

Literary and
Cultural Theory



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A Sense of Apocalypse

Technology, Textuality, Identity



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EDITION

Introduction

The Argument

Throughout human history, we have been dependent on machines to survive. Fate, it seems, is not without a sense of irony.

— Morpheus, *The Matrix*¹

The overall assumption underlying this book is that of a multi-layered paradigmatic change in our thinking of technology, the subject, the relationship between the two, and the ways in which this relationship is represented. The paradigm shift in question, though largely coinciding with numerous postmodern and poststructuralist postulates, is primarily concerned with the impact that postindustrial technologies exert upon experience and, by extension, upon the process of identity formation. This process, combining cultural theory with cultural praxis, is considered here against the background of representational and discursive practices it provokes and informs.

Both elements, the rampant development of electronic technologies and the theoretical reconfiguration of the subject's premises, not only narrow the distance between theory and practice but, first of all, force us to redefine and re-interpret a large number of discursive claims regarding those ideas which play a formative role in the process of identity construction. This is because one of the most distinctive tones of the discourse in question, borne out of a peculiar clash of postmodern theory with visual and textual representations, is the pervasive sense of distrust towards traditional modes of depicting such cornerstones of identity as space, body, locale, relationship with nature, reliability of the sign and, last but definitely not least, the status of the real.

The conviction of technology's fundamental influence is supported by the belief that contemporary technologies, particularly those of electronic origin, long ago ceased to function as mere tools whose sole purpose is to facilitate human daily operations. Instead, they have become the very core of both present and future systems, "allowing for the existence of the social as such."² Not only did those technologies' ubiquity alter and expand traditional modes of communication, social relationships and modes of exercising political power, but it also significantly reduced the gap between the born and the produced. The traditional dichotomy of human vs. technological has been vividly challenged and in many cases rendered non-existent. Whether

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1. Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski, *The Matrix*, Groucho II Film Partnership/Silver Pictures/Village Roadshow Pictures, USA, 1999.
 2. Mark Hansen, *Embodying Technesis. Technology Beyond Writing* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 3.

we adopt Marshall McLuhan's enthusiastic view that current technological capabilities serve as "the extensions of man,"³ or, on the contrary, conform to the voices of anxiety announcing the decay and weakening of human control, it seems inevitable that "[t]echnology and the human are no longer so dichotomous."⁴ As J. G. Ballard famously put it: "[s]cience and technology multiply around us. To an increasing extent they dictate the languages in which we speak and think. Either we use those languages, or we remain mute."⁵

Seen from this angle, technology becomes the subject's new *natural environment*, dramatically restructuring human cognitive horizon. This restructurisation involves, to use Mark Hansen's term, a process of *technesis*, or "putting-into-discourse of technology."⁶ As he explains, "[v]iewed in this manner, technologies generate new types of human (or posthuman) embodiment that should lead us to question the privilege we grant thought in determining what constitutes identity and agency."⁷ In other words, technology plays a fundamental role in the process of identity formation through a direct influence upon the subject's cognitive apparatus, thus questioning the legitimacy of the opposition between the human and the technological.

Yet, if the new subject is to emerge or be constructed successfully, the old one must be erased effectively. And this is where the metaphorically understood notion of apocalypse, supported by textual and representational strategies of the science fiction discourse, comes into play. SF's main preoccupation has always been a paradigmatic shift, whether spatio-temporal or philosophical. As Scott Bukatman maintains: "[s]cience fiction was always predicated upon continuous, perceptible change [...]. In its most radical aspect [it] narrates the dissolution of the most fundamental structures of human existence."⁸

It is precisely this radical gesture of dissolving "the most fundamental structures" which justifies the applicability of apocalypse as an operational metaphor. A powerful signifier, apocalypse remains double-coded; it denotes violent decomposition of the old and at the same time *reveals* the emergence of the new. The concept's inherent incompleteness, coupled with its narrative potential (further discussed in chapter one) implicitly problematises the legitimacy of any "fundamental structures" and, as a result, locates apocalypse in the context of transitional narratives, highlighting its inevitable presence at all moments of paradigmatic change.

3. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 17.
4. Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 5.
5. J. G. Ballard, "Introduction to *Crash*," *Re/Search* 8/9 (1984), 96–97. Available at: <http://www.ballardian.com/introduction-to-crash>
6. Hansen, *Embodying Technesis*..., 4.
7. Hansen, *Embodying Technesis*..., 6.
8. Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner* (London: BFI Publishing, 1997), 8.

Technological fantasies, though often trivialising the issue of paradigm switch due to commercial requirements, vividly narrate numerous aspects and consequences of technologically-stimulated evolution. Those consequences' complexity, combined with the newly emerging technological contours of experience, provide the foundation of both the "end" of the pre-electronic subject, and the subsequent "birth" of a new one—approached and defined against the background of a digital horizon.

Still, the scope of technologically motivated changes goes far beyond the already-mentioned stability of social and economic systems. Not so long ago, to determine a citizen's position solely within the techno-cybernetic system of a postindustrial state seemed only a remote possibility, both futuristic and somewhat threatening. Today, such an operation is considered an unsophisticated daily routine, as the great majority of people living in the Western world are defined through their social security numbers, credit card numbers, various ID numbers, etc. This cyber-bureaucratic environment does not even try to conceal its invasive aspirations: on top of all those numbers is one's mobile phone PIN—Personal Identity (!) Number—an indispensable secret and private password guaranteeing participation in advanced systems of wire-less communication.

Hansen's remark has been quoted above also due to its strict interdependence with the Cartesian framework of reference. The critique of "the privilege we grant thought in determining what constitutes identity" clearly points to the oft-quoted and oft-contested Cartesian formula equating thinking, or more precisely, reasoning, with being. For a number of contemporary techno-critics, this standpoint remains provocative for at least two reasons. First of all, Descartes' prescription implicitly conveys a neat vision of reality nicely cut up in binary oppositions and hence easily analysable by the rational mind equipped with an appropriate method of investigation. Secondly, Descartes' dictum contains a strong conviction about human superiority, independence and control over the mechanical. At stake is a worldview depicting technology in merely practical and functional terms and thus depriving it of any kind of feedback-loop power. The relationship between the human and the mechanical is one-directional; the human is in no way to be influenced, let alone determined, by the machine. It is the man (rather than the woman) who establishes the framework of machine operation, not the other way round, and to think otherwise, Descartes suggests, is ridiculous. In his *Discourse on the Method* he illustrates this unquestioned human superiority through the analysis of a then-hypothetical situation of man-like machines trying to pass themselves off as humans. Machines of that sort, argues Descartes, even if they looked exactly like human beings, would nevertheless be immediately identified by their lack of reasoning and communicative abilities, qualities which even "the dullest of men" possess. Writes Descartes:

[these machines] could never use words, or put together other signs, as we do in order to declare our thoughts to others. For we can certainly conceive of a machine so con-

structed that it utters words, and even utters words which correspond to bodily actions causing a change in its organs [...]. But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence, as the dullest of men can do.⁹

Needless to say, such a reductionist vision could not pass unnoticed today, when both the attitude towards and the representations of technology are informed by technophobia rather than by technophilia. It is, therefore, the purpose of this book to track and analyse those technologically determined areas in which the paradigmatic change has turned out to be vital for the process of identity formation. As both theoretical and representational practices inform us, the process is closely connected with an inevitable symbiosis of the human and the technological. This is a symbiosis, which, often metaphorically, abolishes the man-machine binarity by narrating both the apocalypse of the Cartesian subject and the subsequent emergence of a new, technologically conditioned one.

Though approachable from a number of perspectives, the notion of technology-related apocalypse will be treated here largely in terms of its cultural relevance for the contemporary Western condition. Yet, since the notion of culture remains a desperately broad term, a certain restriction and specification of the cultural field in question appears necessary. Thus, the main emphasis will be laid on various textual practices functioning, often provisionally, under the headline of science fiction with particular emphasis devoted to their cinematic representations.

Though the use of SF as an illustrative model of cultural dynamics is further analysed in section 5 of the first chapter, an important claim needs to be made at this point. Such restriction or even reduction of the cultural environment is by no means to imply that science fiction, whether approached as films, literature, computer games, cartoons or visual arts, usurps the right to embrace and exclusively represent the whole of the Western cultural horizon, and thereby promote itself to the level of the ultimate genre of cultural debates. On the contrary; until recently excluded from the mainstream of cultural operations, particularly when considered in terms of literary practice, science fiction has occupied a rather suburban position in the Western canon, finding shelter mainly under the protective wings of the film industry. This peculiar inconsistency, i.e., literary neglect combined with blockbuster status, has paradoxically turned

9. René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences* (1637), in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 44–45. Quoted in: Neil Badmington, "Introduction: Approaching Posthumanism," in *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 3.

the SF discourse into an avant-garde of cultural debates and social commentary, giving it what Bruce Sterling refers to as “influence without responsibility.”¹⁰

One should not, however, reduce science fiction to its stereotypical image habitually associated with naïve promises of space conquest performed by indestructible heroes always on an interplanetary mission. Contemporary sci-fi has undergone a profound shrinking of its high hopes informed by the Space Age dreams. Macro-ambitions of intergalactic travellers have turned into micro-dilemmas of inner-city residents no longer busy conquering the outer space but confined to the inner spaces of their own techno-urban environments.

It is precisely this shrinking from macro- and outer- into micro- and inner- that justifies the use of science fiction as a topical illustration of broader cultural operations. SF’s cinematic narratives have replaced the *there-and-then* with the *here-and-now*, and this replacement has resulted in a somewhat unexpected proximity between contemporary cultural theory and SF’s apparently unrelated exemplifications of this theory’s postulates. In effect, one might observe a growing convergence between postmodern theory and sci-fi practice without treating the latter as an exclusive narrative mode of the contemporary cultural horizon. In other words, science fiction, due to its somehow peripheral status, has become the ultimate avant-garde of many contemporary debates and as such illustrates a large number of broader cultural tendencies without necessarily restricting those tendencies’ applicability to the SF discourse only. One might claim that sci-fi constitutes a kind of culture’s visualised repressed, returning in the glory of its box-office success. The important thing to remember, however, is that even though the tendencies in question are manifested through SF imagery, they reach far beyond the hypothetical horizons of apparently isolated and abstract fiction.

The other reason for treating the visual discourse of science fiction as a valid example of wider cultural inclinations is that no other field of representation seems to reflect and echo the development of digital praxis with such pace and accuracy as the moving pictures. In a truly postmodern manner enhanced by their visual intensity, movies give vent to both conscious and unconscious collective preoccupations, vividly depicting the sense of fear, anticipation and self-(re)construction that accompany current visions of technology-determined future. SF’s sub-genre of cyberpunk provides a particularly topical illustration here. As a literary practice born out of a cinematic inspiration,¹¹ it not only blurs the boundary between film and literature by successfully mixing

10. Bruce Sterling, “Preface,” in William Gibson, *Burning Chrome and Other Stories* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 9.

11. William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), one of the first and most important books of the genre to date, was to a large extent inspired by Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, a film released in 1982, that is, two years before. Both texts, the cinematic and the literary, have thus established an essentially intertextual space inseparably combining the two modes of representation by a peculiar cyberpunk poetics. Cyberpunk’s dystopian aura, as illustrated by the book and the film alike,

the two in one intertextual-discursive space but, contrary to classic “outer space” SF, depicts the nearest future which in many cases is but an extension of what Fredric Jameson refers to as “our own reading present.”¹² We no longer have Captain Kirk teleporting himself across the most distant corners of the universe, or Luke Skywalker gloriously fighting against the evil forces of the Empire behind the controls of his interplanetary spaceship. Instead, we have a dystopian vision of a not-too-distant future where the essential questions are decided in an ontologically ambiguous realm of cyberspace and, to quote Jean François Lyotard, “[i]t is no longer possible to call development progress.”¹³ Information as weapon, expertise as a vantage point, identity as a makeshift operation, body as pure flesh or an experimental field—this is the landscape both reflecting and narrating a pervasive sense of existential uneasiness, dissolving both human subjectivities and non-human identities. Cyberpunk radiates a sense of the inadequacy of stable social structures, clear goals and acceptable moral codes, which attitude coincides with a recent transition in representation of technology-related concerns. J. G. Ballard describes this state of affairs in the following way:

The future envisioned by the science fiction of the 1940s and 1950s is already our past. Its dominant images [...] of the first Moon flights and interplanetary voyages [...] now resemble huge pieces of discarded stage scenery. For me, this could be seen most touchingly in the film “2001: A Space Odyssey,” which signified the end of the heroic period of modern science fiction—its lovingly imagined panoramas and costumes, its huge set pieces, remind me of “Gone With the Wind,” a scientific pageant that became a kind of historical romance in reverse, a sealed world into which the hard light of contemporary reality was never allowed to penetrate.¹⁴

Cinematic representations, especially those of SF origin, are treated here with particular attention for yet another reason. It is their unprecedented visual intensity, triggered by rapidly developing media technologies, that offers an almost immediate illustration/interpretation of any imaginable cultural phenomenon. This emphasis upon the visible seems vital for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it appears to constitute a very efficient cultural strategy which might be referred to as *problematising-through-visualising*. As illustrated by *Blade Runner*’s obsessive concentration on the reliability of vision and its fundamental role in the process of identity construc-

is characterised by uncontrolled development of electronic technologies and the urban realm, the presence of non-human identities and a desperate celebration of life at street level.

12. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 285.
13. Jean François Lyotard, “Note on the meaning of ‘Post-,’” in *Postmodernism. A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1999), 49.
14. Ballard, “Introduction to *Crash*,” available at: <http://www.ballardian.com/introduction-to-crash>.

tion¹⁵ or by the post-apocalyptic landscapes of Richard Stanley's *Hardware* or George Miller's *The Road Warrior*, it seems impossible to problematise a technology-related concern without simultaneously providing its visual analogy.

The above mentioned examples hint at merely two of the large number of popular techno-worries, those of rampant progress and ultimate regress. Still, and this is yet another reason for the significance of cinematic representations, with such emphasis upon the strategy of *problematizing-through-visualising*, cinema inscribes itself into the inter-discursive context of postmodern culture which in fact reaches far beyond the moving pictures. In other words, SF films provide an effective visual exemplification of contemporary cultural operations and thus highlight their own participation in the cultural condition in question. One of the most fundamental features of this condition (further analysed in chapter three) is its emphasis upon the role of the image. Out of a vast number of attempts to come to terms with the essentially visual nature of contemporary culture, few seem to grasp the gist of the situation more appropriately than the words of Jean Baudrillard: "[i]t is this promiscuity and the ubiquity of images, this viral contamination of things by images, which are the fatal characteristics of our culture. And this knows no bounds, because [...] images cannot be prevented from proliferating indefinitely [...]"¹⁶

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Five main areas are considered vital for the representation of the merger between the human and the technological in the context of apocalyptic dilemmas. Although the division between them is far from being a clear-cut one, for the purpose of methodological convenience each of the areas is approached in a separate chapter. These concern, respectively: different modes of contextualising apocalypse (chapter one), exploration of apocalypse's metaphorical potential (chapter two), analysis of the consequences of technological development with particular emphasis on visual culture (chapter three), examination of computer-generated textuality and representations of urban space (chapter four), construction of technologically determined identity (chapter five) and a brief overview of the apocalyptic concerns against the background of postmodernism (conclusion).

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15. The movie abounds in references to the act of seeing. The opening scene reveals a huge eyeball reflecting the whole city and photographs of one's childhood constitute the basis for legitimised memories as a proof of human identity. One of the most disturbing ambiguities concerning untranslatability of the visual experience is brought into play when Roy Batty, the main replicant of the story, talks to the genetic designer who had designed his eyes: "If only you could see what I have seen with your eyes..." For an extended analysis of *Blade Runner's* visual discourse see: Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner* (London: BFI Publishing, 1997).
 16. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard Schutze, Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), 35–36.

Thus, the first chapter begins with a brief analysis of different modes of representing apocalypse in the post-WWII period. A double evolution may be observed here, both in terms of literal factors causing the end to happen and in terms of approaching its very possibility. As for the former, the evolution in representation of apocalyptic factors seems to proceed from the external to the internal ones. Alien invasions, dominant in the 1950s and 1960s, gradually evolved into major malfunctions of domestic techno-cybernetic systems in the 1980s and 1990s, to be finally replaced by the deliberate action performed by the mechanical or the digital against the human. The latter approach, dealing with the very possibility of the end, has in turn resulted in the division of apocalypse-related works into pre- and post-apocalyptic ones, which depict the end either as a threat (pre-apocalypse), or picture the post-apocalyptic situation. Interestingly enough, it is the post-apocalyptic path that offers most stimulating interpretations of the critical situation, both with regard to its visual illustrations and, even more importantly, to the purely theoretical attempts aiming at inscribing apocalypse in the broader context of Western fate.

Chapter two is devoted to a further exploration of the discursive background justifying the use of apocalypse as a metaphor of paradigmatic change. Although the change in question remains strictly related to a number of contemporary philosophical proposals, such as Lyotard's description of the decline of master narratives or Baudrillard's theory of the autonomy of simulacrum, the chapter traces the origin of apocalypse's metaphorical power back to the Revelation of St. John, setting it alongside a number of secular representations, in terms of both continuities and discontinuities between the two modes of approaching the end. This is because regardless of whether containing eschatological or secular representations, they all share a violent disposition towards the current state of affairs, and hence, despite the differences between them, highlight apocalypse's subversive discursive potential.

The third chapter's preoccupation is with both collective and individual consequences of the ubiquitous message/image mediation, i.e., with the discourse of visual culture triggered by the emergence of "invisible" technologies. The chapter begins with the discussion of the origin and legitimacy of the postindustrial era (Bell, Jameson, Toffler) in view of the visualisation practices they offer. The adopted perspective is that of an evolution of visualisation strategies proceeding from the notion of spectacle to the idea of the hyperreal. As Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard inform us, the pre-electronic opposition between the real and the mediated has been significantly blurred and in some cases erased. For all the differences between them, whether we use Debord's notion of the spectacle or Baudrillard's idea of the hyperreal void, the rampant development of visual technologies has effectively untied the sense of clearly-definable, stable and tactile reality, postulating its replacement by a self-referential simulacrum.

The fourth chapter concentrates upon key characteristics of computer-generated space with particular emphasis upon the phenomenon of hypertext and the textual

nature of the contemporary urban realm. Space, defined through a number of paradoxes concerning its ambiguous composition of the tactile and the digital, questions a number of strategies traditionally adopted while approaching the idea of spatiality. Particularly well-illustrated are those challenging the notion of linearity and promoting the space's intertextual character: a computer-mediated text requires active participation of the reader/user whose literal co-operation is vital for the text's functioning. The concept of the net ceases to function as a topical metaphor but becomes an operational mechanism instead. Not only does it allow the reader/user to move backwards and sideways, explore alternate paths and "cut across a work, several works"¹⁷ but often forces him/her to do so. In other words, Barthesian ideals are put into every-day practice of "billions of legitimate operators, in every nation,"¹⁸ to use William Gibson's definition of a future reader.

The fifth chapter represents an attempt to construct a theoretical stance for the post-industrial technological identity. Depicting the postmodern subject in the context of global circulations of data, invisible electronics and ever-present simulation is to inscribe it into the discourse of identity crisis. Such contextualisation invites a broader philosophical perspective, in this case that of posthumanism, upon the territory in which the new subject is located. This act, a reincarnation rather than resurrection, "situates the human and the technological as coextensive, co-dependent and mutually defining."¹⁹ Scott Bukatman refers to such an outcome of the multi-layered techno-symbiosis as terminal identity, which he defines as "an unmistakably double articulation in which we find both the end of the subject and a new subjectivity constructed at the computer station or television screen."²⁰

The concluding chapter, apart from briefly summarising the key points described in the previous chapters, also offers a broader philosophical reflection. Apocalypse, even though habitually associated with irreversible destruction and unprecedented torment, is finally seen in metaphorical terms, as an inevitable moment of all cultural evolutions. Thus, by inscribing itself into a wider cultural context, apocalypse constitutes a vital component of the subject's experiential territory, and as such plays a formative role in the process of identity construction.

The sense of apocalypse, though even in the above-described context prone to a number of interpretations, is thus eventually restricted to a critical evaluation of the subject defined in terms of binary oppositions of pre-technological paradigms. The subject's apocalypse, however, is not only incomplete (as it is followed by a subsequent rebirth) but much less sudden that it may appear at first. The death of the stable

17. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. J. Harari (London: Methuen, 1980), 75.

18. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 67.

19. Bukatman, *Terminal Identity...*, 22.

20. Bukatman, *Terminal Identity...*, 9.

and isolated subject comes about as a result of a long socio-cultural evolution instigated by the development of technology, resulting in a redefined concept of textuality which finally both reformulate the notion of identity. It is these three terms, technology, textuality and identity, presented in this particular order, that eventually tell the story of the subject's apocalypse. Still, one has to bear in mind that the apocalypse in question is not so much that of the subject conceived as a living individual, but that of the neat, yet out-moded paradigm contouring the subject before the advent of the postindustrial era which is characterised by accelerated technological development.

Hence, just like a number of other concepts summoned in this book, including apocalypse itself, technology fulfils a double role here: both that of a caesura and that of an apocalyptic tool, a means through which the old can wither and the new can emerge. As the former, technology helps pinpoint the transitional moment when the electronic equipment ceases to function as a mere gadget of facilitation and convenience. As the latter, it becomes both the cause and the effect of the subject's major metamorphosis, in the meantime establishing truths and constructing illusions of our post-apocalyptic environments.