thoroughly researched his subject – which turns out to be not only Spillane but the whole tradition of detective fiction and its *film noire* relative – Zorn wrote his findings on filing cards. Some of these cards contained biographical data; others were sounds that Zorn associates with Spillane, his work and detective films (windshield wipers, rain falling, screams, gunshots, phone rings, bar crowds, and so on). Zorn then meticulously organized these cards into the order that eventually created the linear progression of the composition. Like most of Zorn’s other pieces, “Spillane” is a mixture of improvised and notated elements, including brief prose texts by Arto Lindsay that are read by Jonathan Lurie in a voice that is eerily and hilariously appropriate for the ambiance being established. The results are roughly equivalent to the Avant-Prose Assemblages of language poets such as Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, and with A-P authors such as Kathy Acker, Harold Jaffe and Donald Barthelme, where a single theme or image is used to hold together otherwise disparate materials (obviously there are equally valid analogies that one can make with painterly and sculptural assemblages). MTV-like in its rapid paces and the heterogeneous nature of its materials, “Spillane” evolves and moves forward as a free-associative work that presents a composite aural portrait of its subject in a spirit of playful homage and exuberance. Operating at the boundaries of A-P’s reinvestigations of artistic originality and compositional processes, John Zorn’s music perfectly illustrates the ways that developments within popular music have been busy assimilating the chief aesthetic and cultural evident in other A-P art forms.

The Carl Stallings Project: Music from Warner Bros. Cartoons, 1936-1958 (Carl Stallings, with liner notes by John Zorn, Warner Brothers Records, 1990)

It wasn’t Dylan, Hendrix, Chuck Berry, the Beatles or even Elvis that most American postmodern artists were weaned on when they were kids but the music of Carl Stallings, who during the 1940s and 50s composed most of the scores for the classic Warner Brothers cartoons. It was only when they were a little older and hanging out, drinking cheap wine, smoking cigarettes (and wishing it was grass), that they began listening to scratchy 78s and LPs of Miles Davis, Bird, Coltrane (in jazz) and Elvis, Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard. In short, the common view that postmodernism emerged out of the 60s sensibility simply misrepresents the origins and influences of the movement. At any rate, listening today to Stallings’ music without the cartoon context they first appeared in, it’s obvious how truly strange, innovative, and original his compositions actually are. Stallings’ music was created to reinforce and interact with the surreal world of cartoons – a world whose landscape typically undergoes an bizarre and eclectic series of transformations within the courses of just a few moments of frantic action. Thus a Bugs Bunny cartoon might start off with Bugs being chased out of his comfortable rabbit hole by a gun-toting Elmer Fudd, then find himself playing the role of a matador in a Spanish bullring, then a waiter at Monte Carlo casino, then sudden zapped into a Puccini opera, facing off Yosemite Sam at high noon in a Western showdown, and then rowing his boat into the sunset as the cartoon ends (with Elmer perhaps shown paddling futilely after him mumbling “I’ll get you yet, you cwazy wabbit!”). Stallings’ approach to composing scores for such works was a revolutionary “blocks of sound” method in which a familiar musical melody or idiom (say, “The Flight of the Bumblebee”) would be recreated, appropriated and pastiched – but only for a few moments before being replaced by completely different tune (something like “Do Not Forsake Me Oh My Darling” theme from Fred Zinneman’s western classic, *High Noon*) which typically had a very different set of resonances and associations for the audience. Growing up with this kind of music helped prepare later television audiences for creating similarly bizarre “aural stews” as they casually zapped past twenty or thirty different TV shows during a ten or fifteen minute interval; it also would have an enormous impact on the aesthetics employed by A-P artists like Steve Erickson, John Zorn, Robert Coover, Mark Leyner, and Quentin Tarantino. In other words, John Zorn isn’t kidding when he refers to Stallings as “one of the twentieth century’s most original composers.” And in fact, my own view is that once critics finally get around to seriously examining the impact of cartoons on postmodern (and A-P) aesthetics, they’re going to discover that these “primitive” forms played an analogous role in the evolution of postmodernism as African art did in the evolution of Picasso’s and other major modernist masters. Check it out.

Spiked: The Music of Spike Jones (Spike Jones, BMG Music, 1994)

Spike Jones was the first American A-P composer and band to achieve national recognition (by contrast, his contemporary, Carl Stallings – creator of the music for the Warner Brothers Cartoons – was almost completely unknown until the late 80s). During the 40s and 50s, Jones and his talented orchestra used the soothing, banalities of familiar pop musical materials as a well-grounded launch site for their own extended, wildly inventive, and often hilarious improvisations. Like Eugene Chadbourne (the only American musician to come close to Jones in terms of sheer range of crazed inventiveness), what Jones was doing was actually akin to jazz's improvisational treatments of familiar materials and as is also true of Chadbourne, Jones often selected country music for a number of his greatest reconstructive appropriations because of the narrowness and conservative nature of the county audience and most of the music it loved. But Jones' approach to composition – which could be summarized as something like, "Okay, boys, now I want the drums to set the beat, the piano and the reeds will get the melody going, and then we'll use the cowbells-and-gunshots for syncopation" – not only produced a lot of mayhem and laughs; it also opened up whole new areas of sound for musicians to explore. The fact that no less a luminary than A-P Top Gun Thomas Pynchon was brought in here to write the appreciative liner notes for this retrospective of Jones' work suggests how much of an influence on the budding A-P movement Spike Jones had.

Zoo TV Tour (U2, 1993).

In this tour, everybody's All-World band from Ireland used 90s technology (notably the interactive video technology and sampling techniques of Avant-Video artists Emergency Broadcast Network) as a means of creating a kind of auto-deconstruction of their own status as rock icons while simultaneously encouraging audiences to recognize the way their own identities are essentially media-constructs that had grown stale and clichéd. In the process U2's Avant-Concert also managed to explore traditional questions of values lost – and rarely regained.

Xplora (Peter Gabriel, 1994).

Ever since his days with Genesis, it was obvious that Peter Gabriel recognized the inherent interactivity of the rock medium. During his distinguished career, he has sought to combine his musical talent with various technological innovations (for instance, his videos for "Shock the Monkey" and "Sledgehammer" were, in different ways, landmark experiments merging experimental video with music). With *Xplora* Gabriel released a work that merged his own music with an interactive medium that allows audiences to collaborate with the original materials in various ways.

Television, Video, Hypertext, Radio, Multi-Media:

Laugh-In (conceived by George Schlatter, NBC, 1967)

Laugh-In (technically titled "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In") was an Ed Sullivan-on-acid comedy/variety series unlike anything that had previously ever been on American television. Hosted by Dick Martin (the suave, handsome guy) and Dan Rowan (the goofy one), the show swung in and out of control at a demented pace that would be matched only fifteen years later when MTV premiered. *Laugh-In* was the first television show to abandon the tired formal mannerisms that television had always relied on – mostly ones borrowed from vaudeville, theater and film – and began to develop stylistic features more suitable for the "hot" visual medium of television itself. While Rowan and Martin stood around looking amused and befuddled by the whirlwind of hip bits of condensed satire and meta-TV commentaries that encircled them, each show unfolded as a barrage of cockeyed sight gags, irreverent one-liners, parodies and commentaries on current events and social issues (a rarity in American television outside the news), meta-television skits, off-color sketches, and surprise cameo appearances by celebrities ranging from Tiny Tim (who premiered his "Tiptoe Through the Tulips") to presidential candidate Richard Nixon saying "Sock it to *me*?" in 1968. Unquestionably the first postmodern television show, *Laugh-In* helped pave the way for the considerably darker humor and outrageousness of shows like *Monty Python* and *Saturday Night Live*.

Saturday Night Live (Lorne Michaels, director, NBC, 1975)

What can I say? During the first several years of its existence, *Saturday Night Live* was not only the greatest A-P television show of its day, but with the possible exception of *Twin Peaks* and *Duckman* – which I haven't had time to write entries for but which should be included in any list of important A-P works – was, quite simply, the greatest American television show of any kind.

The Simpsons (originally written and directed by Matt Groening; Fox Network, 1990)

The Simpsons first achieved national recognition due to the popularity of Bart Simpson, the adorable monster-child who delighted audiences in the ways he departed from the drearily-predictable portrayals found in most American TV of kids as diligent and well-meaning. There was, of course, a tradition of mischief-making kids in American pop culture, but Bart's personality was far darker and more unsettling than Denis-the-Menace ever dreamed of being. Thus Bart's gleeful delight while watching the mayhem and horrific violence of "Ren and Stimpy" (a cartoon-within-the-cartoon, and one of many regular meta-media devices used in *The Simpsons*) is funny, but also a disturbing commentary about the ways American youngsters are encouraged by pop culture to view violence as an occasion for empathy and enjoyment rather than as something all-too-real and to be avoided. Likewise the other members of the Simpson family are all anti-heroes (with good souls) who seem uncomfortably similar to the citizens living next door to us in the suburbs: Homer (the dad), who spends most of his time at his job at a nuclear plant eating donuts, sucking up to his boss, and spilling beer on sensitive monitor instruments, is the lovable dad-from-hell who is utterly self-absorbed, full of grandiose (but ill-fated) plans, and who has all the wrong answers to family problems. His wife, Marge, sports a blue beehive hairdo that has been compared with the coil of the bride of Frankenstein, struggles in vain to make Homer and Bart more couch – and only occasionally falls victim to gambling-fever or other addictive vices. Rounding out the family are Bart's mirror opposite, the goody-two-shoes Lisa, and baby Maggie, who is always shown brainlessly sucking on a pacifier.

The show began as a series of short (thirty and sixty seconds) animated segments that were used in the James L. Brooks "The Tracey Ullman Show" as buffers between live action segments and commercials. These cartoon segments were written and directed by Matt Groening, whose portrayal of tortured, alienated existence of a family of buck-toothed rabbits in his "Life in Hell" comic strips established him as perhaps the most brilliant Avant-Cartoonist in America.

The Simpsons were not the first TV program to display the ugly underbelly of American family life – Jackie Gleason's *The Honeymooners* did it (though the Kramdens were childless) and so did *All in the Family*; what's original about *The Simpsons* was its success in blending features of A-P aesthetics into a family-sit-com situation. These features include its pop-cultural info density, its speed-metal pacings, its hilarious send-ups of so many different features of the media, and its extremity of vision. Along the way, it's also somehow managed to create a much more thoughtful and moving portrayal of a love affair (between Homer and Marge) than any other American television show using "real people."

Beavis and Butthead (USA Network, 1993).

There's been a lot said about MTV's most notorious show, but not enough said about how truly *brilliant* and *timely* its ultra-minimalism/Beckett-meets-Dick Clark's Bandstand approach to the meta-dada, meta-teen-exploitation genre actually is. Nor how *significant* and genuinely *perceptive* their "reviews" of contemporary music video (and rock musicians) are (Beavis and Butthead are far – far – more reliable about what music "rules" versus what "sucks" than their counterparts in *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, allegedly "serious" rock magazines which increasingly are becoming virtually indistinguishable from the more bland corporate-sponsored-magazines-still-masquerading-as-a-counterculture which indeed receded away into an-image-of-itself). One of the most significant formal innovations is one that other A-P artists are certain to do more with as the technologies to do them become more available – that is, devising a work that creates an ongoing commentary about (and collaboration with) another work of art in "real time." The brilliance of this show can be summed up with Beavis's comments while watching the opening moments of the Stray Cats video of "Rock This Town" (a meta-Rockabilly tune that straddles the border of parody and brilliant simulation); after a few moments of watching Brian Seltzer (lead singer in the Stray Cats) trying (in vain) to lip sync the song while simultaneously riding a motorcycle around late at night, Beavis dead pans, "Is that Billy Idol?" If you understand the resonances of that remark, you'll understand the kind of subtlety, range of reference, and viciously accurate commentary about how much of the material shown on MTV *really does suck!*

FILM:

Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying About the Bomb (Stanley Kubrick, 1963)

Stanley Kubrick is, along with Woody Allen, the greatest of all contemporary A-P filmmakers, and during a remarkably productive fifteen years period Kubrick created a number of classic A-P films that mined

rich veins of genre materials such as horror (*The Shining*) and SF (*2001: A Space Odyssey* and *A Clockwork Orange*) that most artists assumed had long since been exhausted. In *Dr. Strangelove* Kubrick took the basic plot device of one of the most familiar (and disturbing) SF formulas of the 50s – accidental nuclear warfare – whose purported aim was to force Americans to “think the unthinkable.” *Dr. Strangelove* certainly did that, but its A-P approach to this formula also asked something more of audiences: to *laugh about it*.

A Hard Day's Night (Richard Lester, 1964)

About a year before the release of the first two major Avant-Rock albums (these were Bob Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home* and the Beatles' *Revolver*), Richard Lester had already demonstrated that rock's visceral power and passion could be wedded successfully to the avant-garde's experimental formal features. In *A Hard Day's Night* Lester used his background doing TV commercials and many of the innovations of French New Wave cinema (most notably “cinema verite” techniques) to create a wonderfully zany Avant-Documentary about the Beatles phenomenon.

Alphaville (Jean-Luc Goddard, Pathe Contemporary Films, 1965; originally released as *Alphaville, Une Etrange Adventure de Lemmy Caution*)

The appearance of Goddard's *Breathless* in 1959 not only signaled the arrival of the French New Wave as a major cinematic movement of great stylistic verve, freshness, intelligence, but it signaled how crucial A-P aesthetics were going to be to the evolution of serious European and American cinema throughout the 60s. In *Breathless* Goddard used reference to the characters and plot lines of Hollywood's great *noire* and hard-boiled films to provide viewer understanding of the psychological and mythic dimensions of his own films. Jean Paul Belmardo's self-understanding is so thoroughly saturated with the clichés and images of Hollywood that even during the famous death scene that concludes the film, he seems to be acting out one of Bogart's scenes.

But it was *Alphaville* (1965) where Goddard's A-P impulses reaches their apotheosis. Here Goddard took Lemmy Caution (in “real life” a well-known French film detective) and inserted him into a dystopian future where you can drive to the planet Alphaville in a Ford Galaxies (the same car which would be used by the serial killer in Steven Wright's astonishing A-P masterpiece, *Going Native*). The plot is pure recycled SF-dystopia cliché: Assigned to bring back or liquidate Prof. Von Braun, Lemmy winds up being tricked by his daughter (the luscious Anna Karina), an emotionless citizen ruled by Alpha-60, the ultimate control computer, which on a daily basis rewrites the Bible/dictionary used by ordinary citizens by changing the meaning of words and banning others. But like all great A-P innovators, what interested Goddard was not the familiar associations that such stereotypes could evoke in audiences, but their untapped potential for revealing key features of contemporary life – here the tired elements are recontextualized so that *Alphaville* becomes a fascinating allegory of a world psychological and metaphysical confusion, of governmental control and media manipulation, and of the meaning of human freedom in a world suddenly under the thumb of media control.

Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees (David Blair, 1991)

David Blair's quirky, brilliant feature length electronic video, *Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees* (1991) is quite simply the aesthetic culmination of the cyberpunk movement. *Wax* is a mind-warping and yet emotionally-engaging film which relied in part for its startling and poetic visual effects on Blair's access to state-of-the-art digital image-processing and non-linear editing equipment. These new technologies had allowed Blair to manipulate the individual images in his film, and to blend documentary and archival materials, and 3-D military VR footage together with “live” location shots – all of which were subsequently reprocessed and collaged in post production. The visual results that emerge on the screen have been repeatedly compared by reviewers to 2001's concluding “Star Gate” sequences, but they are actually closer in look and texture to the work of early video and cinema innovators like Nam June Paik, Harry Smith, and Jordon Belson. Whatever one thinks of *Wax* as a whole, it is unquestionably one of the most startling *looking* films ever made.

In terms of its themes and plot, *Wax* deals with many of the personal, aesthetic and metaphysical issues that are emerging as a result of the same technologies Blair utilized in the making of his film. The story evolves out of a Pynchonian labyrinth of actual and imagined historical reference, Biblical, mythological and cyberpunk archetypes, Baudrillardian “simulations” of present-day pseudo-events, plus brief glimpses into quirky visual realms created by early cinema and television artists. Bathed in paranoia, grotesquerie, and black humor, and presented by Blair (who also stars in the film) in a narrative style that blends lyricism, precision and sheer goofiness, the end result is an image-and-information dense, hallu-

cinatory film experience – a postmodernist roller-coaster ride that takes viewers to places that seem at once familiar and dream-like.

CRITICISM:

*Journey to America*¹ (Alexis de Tocqueville, 1846, Faber and Faber, 1959)

In the "Panic Tocqueville" entry included in the Arthur Kroker, et al. *Panic Encyclopedia* Alexis de Tocqueville is cited as being "the first political theorist of postmodern America." Tocqueville's political analysis emphasized that American power would rest on the spreading out of an empire of communication. In his very first entry about America, Tocqueville wrote of the Fourth of July celebration he observed with considerable amazement the "Perfect order that prevails" despite the fact that there was "No police. Authority nowhere. Festival of the people." Later, in his fascinating study of prisons in America, Tocqueville concluded that whereas Europe was a "prison without walls" (where social power is dispersed into the residues of high culture which form a network guiding the movements of tourists, artists and, increasingly, capitalists and their government), America was a "prison without walls" – a place where power rested on a daily technology of social and aesthetic reproduction in the poles of discipline/dissipation constantly feeding off one another. This mechanical reproduction of power was complemented by the manipulation of the sensory organs in the form of a violent control of communication. This technologically produced form of manipulation reached new levels of power and control via the rise of mass media in the years following WWII. As the media expanded and pop culture began to exert a growing influence on individuals – creating an ever-more effective prison (a prison described by DeBord as "The Society of the Spectacle") that required physical walls less and less. It was the awareness of the alarming significance of the rapid expansion of these media-ated barriers in the 50s and 60s that sparked the emergence of an A-P aesthetic which sought to resist this form of pop-cultural control and manipulation.

Panic Encyclopedia (Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, and David Cook, eds., St. Martin's, 1989)

In their introduction, the editors note that "Panic is the key psychological mood of postmodern culture." This mood finds its expression in the various forms of "panic culture" (sample entry titles: Panic Art, Panic Shopping Malls, Panic Sex, Panic Suburbs, Panic Fashion, Panic Feminism, Panic Elvis, etc.). These topics are analyzed here in densely argued, free-wheeling entries that, sometimes playfully, often ironically, and always provocatively explore the ways the interlocking structures of media, economics, politics and education have joined forces to control people's minds and bodies. "Panic culture," the editors note at the end of their introduction in a passage that illustrates the kind of imploded, Avant-Crit discourse that characterizes the writing in most of these entries, is "a floating reality, with the actual as a dream world, where we live on the edge of ecstasy and dread. Now it is the age of the TV audience as chilled superconductor of the stock market crash as a Paris Commune of all the programmed supercomputers, of money as an electronic impulse, fibrillating across the world, and of the individual as a quantum energy pack tracing/racing across the postmodern field." The editors' introduction also provides a listing of some of the key cultural cites whose meanings and ideologies are currently being contested by A-P artists.

Down and In: Life in the Underground (Ronald Sukenick, Beech Tree Books/William Morris, 1987)

This was *the* book that got me thinking about what an A-P aesthetic might mean. Part critical study, part cultural history, and part personal meditation, Sukenick examines the story of the underground culture in America as it grew out of the old Greenwich Village Bohemia of Hipsters, Beatniks and artists in the 40s and 50s of his own youth until it began regularly appearing very much above ground during 60s' and 70s during the ascendancy of Pop, the Beatles, punk, splatter punk, and rap. Sukenick's thesis is very simple: the "triumph" of American counterculture during the 60s wound up eviscerating its soul by the mid-70s, as genuinely radical artists found themselves becoming victims of burn-out, wipe-out or sell-out while the *image* of radicalism increasingly dominated the circulation of mainstream art.

1. This entry was inspired by the "Panic Tocqueville" entry in Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, and David Cook, eds., *Panic Encyclopedia* (NY: St. Martin's, 1989), (pp. 86-91).

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- [Note: I have also published over 100 other book reviews in such places as the *San Diego Union Book Review*, *Chicago Tribute Book Review*, *San Diego Reader*, *Pacific Review*, *Arete: The Journal of Sports Literature*]

WORKS-IN-PROGRESS:

Avant Crit: The Death of the Critic in the Age of Post-modernism.

A book of experimental critical essays that illustrates the ways in which the traditional role of the literary critic has been problematized – and that suggests some possible strategies for directly entering into the "maelstrom" of postmodernist aesthetic strategies. Ms. currently being read at the University of Illinois Press.

Avant-Garde/Avant-Pop: Interviews with Postmodern Authors of the 90s.

(Will include critical introductions, individual author introductions, comprehensive bibliographies of primary and secondary materials relating to all authors, and interviews with: Kathy Acker, Paul Auster and Don DeLillo, Lynda Barry, Robert Coover, Susan Daitch, Ricki Ducornet, Brett Easton Ellis, Steve Erickson, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, Harold Jaffe, Maxine Hong Kingston, Mark Leyner, Jay McInerney, Lewis Shiner, William Vollmann, David Foster Wallace.)

Out of Darkness – Perestroika Science Fiction: New Writings from Russia

(with Andrei E. Chertkov, St. Petersburg). An anthology of recent Russian Science Fiction to include "Afterword" and Chertkov's and McCaffery's critical introductions for each fiction selection.

Alfred Bester, SF & Me

William Gibson

... and it was, as we said in those days, a rush. It still is.

I don't remember how old I was when I first tried to read *The Stars My Destination*, I may have been eleven, I'd discovered a shelf of back issues of *Galaxy* at the rear of a dusty loft in the Office Supply store on Main Street. The Office Supply was a known source of exotica: my mother went there once a week for the Sunday edition of an enormous newspaper called *The New York Times*. We lived in southwestern Virginia and *The New York Times* was the product of Yankees. The loft was made a grey-painted, perforated angle-iron, fastened together with giant bolts, the whole construction swaying and jittering in a definitely exciting way when you mounted the steel stairs. And there were books up there, second hand paperbacks, though most of them were mysteries, 1950's mysteries with maps worked into the rear cover design, and those weren't what I was after.

You know what I was after.

I found it. I selected a dozen issues of *Galaxy* on the basis of superior cover art and took them home. My favourite had a wonderful painting of spacesuited, dinosaurian aliens excavating Earth, exposing cliff strats that clearly illustrated mankind's progress from club-swinging savage to radioactive slime.

The contents, initially, proved to be somewhat over my head. There were stories by people like Robert Sheckley that I just didn't understand. I think I was having a hard enough time just grappling with the concept of the short story, because I'd only read *books* before, *The Spaceship under the Apple Tree*, for instance, or *Have Spacesuit, will Travel*.

I don't remember any of those stories in *Galaxy*, but I do remember trying to read something there that had letters going all strange across the page; at one point it even had pictures worked into the text. Not illustrations, but *pictures*... Lips, a strand of pearls... More confusing still, this wasn't just a story, but part of something longer, something called a *serial*, and I soon understood that my choice of cover art had left me with several incomplete serials...

So I didn't get to read *The Stars My Destination* at age eleven, have avoided serializations ever since, and didn't know that I'd been touched, however glancingly, by the paraliterary daring of Mr. Alfred Bester.

Certainly I'd read him by age thirteen, but my own Golden Age of Science Fiction was upon me, that fabled glut of marvels; I took Bester, Sturgeon, Hein-

lein and the rest for granted, as children are wont to do. So much lovely stuff, lovely, and so much of it so soon forgotten...

Years passed, Heinlein was left out in the rain to rust, sex and love proved more complex, more paradoxical, than even freethinking Sturgeon had led one to expect, and *The Stars My Destination* was no more than a faint memory of some fleeting adolescent infatuation.

The age of twenty is a wonderful time for nostalgic glances back at childhood: childhood is still close, too close for serious perspective to have been established. I no longer read science fiction, at age twenty. I read Ballard, I read Pynchon, I read Borges. Science fiction belonged to childhood's drowned Atlantis, seven years gone, and I regarded it, when I regarded it at all, with a distant and profoundly sophomoric disdain.

So. One dreamy, resin-laden summer afternoon, in a second-hand bookstore on Toronto's Yonge Street, I happened on Mr. Bester once again. Feeling a sort of tender pity for the child who'd been so taken, as I then recalled, with this very book, I picked it up and opened it.

He stood in the door to nowhere.

Blink.

The cold was the taste of lemons and the vacuum was a rake of talons on his skin. The sun and the stars were a shaking ague that racked his bones.

Feeling obscurely chastened, I carried the book back to my rented room on Isabella Street and read it beneath a bare light bulb that dangled from an enormous plaster rosette that had once supported an ornate gilt gas fixture.

And it was, as we said in those days, a rush.

It still is.

Cyberpunk.

"I didn't call it that when I invented it," said a British rock musician when questioned about his historical relationship to heavy metal.

Some of you may have noticed that I myself have had next to nothing to say about this alleged "movement" (yes, sort of like the Symbionese Liberation Army, you see) or "sub-genre" (if you're tired of *Dungeons & Dragons*, try *Modems & Mohawks*) or whatever precisely it's supposed to be. And, in any case, I didn't

really invent it. Something very much like it was markedly present in the pop zeitgeist of the last Seventies and early Eighties, there for all to see in the pages of *Heavy Metal*, in the lyrics of Bowie's *Diamond Dogs*, and in films like *Escape from New York*, needing only the least little whoops and a push to tip it over into the relatively stodgy realm of science fiction's printed word.

Hence *Neuromancer*, a novel that caused a number of critics to invoke, much to my delight, the name of Alfred Bester.

To set the record straight, I did not write *Neuromancer* with a copy of *The Stars My Destination* open on the desk beside my typewriter. However, when I found that Terry Carr had put me in the position of actually having to write a whole novel all by myself, I do remember casting back through my racial memory of SF for a work that might provide a model, a template... What did I *really* like? What, out of all that stuff, was my personal favourite?

The Stars My Destination. It had been at least six years since I'd last read the book: to my credit, I avoided rereading it then. Instead, I set out to write a book that, I hoped, would *move* the way I remembered *The Stars My Destination* moving. Frankly, I don't think I pulled it off, but it did give me something to shoot for.

Neuromancer, I suspect, won't age well. *The Stars My Destination* hardly seems to age at all. And here, I think, we have a paradox, because my book is rooted less in a particular time and place than in the McLuhanesque ether of Seventies Big Media, while Bester's is so obviously and wonderfully the product of Fifties New York.

Several years ago I was given a British paperback reprint (*The Rat Race*) of a mainstream Bester novel that dated, I imagine, from the period that produced *The Stars My Destination* and *The Demolished Man*. In

my opinion, it didn't quite work. Which puzzled me, as its colors were obviously from the same palate. Eventually I decided *The Rat Race* proved something; that, indeed, it underlined what is for me the key pleasure in these two marvelous novels; the manner in which Bester, via some private and urbane alchemy, was able to tap into the extraordinary energy of post-war Manhattan in a way that allows us to *feel it today*. There are remarkably few mainstream novels of the period that manage to do this at all.

I seem to recall that, within hours of meeting Bruce Sterling, he described *The Stars My Destination* as a "seamless pop artifact." By this he meant that it was very nearly perfect.

I don't know Alfred Bester personally, and I'm not about to feed you potted bio-and-or-bibliography. I did see Alfred Bester once, in Seattle, when he was guest of honor at an early Norwescon. He wore glossy black penny-loafers, a beautifully tailored black suit, a neatly trimmed beard, and cut an extremely relaxed and elegant figure. Which is to say, he looked remarkably unlike your average American SF writer. The man had very definite class, and I, though too shy to speak to him, was delighted. Too often had lesser heroes manifested in Sears polyester and dandruff, you understand. Later in the evening he donned a Levi jacket and jeans and he looked pretty cool in that as well.

I can't recall having met an SF writer whose opinion I respected who failed to share my enthusiasm for Alfred Bester's work.

As I write this, it's early May in Vancouver, a long way from Brighton and *Conspiracy*, and already I'm feeling a few mild pangs of pre-worldcon excitement. Because, you see, any Worldcon with the taste and sense to honour Alfred Bester is likely to be very special.

The Magpie Mind of Alfred Bester

Robert Ingria

While one of the stereotypes of the professional writer is that of a jack of all trades who has “learned about life” by holding many jobs, this was not true of Alfred Bester. “I have never been a cook, a lumberjack, a sandhog, or even a soda-jerk. I’ve been a writer all my life, and I don’t give a damn who knows it.” But while Bester’s occupational history may have been limited to writing, his interests were wide ranging; he believed that “the professional writer is a professional magpie” and would often speak of his “magpie mind”.

Born December 18, 1913 in Manhattan (or “the Rock”, as he would refer to it), to middle-class parents, Bester attended “the last Little Red Schoolhouse in Manhattan” and George Washington High School. He attended the University of Pennsylvania (class of 1935) “where I made a fool of myself trying to become a Renaissance man. I refused to specialize and knocked myself out studying the humanities and the scientific disciplines. I was maladroit on the crew and football squads, but I was the most successful member of the fencing team.” He married in 1936, and studied law at Columbia University, “just stalling”. As a law student, Bester learned speed reading, and would read for hours in the main reading room of the New York Public Library. “I read everything and anything with magpie attention for a possible story idea”.

Eventually, he “drifted” into writing, and submitted a story with “the ridiculous title of ‘Diaz-X’” to Standard Magazines, which he chose because they had published Stanley Weinbaum’s “A Martian Odyssey”. Two of the editors, Mort Weisinger and Jack Schiff, took an interest in him (Bester claimed it was because they could discuss *Ulysses* with him) and showed him how to revise his story and resubmit it for a contest they were running. The rewritten and retitled story, “The Broken Axiom”, appeared in the April, 1939 issue of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, the winner of the magazine’s Amateur Short Story contest. (Years later, Bester interviewed Robert Heinlein and discovered that Heinlein had written his first science fiction story, “Lifeline”, for the same contest. But when Heinlein discovered that he could earn

more by having it published in *Astounding*, he submitted it there and had it accepted.)

Bester produced more than a dozen short stories between April, 1939 and June, 1942. Except for “Adam and No Eve” and “Hell is Forever”, they remain uncollected, since Bester later regarded them as “rotten” and “miserable”. Mort Weisinger, who bought many of these stories, was a major influence on Bester during this period. He introduced Bester to the informal lunch gatherings of the science fiction writers of this period, where he met Henry Kuttner, Edmund Hamilton, Otto Binder, Malcolm Jameson, Manley Wade Wellman, and others. When Weisinger and Schiff were hired by the Donenfelt Group to edit their comic book lines, they brought Bester along with them. This marked Bester’s first withdrawal from the science fiction field; he would not publish another science fiction short story until 1950.

Bester regarded his years writing comics as his apprenticeship: “The comics gave me an ample opportunity to get a lot of lousy writing out of my system.” Bill Finger, a star comics writer of the time, helped teach him the craft of writing comics, and the constraints of constructing a story told simultaneously in pictures and words was “wonderful training in visualization, and tight, crisp, action writing.” During the three or four years that Bester wrote for the comics, he worked on *Superman*, *Green Lantern*, *Captain Marvel*, and *The Star-Spangled Kid*, as well as “ghosting *Mandrake the Magician* and *The Shadow* for Lee Falk.”

Unfortunately for Weisinger and Schiff, “they trained me so well they lost me.” His wife, who was a radio actress at the time, recommended him as a writer when the radio programs she was working for had difficulty finding scripts. Bester submitted two initial scripts and soon became a regular contributor to *Nick Carter* and *Charlie Chan*, and also wrote for *The Shadow*, *Treasury Agent*, *Hercule Poirot*, the *Jimmy Melton Show*, and others. “The comic book days were over, but the splendid training I received in visualization, attack, dialogue, and economy stayed with me forever.” He even directed on one show.

After writing for radio, Bester moved on to writing for television, where he wrote for *The Doctor*, the *Paul Winchell Show*, and *Tom Corbett: Space Cadet*, among others. However, he found writing for TV much more constraining than writing for radio. Many of the effects and locations that the imagination could supply in radio were beyond the financial and physical resources of television. Moreover, he found television to be more conservative than radio overall, with an emphasis on what had already worked and a fear of the original. In 1950, while still writing for television, Bester started writing science fiction stories again, as "a safety valve, an escape hatch, a release from the constraints of script-writing."

Bester's return story was "Oddly and Id", which appeared in the August, 1950 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*. Though Bester had published in *Astounding* during the '40s, this story led to his first and only meeting with John W. Campbell, a meeting he would describe as "laughable and embarrassing" and "demented". Campbell wanted to discuss the story with Bester because he had just discovered Dianetics and felt that it rendered obsolete the Freudian terminology that Bester had used. Campbell summoned Bester to his office where he had him read the galleys of the very first Dianetics article. He then insisted that Bester eliminate all Freudian references in the story and changed the title to "The Devil's Invention".

For the next several years, Bester continued to work in television while also writing science fiction short stories. During this period Bester also produced his first science fiction novel, *The Demolished Man*, which won the first Hugo for Best Novel and which is still regarded as a classic by many. It had its origin in an idea that appeared in Bester's *Commonplace Book* in this form: "A crime story set in a future in which crime no longer exists because the police have time-scanners and can go back into the past and ferret out evidence to convict." Bester discussed the idea with Gold who liked it but felt that the time travel angle was hackneyed. In a series of back and forth discussions with Gold, Bester developed the concept of setting the murder in a society into which telepaths are fully integrated. Bester always expressed gratitude to Gold for his help with the novel (Gold even suggested changing the name from *Demolition*, Bester's working title) and dedicated it to him.

As a byproduct of the success of *The Demolished Man*, Bester was invited to meetings of the Hydra Club, where he met Theodore Sturgeon, James Blish, Anthony Boucher, Isaac Asimov, Avram Davidson, Judith Merril, and Lester del Rey.

In 1953, out of disgust with the television industry, Bester published the mainstream novel *Who He?* about TV. This book was significant in the development of Bester's career for two reasons. The sale of the movie rights to the novel brought him sufficient money that he and his wife could afford to take the next two years off and travel in Europe. It also brought him to the attention of *Holiday* magazine, which commissioned him to write an article on television from an insider's perspective.

During Bester's sojourn abroad, he worked on his second science fiction novel, *The Stars My Destination*, writing different drafts of it in Surrey, London, and Rome, where it was completed. The initial drafts in Britain are responsible for the many English names in the book, because Bester used English telephone directories and maps as sources. Bester also wrote frequent letters to Horace Gold, Anthony Bucher, and Willy Ley for scientific and technical information, since he found the English language libraries in Rome inadequate to his purposes. After returning to London, he met various British science fiction writers, including John Wyndham and Arthur C. Clarke.

At this point, Bester and his wife were seriously considering setting up permanent residence in London. However, *Holiday* magazine asked Bester to return to New York City and write a regular column on television. Bester accepted and began writing the Television portion of a column called "The Antic Arts." (Harry Kunnitz wrote Movies and Kenneth Tynan, Theater, very occasionally.) Eventually Bester took over "The Antic Arts" column and wrote on the arts in general, gradually moving into other areas as well. Finally, Bester became the senior literary editor at *Holiday*. (In this capacity, he claimed to have accepted a piece on sharks by Peter Benchley and then encouraged him to turn it into a novel; Benchley then produced *Jaws*.)

Bester found his work at *Holiday* tremendously stimulating. Not only did he get to meet and interview celebrities as diverse as Sid Caesar, Alistair Cooke, Mike Wallace, Milton Berle, Peter Ustinov, John Huston, Mort Sahl, Sophia Loren, Glenn Gould, Woody Allen, and "Sir Larry" Olivier, among many other, he also did research for columns that included flying on the very first test flight of the very first 747, test driving new cars from Detroit, etc. Bester gave the diversity of his magazine writing career as the reason for the second hiatus in his science fiction writing. "That's why his science fiction stopped. Reality had become so colorful and rewarding that he no longer needed the refuge of fantasy. That's where he's been, in the real world, the adult world, hopefully still learning, maturing, experimenting."

Before drifting away from regular science fiction writing, Bester did a stint as a book reviewer for *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, from October, 1960 through August, 1962. Bester's columns were rather controversial at the time, since he was often fairly critical of the defects of science fiction writing. "Unfortunately, my standards had become so high that I seemed to infuriate the fans who wanted special treatment for science fiction. My attitude was that science fiction was merely one of many forms of fiction and should be judged by the standards that apply to all." Nor did Bester go out of his way to calm those who were offended by his pronouncements. For example, in his February, 1961 column, after reviewing only one of the books that had come in that month (*The Year's Best SF*, #5, by Judith Merrill), he turned his attention to the general state of science fiction: "The rest of the books sent in for review this month were so bad that we've decided to ignore them, rather than pan them, and turn our attention to a discussion of the reasons why the books are so bad." The next month he continued on the same theme, creating a composite science fiction

author out of traits of seven of the best. And in June, 1961, seemingly in response to queries over what constraints might be placed on him, he stated imperiously: "In the first place, there is no editorial control over the book reviews. We review what we please, when we please, and how we please. Our spelling and syntax are occasionally revised, but always most apologetically. Our opinions are often contradicted, but only after they are safely in print." Witty stuff, but not the sort of thing to win friends in fandom.

In the mid-'70s, *Holiday* was sold and its editorial offices were moved to the midwest, where it lingered until 1977. Bester was unwilling to relocate and unimpressed with the new owners, and started writing science fiction seriously once again. He produced three novels and about a half dozen short stories during this period.

Bester died in 1987. He had been a Guest of Honor at Conspiracy '87, the 45th World Science Fiction Convention. He was also named the Philcon Grand Master the same year.

Alfred Bester: A Bibliography

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Richard M. Powers

David G. Hartwell

Richard Powers was the most skilled and inventive artist to work in the science fiction field, ever. Aside from the fact that he did more paperback covers than any other illustrator in the 1950s and 1960s, dominating the entire look of paperback sf for two decades, what he did was to introduce the visual language of surrealism into sf illustration and expand its possibilities permanently. His technical range and skill is awe-inspiring and his visionary, suggestive images continued to evolve, even into his fifth decade as a professional in the field. He did more than 800 SF paintings.

Shortly after the beginning of the paperback revolution, in the early 1950s, Ian Ballantine started Ballantine Books and chose Richard Powers as the artist to give his science fiction books a distinctive look. Ballantine had the radical idea that you could publish both in hardcover and paperback at once, and the early Ballantine Books had to compete both in classy bookstores (in those days bookstores sold no paperbacks) and on paperback racks in stations and drugstores. It took special art and special covers to do that and Richard Powers remained a continuing explosion of innovation throughout the decade, and then the next. His stylistic slant became so dominant and fashionable in the paperback market by the end of the 1950s that younger artists had to imitate the Powers look to sell. Both John Schoenherr and Jack Gaughan told me that they did this early in their careers.

I was a kid living in Lock Haven, PA in 1953 and had only been reading SF for a couple of years. One day I walked into the news store and the proprietor, knowing I would buy SF magazines, walked me over to the paperback rack and said I ought to try some. I bought two novels by writers whose short stories I liked, *Childhood's End* by Arthur C. Clarke and *More Than Human* by Theodore Sturgeon. I imprinted on Powers art as synonymous with wonderful science fiction. I went back and bought *The Space Merchants* and *Star Science Fiction #1* later, also with Powers covers, and then subscribed to the monthly Ballantine release mail order to be sure to get every one. Something about the art at the time made a deep and lasting impression on me. It was better that it was not as specific as the magazine covers. It was what really good SF was really about. And remained so – *The Stars My Destination* (Signet) and *The Sirens of Titan* (Dell) both had breathtaking Powers covers. He was everywhere with the best.

A decade later I had learned a bit about art (and my sister Janice had become an artist) and could recognize some of what made Powers different and better than other artists. And the first time I visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York I saw Powers all around me – works whose ideas he had imported into SF. When I began to attend SF conventions in the 1960s it was my dream to be able to own one of those miraculous works, and finally I was able to do so. And in meeting him my opinions of his importance to the contemporary vision of science fiction at its best were confirmed.

It is appropriate to mention that SF illustration was only a part of his artistic work – like John Schoenherr (a distinguished nature and animal painter), or Ed Emshwiller (who was internationally known as an experimental filmmaker). He did all the covers for the Dell classics line in the 1960s (portraits of great writers), he did many, many mainstream covers (for instance, the original cover for Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*), he did record jacket art for classical music, medical advertising illustration, and had a continuing and important career as a fine artist, with a specialty in seascapes (he's in two standard how-to books on seascape painting), and spent portion of his time on sculpture. He used to spend part of every winter in Jamaica and paint there, then in recent years spent winters in Spain with his daughter Beth and his granddaughter Adelina, also painting. He got into the biography of Kafka a few years ago and did many Kafka drawings and paintings.

He was a political cartoonist for a time for a distinguished newspaper, the *Berkshire Eagle*, in association with a column by his old friend Roy Hoopes (writing as Peter Potomac). Hoopes is a photographer and the biographer of James M. Cain and author of a number of other books. Powers also published some jazzy poetry.

Richard was a joker and a wise-cracker, given to the direct insult. He needled, in the kind of infield patter typical of a local softball game. Going out to dinner or sitting around over drinks was lively, funny, often fascinating. He grew up in Chicago, was a Golden Gloves boxer and studied at the Art Institute, then an army artist during World War II, with the Signal Corps in Astoria, Queens. After that he studied on the G.I. Bill and his brother Jack, also an artist, spent the summer once in the late 1940s on Monhegan Island off the coast of Maine, painting and swimming in the icy waters of the Atlantic. He was a big guy, more an athlete than an aesthete, with an echoing, brazen laugh. Say something stupid and he'd laugh and laugh and laugh.

He thrived on arguing about books and politics and ideas. There was always classical music playing in the background, or jazz (rock and folk didn't interest him), or a ball game, or one of his old Bob & Ray tapes.

We are fortunate to have had Powers in SF. Too much of the illustration done over the decades has been, simply put, unimaginative, in a field where we hold imagination as a primary virtue. But not Richard's work. He's done more respectable paintings that one would be proud to hang on the living room wall than any other artist, injected the whole language of modern art into the generally conservative field of paperback illustration, and set a standard of craft for other artists to work up to. He understood the imagery of science and technology as few other sf artists have.

Richard Powers was Artist Guest of Honor at Readercon 5.

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Michael Manley
Literary Magazine Review

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Adina Adler is often suspected of confusing reality with a role-playing game. She doesn't have time to explain the difference right now, though, because she has to go deal with some vampires. Or are they aliens?

Ellen Brody has spent a lot of her life doing everything that you can possibly do in the Theatre without getting arrested. She also studied Anthropology, and was urged by Louis Leakey to devote her life to the study of Sea Monkeys in the Indian Ocean. She needs more time to read.

Julianne Chatelain is an information designer (both online and in print) and book collector. Key words: APA-50, SIGCHI, feminism, St. Mary's, jchat@world.std.com.

Bryan Cholfin denies all responsibility.

Founder Bob Colby wishes to thank everyone involved in any way with Readercon since its inception for having made the last decade so entertaining. It's time to move on. Aficionados of typography who would like information on his next endeavor (Typecon) can e-mail him at bobcolby@tiac.net.

George Flynn copyedits and proofreads for NESFA Press and Necronomicon Press (besides the people who actually pay him to do it). He has more times than anyone else been Secretary of the World Science Fiction Society, which is amazingly trivial but looks great on resumes. And he still aspires to be an omnifan.

THE COMMITTED

As a user interface designer and usability engineer, Merryl Gross spends much of her time peering at computers and swearing. In a desperate attempt to get a life, she has agreed, along with Ellen Brody and Adina Adler, to chair Readercon 9. Her two cats have requested not to be mentioned.

During the past eight months B. Diane Martin has founded a computer and online game company with friends, bought a Victorian house, and lost 500 books in a flood. After Readercon, Diane plans to run the company, work with David Shaw to restore their new home, and spend more time in used book stores and cons looking for replacement books.

Craig R. McDonough

Lets see.

Probably Human.

Recovering AMWAY™ distributor, keeps the indentature contracts on several Teddy bears, and has contracts held on him by one wife (Leslie) and four cats (Leda, Edmund, Pywacket and Fal-

staff, in order of appearance in the household).

Drives a little car that does go "Beep, beep."

Works on local SF conventions whenever possible (or prudent).

David G. Shaw tried to get William Gibson to the last four Readercons. Now that he has succeeded, he plans to split his time between reading four years of backlogged books and restoring the hundred-year-old house he lives in with Diane Martin.

Eric Van is the author of *Ubik: Solved; Several Improvements to Bill James Runs Produced Formula; Rock, Punk, Pop: Some Formal Definitions; Speculations on the Role of Adenosinergic Presynaptic Inhibition in Depression and Consciousness, and Criminal Injustice: Why the Adversarial System and Trial by Jury are All Wrong*, none of which, however, he has actually written yet. Instead he continues to work patiently on *Eric M. Van: Case Notes*, a portrait significantly complicated ($p < .005$) by the refusal of the subject to sit still ($p > 500$ ml). He credits his continuing sanity to good genes, the scientific method, and Caffeine-Free Coca-Cola.

David Walrath was coerced onto the Readercon committee after Readercon 2, and has not Succeeded in escaping since. When not complaining about how much time he spends at work, adding to his collection of unread books and unheard CDs, or disturbing the Readercon committee by arriving late to meetings clothed and armed for a late 18th century revolution, David attempts to coordinate Readercon-at-con operations.

Amy West is an editor at a dictionary publisher in Western Massachusetts. She is also an academic medievalist, an amateur zymurgist, a paleontology aficionado, and a new mommy! She's also a telecommuting member of the Readercon Publicity Committee and Czar Nicholas' consuite lackey.

Karl R. Wurst is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Connecticut attempting to merge the fields of Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and Puppetry. This is his second Readercon (he was sucked into the Committee within minutes of his arrival at Readercon 7.) He reads mostly short fiction these days as the demands of new fatherhood and dissertation leave little time for longer works.

Nicholas K. Wurst is attending his first Readercon, his first convention ex utero. However he has been on the Committee for the last 11 months (nine of them in utero,) and is this year's Consuite Czar.

Terra Cholfin, Richard Duffy, Ozzie Fontecchio, Sheila Lightsey, Kathei Logue, John O'Neil, Barnaby Rapoport, Jamie Siglar, and Brian Youmans were unavailable for comment

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