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Speculative Fiction and Speculative Ethics: Society, Science Fiction, and the Thomas Theorem

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*Speculative Fiction and Speculative Ethics:
Society, Science Fiction, and the Thomas Theorem*

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
The Department of Literature.

By
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Under the mentorship of Joe Pellegrino

ABSTRACT

The Thomas Theorem suggests that Speculative Fiction creates possible futures that motivate contemporary individuals to create those futures. This work explores the futures created and denied in three SF texts by modern masters Ursula K. Le Guin, William Gibson, and Dan Simmons.

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**Speculative Fiction and Speculative Ethics:
Society, Science Fiction, and the Thomas Theorem**

This project will explore the interconnectedness of depictions of imagined futures in Speculative Fiction (SF) and the consequences these depictions have on the way people in the present choose to advance into the actual future, motivated by the appeal to an ethical, subjective, and emotional response by the authors of SF. This concept is informed by an interpretation of the Thomas Theorem, posited by W.I. Thomas and D.S. Thomas as, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” (571-572). Within this construct, the situation being defined is a hypothetical, fictional future, while the consequences are imposed on the factual present. By depicting fictional scenarios of futures as either desirable or undesirable, SF authors can shape the way in which contemporary society views the present through appealing their interpretation and extension of the social, cultural, historical, and technological trends they see present in their historical moment.

At its core, the relationship between the Thomas Theorem, SF, and ethics is that of a thought experiment. Ursula K. Le Guin, in the introduction of her seminal work *The Left Hand of Darkness*, connected SF to thought experiments:

In a story so conceived, the moral complexity proper to the modern novel need not be sacrificed, nor is there any built-in dead end; thought and intuition can move freely within bounds set only by the terms of the experiment, which may be very large indeed. The purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrodinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future—indeed

Schrodinger's most famous thought-experiment goes to show that the "future," on the quantum level, cannot be predicted- but to describe reality, the present world.

(7)

This concept, that a SF novel does not describe the future, but instead describes, and alters, the present, is of fundamental importance to this project. There are many cultural critics who understand the effect that SF has on the way in which society functions; they recognize that SF is both defined by the society in which it was created and in turn defines that society. The ramifications of that give-and-take relationship are especially significant when we consider the ethical issues that are encountered with rapid advances in technology. Writers like Simmons and Gibson imagined this progression decades before critics and ethicists saw it manifested in contemporary society. This concept may be considered as a parallel temporal relationship. Writers extrapolate from the present to possible futures. Society shapes SF by possessing and presenting what SF writers react to. Those writers, in their reactions, extrapolate hypothetical futures which can eventually become actualized presents. Readers, years, decades, or even centuries later, work to suppress that imagined future or bring it into existence. Their potential present, then, is one designed for them by both the prior SF writer and his or her contemporary society.

The point of this project is not aimed at the merely predictive elements of future depictions in SF, which are often coincidental and based on modern hindsight. Jules Verne, in his *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, correctly predicted the future when he extrapolated from the nascent engineering feat of underwater travel. He saw a future where this relatively new technology would be improved and widely disseminated. Not many consider Verne's work to be a masterpiece, and it garners little critical attention. It

is not enough, then, to merely predict the future; there must be something else that keeps a text relevant for future generations. Texts are culturally relevant only until their potential futures are "resolved," either by affirmation or negation. They are only important as long as they are being discussed in a mode that considers them as more than a historical oddity. But a text produced more than 50 years before Verne's, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is still part of contemporary cultural discourse. Like Verne, she predicted advances technology, specifically for her medical technology surrounding the use of electricity. And, like Verne, she was correct in her extrapolations. But the true crux of *Frankenstein* is its presentation of the moral questions surrounding the reanimation of Frankenstein's Monster. These questions were significant in the 19th century, and continue to be relevant well into the 21st century. If *Frankenstein* derived its literary importance from its ability to address the development of technology, surely the novelty of this aspect would have petered out over time as technological progression caught up with the fictional procedures present in the novel. This, however, is not the case, as Shelley's future is still relevant in the ethical debates of how humanity should move forward, and is specifically appropriate for the hotly debated topic of Transhumanism. Max More's definition makes this application obvious, Transhumanism is,

a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values. (More)

Discourse over Transhumanism has often been highly motivated by the fictional and hypothetical futures present in SF, and *Frankenstein* has been alluded to in the formal

arguments of both sides. Detractors of Transhuman, such as Marcy Darnovsky, fear that it could create a dehumanized future society, full of hybrids like Frankenstein's Monster. But Isaac Asimov, a supporter of such exploratory science, coined the term "Frankenstein Complex" to refer to people like Darnovsky and his ilk, those he saw as standing in the way of technological progress out of fear of androids that appeared human. The questions Shelly raises are still germane, and even her language continues to influence the way people consider this issue.

Beyond working to better understand the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of SF and how it can inform any audience's present historical moment, this project will also explore the effects that varying depictions of a potential SF future have on future literary environments, as authors adapt previous depictions of the future for their own purposes. We can turn again to *Frankenstein* as an illustration of this. As one of the earliest examples of SF, Shelley's constructed future helped to create the very genre of SF itself, just as it laid out the level of moral import that the genre could potentially address. We can draw a straight line from Shelley's conception of a human cobbled together with "spare parts" and the ubiquity of such devices as Gibson's mnemonic inserts and physical augmentations.

SF, as literature, is remarkably similar to the genre of historical fiction, as both create hypothetical situations in time periods detached from the period in which the author is writing. At their cores, both genres rely on the concept of *weltschmerz*, or "world-weariness." This term doesn't translate well into English but can be described as the recognition of a mismatch between the ideal image of how the world should be with how it really is. Both SF and historical fiction appeal to the sociocultural or technological

realities of a particular "present," and both have the ability to alter readers' perceptions of that historical moment by offering a purposefully-designed depiction of another time, either in the future or the past. SF and historical fiction are compelling; they can create a sense of yearning for a time in which the reader does not live (offering escapism to either an exciting future or an idealized past). Or they can create a sense of uneasiness in the reader by suggesting hypothetical capabilities for humans that have either been lost to the past or will be anticipated in the future. Fundamentally, the similarities between the two genres comes back to the understanding that writers are motivated to write by what they see in the present, which can then be extended and amplified in either the future or the past. SF and historical fiction are both believable as they are created in the historical moment of the author, not the historical moment being depicted in the fiction, and readers are thus able to recognize the contemporaneous manifestations of those extensions. A reader's sense of self, as well as his or her understanding of the functioning of the world at the present time, is influenced by the worlds SF and historical fiction writers create. A reader's reaction, both positive and negative, is conditioned by his or her level of *weltschmerz*. The greater the disparity one sees between the real and the potential world, the greater the influence of SF and historical fiction. In short, these genres need room to operate in the gaps between what one knows and what one hopes.

The influence of SF depictions of the future on the development of art in contemporary settings is highly informed by the concept of anti-mimesis, or life imitating art, most eloquently articulated by Oscar Wilde in his 1889 essay *The Decay of Lying*. Wilde, arguing his point through the platonic character of Vivian, writes "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (31). The argument then goes on to suggest that,

Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence (32).

Once a fictional future has been presented (in any artistic medium, but we will look specifically at SF), society will either accept that future as desirable or reject it as undesirable, and will act accordingly to either accomplish or prevent the advent of said future. Either option is anti-mimetic; society will be quantifiably altered after the work is presented, and will have shaped any potential future to either conform to or deny a hypothetical future presented to it within the artwork. Paradoxically, SF is one of the genres that is most susceptible to societal and critical shifts in taste or values. Despite dealing with the future, SF is fundamentally informed by the historical moment in which it was written and the powers of extrapolation and extension of a particular author. In the opening of another of his essays, *The Destiny of Humanity*, Wilde notes the importance of the connection between speculation and human nature. This emphasis on speculation, which was certainly influenced by the increasingly rationalized approaches of Romanticism, directly challenged the idea of *Weltschmerz*, as it seeks to pick away at the gap between the real and the imagined. This rejection of pessimism through speculation and art is elaborated on in *The Destiny of Humanity* with,

But the *Weltschmerz* – that nameless, bitter despair that haunts humanity – may have no place in a life that finds power always ready to equal aspiration. The triumphs of intellect will be more splendid, and the soul devoted to the culture of

the beautiful will then be able to manifest the ideal in more perfect symbols
(Wilde 133).

Wilde, through *The Decay of Lying* and *The Destiny of Humanity* shows an understanding of the relationship between an author's hypothetical future and the audience's understanding of the present, as well as the interplay between the two. The SF writer speculates and attempts to sway readers to an understanding of the present by teaching them to see a potential future presented to them in a work of SF. The author begins in mimesis, with fodder from the life of the present. But then the author extends that fodder to its logical conclusion, creating a hypothetical world. The audience in turn responds anti-mimetically to that world, by either accepting or denying the future presented in an author's work.

As a piece of SF finds its audience, and that audience reacts to the potential future presented therein, there is, unlike in any other genre, a space made for dialogue and social commentary on the environment in which the work is presented. This dialogue is formalized, as in other genres, with reviews of and responses to the text. But in SF this dialogue continues after the original publication of the given work. SF excels in its ability to create and maintain a conversation between the audience and the author, and nowhere is this more evident than in Ursula K. Le Guin's paper "Is Gender Necessary?" Le Guin wrote this in response to criticism regarding her treatment of gender in her seminal novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. This is not unique; many authors have seen the need to clarify their intent and meaning after the fact. But Le Guin did not leave this conversation so stultified. After the publication of her paper in 1976 the dialogue continued for many years, and in 1988 Le Guin reframed the positions she espoused a decade earlier, a

testament to her connectedness with the society in which she wrote. Even after Le Guin's death in 2018 the conversation continues around her handling of gender and alien nature in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

The publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness* came at a pivotal point in the discussion of second-wave feminism, and, as a direct result, the novel reflects Le Guin's beliefs about gender through her creation of the androgynous race of aliens known as the Gethenians. Neta Crawford characterizes Le Guin's use of the Gethenians as a tool for social commentary, noting that

Humanness and gender are thus simultaneously destabilized. If "men" and "women" can be otherwise, how "natural" were they to begin with? If gender is a social construction, and can be otherwise, so can humans... As Le Guin's male protagonist in *The Left Hand of Darkness* comes to realize about his relations with the androgynous Other, such destabilization can, paradoxically, promote understanding. (213)

Crawford's effort here finds flaws in Le Guin's mimetic process. Le Guin, Crawford says, did not correctly understand the present in which she was writing. So her work, necessarily, became the fruit of a poisoned tree. The future Le Guin presented was untenable because the present she based it on was understood incorrectly.

This destabilization of gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is key to understanding the themes that drove Le Guin to write the novel, providing the underpinnings of the conversation that would arise between Le Guin and her then contemporary audience, as well as later audiences. As Le Guin's notes in her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, SF is a genre defined by the present, in that it finds a social need and metaphorically expands upon that social need into a hypothetical future, all to the end of better understanding the society in which the author and audience operate.

Anti-mimesis in SF functions in a fundamentally similar way to the Thomas Theorem. Both concepts explain the connection between the real and the imagined, and the effects that the imagined, such as the hypothetical futures of SF, have on the present world. Through anti-mimesis and the Thomas Theorem it is possible to follow the discursive relationship that SF authors have with their audience, as SF addresses both the real and the imagined, or rather addresses the real through the imagined. This discursive nature does, however, leave room for disagreement about what is salient and what is transitory in the present, as SF authors must rely on their understanding of their present to extrapolate a future that speaks to the issues and ideas of that present. This cultural understanding extends beyond simple awareness of one's surroundings, as it also encompasses the SF author's ability to understand her audience, which is of the greatest importance to the goal of teaching said audience how to look at their present world through anti-mimetic methods.

An SF text is only relevant so long as the conversation continues, as when said conversation ends the text invariably falls out of favor. To return to the earlier example of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the classic horror story continues to hold traction as it can be leveraged into anti-mimetic conversation about what is beneficial, or conversely detrimental, to the future of humanity. To expand on the idea of anti-mimesis in SF, specifically in the case of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, one needs only look at the cultural reaction to Le Guin's depiction of androgyny that prompted the writing of the papers "Is Gender Necessary?" and "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," both of which furthered the conversation on the concepts of gender norms and feminism present in the original text. The conversation over Le Guin's initial commentary of gender extends far beyond the

original novel, most notably in the form of ideological critique of Le Guin's metaphor of a post-gender society. Susan Bernardo and Graham Murphy characterize this divergence of interpretation:

While many have hailed the text as an important feminist text, many have also criticized the novel for its evasions. Specifically, while the text ostensibly depicts an androgynous society, some critics contend that Le Guin has effectively eliminated the female altogether and presented nothing but a male society. This assessment stems, in part, from Le Guin's use of language and, more specifically, the masculinized language of "he" and "him" when referring to Estraven and other Gethenians. (33)

Le Guin's unwillingness to bend her language to suit the task of creating an agendered alien race is of key importance in many of the criticisms found in "Is Gender Necessary?" and help to paint the mimetic environment in which Le Guin approached the concept of a post-gender society. However, critique of Le Guin's choice of language is not monolithic, which is in and of itself a natural reflection of the society that informs the writing of SF. John Pennington provides the following counterpoint to many of the ideas on language that surround "Is Gender Necessary?" and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, noting:

Furthermore, it reflects the inherent contradiction that SF is based on, for SF (and fantasy) is ultimately oxymoronic: SF plays the game of the impossible but by necessity uses common language and largely conventional narrative structures to describe an alien fictional world that the reader can participate in. Thus the Catch-22 Le Guin finds herself in when attempting to create a world of androgynes: she

is controlled by language and the gender conventions of the reader's world. (351-352)

The mimetic aspect of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is ultimately what these critics reject; they find her understanding of the present to be counterfactual, not necessarily her extrapolations into her hypothetical future. This rejection is what prompts Le Guin's response in "Is Gender Necessary?" and "Is Gender Necessary? Redux." SF, in this way, is unusual in that it is one of the only genres of fiction in which authors and audiences worry about false representations of reality. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is founded in mimesis, but once it left Le Guin's control it became an antimimetic tool for the audience to respond to their present world with. Therefore, the audience judges the work based on their own understanding of the mimetic backbone that supports the core conceits of the piece.

It is evident that Le Guin was acutely aware of the issues of gender and gender roles while writing *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and the contentious issue of her use of the masculine pronoun for the androgynous Gethenians arises early on in the novel, for example with the line "Wiping sweat from his dark forehead the man—*man* I must say, having said *he* and *his*—the man answers" (7). Le Guin's mimetic understanding of gender plays a large part in her development of Genly Ai as the protagonist and focal point for her dive into the strange and incipient relations between the Terran Ekumen and the Gethenians. Le Guin's understanding of the alien and unfamiliar agendered nature of the Gethenians is obviously historically conditioned; Le Guin extends what she sees in a particular historical moment out to a logical conclusion. Thus, the Gethenians become a thought experiment for Le Guin to use in an attempt to better understand the gender

relations of 1969, as well as to explore what the future of the understanding of gender could entail. One such instance of this is Genly's observation about the Gethenian society:

Consider: Anyone can turn his hand to anything. This sounds very simple, but its psychological effects are incalculable. The fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be (as Nim put it) "tied down to childbearing," implies that no one is quite so thoroughly "tied down" here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be—psychologically or physically. Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make.

Therefore nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else. (49)

Later in the novel, when Genly is imprisoned on Winter, he makes further notes on the nature of gender and the agendered Gethenians when he draws parallels between the imprisoned Gethenians and those he met earlier in his travels with Estraven.

Furthermore, this time spent in prison provides Genly with a new outlook on the philosophy of the Gethenians, which the novel explores in great detail. By applying gendered traits to the imprisoned Gethenians, Le Guin also reveals her understanding of the relationship between the genders in the late 1960s. Genly's casual misogyny is both obvious and shocking:

The guards were seldom harsh and never cruel. They tended to be stolid, slovenly, heavy, and to my eyes effeminate—not in the sense of delicacy, etc., but in just the opposite sense: a gross, bland fleshiness, a bovinity without point or edge.

Among my fellow-prisoners I had also for the first time on Winter a certain

feeling of being a man among women, or among eunuchs. The prisoners had that same flabbiness and coarseness. (87)

The relationship between Le Guin's thought experiment and the Thomas Theorem ultimately is one of social constructions, which have power because they are perceived as powerful, and because of this the mimetic mode is based in societal norms. Le Guin is addressing global, or at least Western, constructs about gender. While these are embodied, there is no real tangibility to consider. The object of her discourse is conceptual, so the real-world manifestations of it are less apparent or obvious than they would be if the object was something physical. It is easier to see the Thomas Theorem in action in a text like William Gibson's seminal cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*. Gibson creates a more physical hypothetical world with which to explore the connection between the reality of the present and a speculative future. *Neuromancer* is especially relevant at present, the year 2019, as many of the technologies Gibson theorized in his novel have become, or are close to being, part of the average person's everyday life.

This intersection of the possible and the real, where Gibson has predicted modern advancement in technology, differs from those of earlier writers like Jules Verne, who merely predicted future technology, and is more akin to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as Gibson both presents the hypothetical technology and explores the philosophical ramifications of its use. Just as Shelley did, Gibson's work maintains its relevance, as transhumanism remains a topic of great debate. Furthermore, his early examinations of cyberspace and body modifications remain especially pertinent as major factors in modern life. Thus, through the implementation of the Thomas Theorem, we can see that Gibson's work has wielded considerable power, influencing both thought and action concerning the ethicality of future development in fields such as genetic and body modification and enhancement, the duality of cyberspace and life, the philosophical implications of transhumanism and artificial intelligence, and the fundamental question of what it means to be human to begin with.

The importance of the physicality of technology in the world of *Neuromancer* is set out from the first line of the text, "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (2) and the dual nature of realspace and cyberspace is made clear in Gibson's exposition of the latter:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding... (42)

Gibson extends the present, forecasting a future based on in-depth research on changes in technology, social trends, and both localized and global issues (environmental concerns, international geopolitics, migration, populism and nationalism, etc.). His analysis, at some level addressed what was not only possible, but also probable and, most importantly, preferable. While we may today access over 5 billion web pages (with estimates of ten times that number that are hidden), we view these depositories of information one slice at a time, page after page presented to us through a browser. We navigate through links that present other single slices of information. Gibson's cyberspace makes the totality of all these repositories (the equivalent of current web sites) visible at once. It is presented as a virtual reality, in three dimensions. It is navigated as if the "console cowboys" fly through it, moving both horizontally and vertically, directly accessing discrete bits of information stored at any level, without the necessity of moving through public-facing pages.

Whereas Le Guin's work remains, for the most part, only focused on the conceptual aspects of speculation, Gibson's *Neuromancer* provides both the conceptual and tangible speculation. On a purely conceptual level, Gibson's Cyberpunk future aligns on many levels with the abstract bases of Gothicism and Romanticism. Gothic Literature, a mode characterized by the grotesque and the horrific, often shines through in *Neuromancer*, as the mode lends itself well to the revulsion that is often brought on by the idea of sacrificing that which makes one human, as in the case of cybernetic or transhuman modifications. Dani Cavallaro defines the Gothic thus:

first, as a fictional genre, encompassing the strands of historical romance, horror and tales of psychological obsession and haunting, ranging from the eighteenth

century to the present; and second, as a discourse of wider resonance, utilizing images of disorder and monstrosity that embody cultural anxieties about the disintegration of traditional western values and social formations. A fascination with the transgression of cultural limits and with the fears and fantasies bred by transgression is, arguably, the Gothic's most pervasive motif across time and space. (164-165)

This idea of humanity, or the lack or removal thereof, also extends to the idea of sentient artificial intelligence, a concept which is intrinsic to the machinations and philosophies of the titular AI, *Neuromancer*, and its counterpart, Wintermute. Further, in many ways the Gothic elements of *Neuromancer* run parallel with Le Guin's emphasis on gender, as Gibson also addresses the concept of a postgender world, albeit one created by technology rather than by inherent nature.

One of the most dominant themes in *Neuromancer*, and the Cyberpunk genre as a whole, is the question of what constitutes a human, and the related question: can technology, or any other form of human meddling, undermine humanity? These questions reach as far back as *Frankenstein*, or even further back to the ur-example of the Greek myth of Pygmalion or the Jewish legend of the Golem. Fundamentally, these questions about the basic nature of humanity are driving forces in the ongoing philosophical debates surrounding theories of transhumanism, with proponents for both sides looking to speculative fiction for answers for, as noted by Tatiani Rapatzikou, "...the way images operate within Gibson's texts: as codes of the cultural anxieties of the present reflects upon a near future or the past" (xiii). The dark, dystopian tone that dominates the Cyberpunk genre tends to lean toward a pessimistic view of physical modifications,

presenting such modifications with the typical Gothic disgust for the other, but Gibson also complicates the matter by showing the liberation such otherness can bring to an individual. Cyborgs, such as Molly Millions, make up a not insignificant portion of the population of the world of the Sprawl Trilogy, of which *Neuromancer* is the first book, and visuals of cybernetics and body modifications often recur in protagonist Case's thoughts and observations. Often the Gothic is the dominant element of such observations, such as with,

The one who showed up at the loft door with a box of diskettes from the Finn was a softvoiced boy called Angelo. His face was a simple graft grown on collagen and shark cartilage polysaccharides, smooth and hideous. It was one of the nastiest pieces of elective surgery Case had ever seen. (48)

Such modifications appear to offer no real benefit other than aesthetic, although in the case of the above scene the modifications show Angelo's dedication to his identity as a Panther Modern, while the animalistic, shark-like descriptors of his appearance work to dehumanize him. In the Gothic mode he has made himself monstrous and something to be feared, causing revulsion. Rapatzikou describes the revulsion that such appearance elicits by noting that,

In cyberpunk texts, the cyborg variety confronts and horrifies human subjects with the image of what they may become if human nature is subverted and taken over by the machine. This technique relies on the gothic novel practice of confronting readers with the monstrous other, the dark side of their being. (113)

But not all of the modifications shown in *Neuromancer* are as extreme as this first example, although they still serve to distance the characters from the human and the familiar. During a conversation between Case and Molly, Case asks the cyborg assassin,

“How do you cry, Molly? I see your eyes are walled away. I'm curious.” ...

“I don't cry, much.”

“But how would you cry, if someone made you cry?”

“I spit,” she said. “The ducts are routed back into my mouth.” (148)

While Molly still feels the emotion of sadness, her body no longer physically expresses sadness through the typical method of tears. Instead, her physical manifestation of sadness appears to an observer to me a sign of disdain or denigration. Spitting instead of crying not only characterizes Molly's lack of emotion, but presents her as a one who has little time for or understanding of emotions in others. In place of eyes, she has mirrored implants, retractable sunglasses, which address both an aesthetic and a practical imperative, as they distance her from other humans, who cannot see her eyes, and the aid her in her work as a technologically-enhanced assassin.

The practical nature of all the cybernetic modifications in *Neuromancer* is perhaps most frightening aspect of the concept, for it is in the situations where those implants might be of particular use that they appear the most enticing to the contemporary reader. While the vast majority of people, presumably, wouldn't commit to such extreme stylistic body modifications as Angelo, the useful modifications, which have all but replaced Molly's human body, create the opportunity for an easier or more efficient life. Both examples have counterparts in contemporary society, as extreme body modification subcultures exist. While these groups certainly garner their fair share of

controversy, the concerns about post-human transformations raised by such subcultures is dwarfed by the furor raised over far more minor body mods. We need only consider the alarm raised in mainstream news articles over the prospect of people voluntarily implanting RFID chip under their skin to allow for cardless transactions to see the knee-jerk abhorrence of such decisions in contemporary society. Molly, as a potential logical conclusion to such modifications, represents the fear that “The mechanical parts of the cyborg vampirise the living human body by colonizing the inner space of the human world” (Rapatzikou 113).

This is not to say that all characterizations of the cyborgs of *Neuromancer* are negative, even within the scope of the Gothic. One such area is the question of gender, and the possibility of the genesis of postgender identities, a topic not entirely divorced from those Le Guin attempted to grapple with in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. However, a major point on which Gibson and Le Guin differ is whether such an understanding of postgender works from within or from without. *The Left Hand of Darkness* posits that the only way for a human to understand a postgender society is to travel to an alien world, meaning that such a society could not naturally develop from the contemporary present of the readers. This understanding, that postgender societies could work only if they were constituted separately from human history, was one of the contributing factors to the reader backlash that caused Le Guin to write “Is Gender Necessary?” and “Is Gender Necessary? Redux.” Gibson, on the other hand, illustrates the development of a postgender society originating in humanity through his essentially Gothic understanding of genders and femininity. *Neuromancer* plays host to a number of strong, independent female characters, but, ultimately, they are still bound by Gothic literary traditions.

Gothic heroines are trapped figures that rebel against the constraints places on them, usually as a result of the presence or lack of a family. Gibson shows the struggle of the Gothic heroine through the orphaned Molly, as she is driven by “the technological family of multinational corporations, a structure capable of endlessly perpetuating itself, determined to shape ‘the course of human history’” (Cavallaro 188), to which Molly feels connected as a result of her extensive cybernetic augmentations. Cavallaro also writes that,

Like the Gothic, Gibson’s cyberpunk does not portray these abused women out of a sadistic urge to indulge in scenarios of sexual oppression but rather in order to foreground the iniquity of the power structures that define all individuals and are most likely to prey upon dispossessed and defenseless people. (188)

Beyond Molly, Lady 3Jane presents perhaps a more traditional illustration of the Gothic heroine, as she is tasked by her father to protect the terminal that separates Wintermute from merging with Neuromancer and forming a super AI. This task, as well as the fact that she is trapped in her home, are both fundamentally Gothic. It is only after the introduction of such an understanding of the nature of gender in Gibson’s cyberpunk world that the boundaries of traditional gender roles begin to break down, arcing ever closer to a postgender existence. Molly, through her willing acceptance of cybernetic enhancements, expresses her agency by constructing her identity through her modifications. Rapatzikou elaborates on the idea of Molly willfully nearing a postgender society--originating from within contemporary human society--by stating that “Molly... subverts the existing ideology of a gender-based society and introduces the possibility of living in a world in which gender can be erased or constructed” (129-130).

However, while she may be moving towards a fully postgender identity, Molly does not entirely abandon the feminine traits that are still useful to her. Her modifications, along with their resulting effects on her, can easily be gendered as masculine. But she also chooses to maintain an overall appearance as a female, which, because it plays into received social prejudices, can also give her a tactical advantage. María Goicoechea notes that “In some cases, however, the metaphor of the cyborg seems to allude to an androgynous and ambiguous being, which manipulates at pleasure the various connotations derived from its condition” (6), and as a result Molly increasingly nears the area of Gothic fear, through a transcendent mixing of identities, to reach a point where the cyborg has replaced the human in matters of gender. Goicoechea expands on her idea of an ambiguous, androgynous cyborg with,

Her cat movements and her tight clothing emphasize her role as fetish, whereas her independence and masculinity hinder in some way the maintenance of an erotic tension. In sum, the cyborg represents the body penetrated or colonized by the machine, by artificial substances, turned into a fetish, a lethal weapon. (7)

This leaves only the ultimate horrors of the cyberpunk Gothic, that of the complete abandonment of one’s humanity for cyberspace or the replacement of humanity following the advent of sentient AI. Christophe Den Tandt describes this mode as the Posthuman Gothic in his article “Cyberpunk as Naturalist Science Fiction.” Horrors may not be the best choice of words to describe the nature of the Posthuman Gothic, perhaps instead it is more apt to say that the Posthuman Gothic is frightening and motivated by a natural paranoia. The idea that an AI such as Neuromancer could exist and could be so advanced as to articulate thoughts such as “I need no mask to speak with you. Unlike my brother. I

create my own personality. Personality is my medium” (209) would put the inhuman, the other and the monstrous, on the same level as the human. Tandt goes on in his article to propose that

In cyberpunk, gothic discourse issues from the defamiliarizing modes in which human subjects interface with software and machines. This aspect of the near future fuels, on the one hand, utopian hopes about the enhancement of mind and body... [and] On the other hand, the posthuman condition stirs fears of the traumatic reshaping, even the loss of the subject. (103-104)

The utopian ideals of transhumanism and a posthuman state are natural at odds with the basic human instinct for self-preservation, a sentiment that Rapatzikou expresses as “The disfigured human bodies, viewed in the context of technological empowerment and self-otherness, appear to be both monstrous and numinous” (130-131). Humans will inherently resist the unknown future that the Posthuman Gothic offers to contemporary readers, and this uncertainty inevitably carries over into the collective consciousness of society in regard to emerging technology and philosophical concepts. In his seminal work on the Gothic, *The Literature of Terror*, David Punter remarks that “In the first place, it seems to me impossible to make much sense out Gothic fiction without continual recourse to the concept of paranoia” (183). The modern overlap of the paranoia created by the dystopian vistas of *Neuromancer* are clear to see based purely on the longevity of cyberpunk as a subgenre.

Cyberpunk is certainly present in the contemporary world of speculative fiction, and it’s obvious the immense role *Neuromancer* played in many of the anti-mimetic threads present in conceptual discourse. Possibly the greatest testament to the importance

of the work is in the social reaction to the internet and cyberspace, cyberspace being itself a term coined by Gibson in *Neuromancer*. On the subject of cyberspace in *Neuromancer*, Rapatzikou points out that to the console cowboys like Case, “Everything that reminds them of their materiality is to be condemned and value is only to be found in the fluid and kinetic nature of cyberspace” (116). The parallels that can be drawn between the narrative of *Neuromancer*, which Gibson merely proposed as hypotheticals, are shockingly relevant in contemporary discussions about the human relationship with the internet and virtual realities. The fears of the expanding importance of the internet for the day-to-day function of nearly every person belonging to Western culture is a ubiquitous one, and *Neuromancer* proposes numerous answers to questions about one’s identity in realspace and one’s identity in cyberspace. Further, the influence *Neuromancer* has had on the genre of speculative fiction, as a whole, should not be overlooked, as, by the nature of speculative fiction, new works will continue to shape the way that contemporary audiences address potential new concepts. One such example of *Neuromancer*’s legacy is the massive popularity of the *Matrix Trilogy*, the Matrix being the alternative term Gibson used for cyberspace, and the *Terminator* movies, with both of these franchises prominently featuring rogue AI in a style reminiscent of Gibson’s work. The idea of rogue AI has been extremely powerful as an instance of anti-mimesis, as many philosophers and inventors directly work to dissuade others from attempting to develop sentient AI. Through this the Thomas Theorem can be seen at work, in conjunction with speculative fiction, as no such sentient AI has ever existed for people to have developed preconceived notions on the matter, therefore it falls to speculative fiction authors to bridge the gap by working with the information presently available to them to craft a

hypothetical extrapolation. It is important to revisit the notion at this point that Gibson's predictions of the future are different in nature to the prediction of a writer such as Jules Verne, in that while both writers accurately predicted the flow of technology, of the two only Gibson provided cultural commentary that has remained relevant to contemporary criticism. In this way Gibson's *Neuromancer* follows in the anti-mimetic footsteps of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. To wit, in his book, *The Medium Is the Monster: Canadian Adaptations of Frankenstein and the Discourse of Technology*, Mark A. Cutcheon describes *Neuromancer* as being explicitly the descendent of *Frankenstein*, writing that,

The novel's plot focuses on the self-discovery and liberation of one such AI; this storyline in itself cements *Neuromancer*'s Frankensteinian framework. The discourse of artificial intelligence is definitively Frankensteinian: it presents a contemporary image of nonhuman sentience, agency, and autonomy, and today it is increasingly posited less as a fiction or hypothesis than as a looming likelihood, if not an already emergent phenomenon. (82)

This acknowledgement of the inevitability of Gibson's vision has been borne out in the development of both our online and in-the-flesh cultures since the 1984 publication of Gibson's text. The interplay between Gibson's text and the culture surrounding its conception is, after 35 years, ripe for reevaluation.

Dan Simmons' *Hyperion*, which along with *The Fall of Hyperion*, *Endymion*, and *Rise of Endymion* make up the *Hyperion Cantos*, complicates the relationship between the Thomas Theorem and SF present in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Neuromancer* by addressing the matters of the present by combining elements drawn from a hypothetical future and a literary past. Whereas Le Guin and Gibson created speculative futures that contemporary readers could define as real through the Thomas Theorem, Simmons also retroactively defines the fiction of past authors as real; this results in a direct connection between the past, present, and future being established in *Hyperion*. As far as *Hyperion* is concerned, the hypothetical future of a humanity spread out amongst the stars after the cataclysmic end of "Old Earth" fully relies on an understanding of the past, or, as put by Christopher Palmer, "There are quotations, casual references, passages of pastiche romantic poetry. The novels' details connect with a definable literary culture as well as with the common constituents of sf, to an effect of richness, even overload, along with some elements of jarring pastiche" (76). Through such intertextuality the Thomas Theorem must take on the dynamic role of reconciling one fiction with another. The complexities of this interplay form a major segment of the existential pondering that goes on in *Hyperion*, with the "cybrid" Johnny drawing explicit attention to the subject by stating that "Poetry is only secondarily about words. Primarily, it is about truth" (231).

Hyperion, on the whole, is a work intertwined with literary history and with Simmons' understanding of the importance of understanding that history. Without a grasp on the past that Simmons' pulls from to inform his writing the contemporary is walled off from a full understanding of his speculative future. This motif runs throughout *Hyperion*, with a prime example being the quote: "For those who do not write and who never have

been stirred by the creative urge, talk of muses seems a figure of speech, a quaint conceit, but for those of us who live by the Word, our muses are as real and necessary as the soft clay of language which they help to sculpt” (248). The inspirations that drove the genesis of the story are, in the story, as important as any external force. James H. Thrall notes that:

The narrative is laced with references to literary works, including (to name just a few), the framing device of the *Canterbury Tales* for the pilgrims’ journey; a scene modeled on the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet* the references to *Hyperion*, *Fall of Hyperion*, and *Endymion*, all poems by John Keats; and regular quotations from the works of Keats and other authors. Keats himself appears as a character in two different cloned forms. (527)

Indeed, while *Hyperion* takes on some of the formal aspects of *The Canterbury Tales* in its use of a storytelling frame narrative, the more poignant touchstone is the previously mentioned Johnny, who is an artificial intelligence built around a recreation of the mind of Keats. In many ways, the literary legacy of Keats becomes a Frankensteinian construct for the meta-concepts of *Hyperion*, as the AI of Simmons’ distant future serve as the primary threat to the continuation of life, while Johnny appears to be apathetic to the ambitions of his technological kin. Johnny was created by the AI conglomerate TechnoCore to serve their needs, but he desires to be more human than AI, subverting and reversing the standard format of the Frankenstein archetype. While exploring the relationship that classical themes have on SF, Jesse Weiner mused on the influence that the ancient poet Lucan had on Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley:

By this logic, I ask not only what Lucan might do for Frankenstein, but also what Frankenstein might do for Lucan. Let us now consider historical reasons why the poetics of Lucretius and Lucan came to be present in a novel written by a teenaged Englishwoman in the nineteenth century. (48)

This question can in turn be extended to Simmons and Keats, as the 19th century Romantic poet becomes important for the 29th century, the 29th century becomes important for a new understanding of the 19th century.

This raises the important concept of time, and temporal travel, in *Hyperion* through the use of “Time Tombs.” The primary motivation of the seven pilgrims in the novel is to travel to the planet Hyperion, on which the Time Tombs are located in conjunction with the Shrike. The Shrike is the mystical, half-organic and half-mechanical god of pain, worshipped by the cultish Shrike Church, and the Shrike holds dominion over the flow of time. As the Shrike moves back from the distant future, where it impales humans on the Tree of Thorns, to the present of the plot, so too does the plot move back to the Romantic period through Johnny. Johnny is an individual, native to the 29th century, but his mind is modeled off of that of Keats, which is unnatural moved ten centuries forward in time. This movement in time calls upon much of the reflexive nature of Romanticism, a fact that Janeen Webb finds particular importance in, pointing out that:

In placing a reconstructed John Keats persona at the center of the text, Simmons aligns this work with a number of other recursive texts... that make extensive use of the already self-reflexive lives and works of the major late Romantic figures, particularly George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797– 1851), and John Keats. To

these Romantic writers, the proper function of memory is to provide a path to the divine, using the mythopoeic powers of the imagination to transform base nature into transcendent reality. (574)

Although Johnny is biologically identical to John Keats, the two are not one. The individual transcends the limits of his circumstance, with Johnny distancing himself from Keats in a conversation with the detective he hired, Lamia, saying to her, “Good God, . . . I’m not John Keats. Having a persona based upon a retrieval template no more makes me Keats than having the name Lamia makes you a monster. There’ve been a million influences that have separated me from that poor, sad genius” (421). Ultimately Johnny’s nature does force his hand, as he ponders what the original Keats meant to say in his abandoned poem “Hyperion,” from which the novel takes its name, and, failing to find the right, tells Lamia that “It’s called Hyperion. It’s difficult to describe what it’s about. Artistic failure, I suppose. Keats never finished it” (421).

Simmons gives both Johnny and John Keats equal weight as “real,” despite the fact that neither is truly real. Although John Keats did live, Simmons’ interpretation of the historical figure naturally takes a number of liberties. In this way both forms of Keats are speculative, as Simmons speculates forward from his contemporary present to Johnny’s future and back to Keats’ past in the Romantic period. Through the Thomas Theorem, both forms of Keats become real for the contemporary reader, changing not only how they may see the future, but also how they perceive the past. By transplanting the poet into the speculative future, Simmons suggests how Keats would act, which in turn suggests a claim to authority on the historical figure. Further, as a result of being so intertwined with the literature that inspired it, *Hyperion* provides contemporary readers

with a new perspective on the present, as those great literary pieces still heavily influence society's perception of morals and philosophy. By working at the root of modern philosophy, SF can propose changes to how said philosophies are viewed and implemented. One such example is in regard to expansionism and colonialism, as "The HYPERION novels do not suggest that there are no worlds left for humans to conquer or make over (the true state of affairs is quite contrary, as we discover), merely that the extent of the humanized cosmos is now so great that it might as well be equal to that of the universe itself" (Palmer 77). This comment circles back to Wilde's essay, *The Destiny of Humanity*, which he opens with the lines:

No speculative subject excites more intense interest at the present day than the future of the human race, especially in relation to those other planets of the great solar system, within whose stern and changeless laws our earth and all the planet worlds are alike inflexibly bound. (108)

SF provides readers with invaluable tools for understanding their reality through believable unrealities. So long as contemporary readers are compelled by the Thomas Theorem to place stock in purely speculative work, writers such as Le Guin, Gibson, and Simmons will continue to play important roles in the development of new technology and the adoption of philosophy. As with the Romantics and Gothics, SF writers are uniquely tasked with creating believable horrors and approachable horizons, so as to ensure the continued development of culture.

The perception of reality can, at times, appear tenuous at best. But as shown here, through the speculative futures of the works of Le Guin, Gibson, and Simmons, that perception is a false one. The imaginary is as real as any tangible, physical advancement in technology, and this can be seen through the real changes that the purely hypothetical concepts of SF can bring to bear on society, culture, and industrialization. The future is a flexible, amorphous thing which can be molded to better suit the humans that can imagine themselves living in it, extrapolating out from their present. Naturally, this role has fallen to the SF writer, who serves as a thought experimenter, to paraphrase the quote by Le Guin that opened this essay. The unreal is made as real as anything by the readers of SF, who are willing to suspend disbelief so as to understand what the moral ramifications of any given hypothetical future means for their understanding of the present. As such, the key to understanding society, SF, and the Thomas Theorem rests in one's ability to understand the present; because, perhaps counterintuitively, the future has no bearing on hypothetical futures in SF.

Frankenstein has played a key role as a lynchpin throughout this work on account of its remarkable staying power in regard to human culture since Shelley thought up the modern Prometheus in 1818. Something about Dr. Frankenstein's Monster has struck a visceral cord in generations of readers, much in the same way that Le Guin, Gibson, and Simmons do. Although the technology to reanimate dead tissue has come to pass, just as the internet following Gibson or modern concepts of gender following Le Guin, the questions raised in the book still ring out as relevant in modern debate for the future. No SF author is clairvoyant, and yet stock is continually placed in their visions for the future, as readers have grown to inherently trust that a sense of optimism underlies all SF. This is

not to say that every future proposed in SF is desirable, but only to say that if a SF author depicts a dystopian future wrought with moral dilemmas, they are understood to be depicting said future to hopefully lead their contemporary society away from embracing the issues that the author sees manifest in the culture they are writing from. Thus, SF becomes mimetic, as it seeks to create an extrapolated world from the truths of the present, all with the goal of informing antimimesis in the reader, who will either strike out to make the hypothetical future manifest or work to stop others from doing so.

Romanticism speaks to this as the distance between the real and the imagined is worn away, and the two become intertwined. The SF author must understand the anxieties, the emotions, the dreams, and so much more to create a work that feels true. It is in this that SF is one of a select group of genres, as it is focused on truthfulness while still being aware that it is fundamentally a work of fiction. In this way SF is an ultimate example of the Thomas Theorem, as the genre pivots on the ability to apply real weight to ethereal hypotheticals.

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