

# Aliens and Others

Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism

✓  
Jenny Wolmark



University of Iowa Press, Iowa City



"Wolmark has the courage to state that stellar critics such as Jameson, Baudrillard and McHale have left women out of their arguments in regard to science fiction and postmodernism. She shows exactly why the omission is egregious. Then she applies the theories of Jardine, de Lauretis, Hutcheon and Haraway to feminist SF. In other words, after taking the boys to task, she calls on the girls to enhance her argument. Bravo!" — Marleen S. Barr

*Allens and Others* explores the radical potential of feminist science fiction to question dominant cultural definitions of difference and identity. With strong, exciting, often brilliant prose, Jenny Wolmark examines the ways in which the conventions of science fiction are subverted so that notions of genre, race and gender identity are redefined.

Wolmark redirects our understanding of contemporary feminist fiction by considering the ways in which both feminism and postmodernism have enabled women science fiction writers to challenge the 'commonsense' nature of social and cultural practices and institutions. Postmodernism's critique of the 'grand narratives' of western culture is paralleled by feminist analysis of the patriarchal discourses of that culture. *Allens and Others* shows how these projects are connected, both by their recognition of the partiality of dominant cultural practices and by their potential to develop an interventionist cultural politics.

These issues are explored in riveting readings of a wide range of science fiction texts by Octavia Butler, Gwyneth Jones, Vonda McIntyre, C.J. Cherryh, Suzy McKee Charnas, Sally Miller Gearhart, Sheri Tepper, Pamela Sargent and Margaret Atwood. Cyberpunk and what it can offer feminist science fiction are also explored through the feminist cyberpunk of Pat Cadigan, Marge Piercy and Elisabeth Vonarburg. Informative, well written and insightful, *Allens and Others* maps each intersection between feminist SF, postmodernism and feminism.

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ALIENS AND OTHERS JENNY WOLMARK

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藏书章

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Printed in Great Britain

To Geoff and Nick  
and to my mother Kathleen

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## Preface

There has been an increase in both general and academic interest in the science fiction (SF) genre in the last few years, and this parallels other cultural developments, such as the acknowledged overlap between postmodern fiction and SF, and the production of a range of films which are situated loosely within SF but which cross over into other genres, particularly that of horror.

In SF itself, distinctions of all kinds have always been blurred. Those who read SF often end up writing it, or writing about it, or both. In addition, fandom in SF has produced a range of informed and often innovative publications that deserve serious attention. Feminist science fiction participates fully on all these different terrains, and its participation has been crucial to the development of the genre, despite the fact that it has often had to argue vociferously for its concerns to be taken seriously.

This book is intended as a contribution to that on-going argument. I have drawn on a range of theoretical positions from within feminist theory, literary theory and cultural theory, to examine texts that in themselves are determinedly boundary crossing. Although it is primarily academic in its address, the blurring of boundaries between the consumer, the practitioner and the academic means that this address cannot, and indeed should not, be regarded as an exclusionary device.

My own position as a feminist, an academic and an avid reader of science fiction reflects this propensity to negotiate boundaries, and I have derived great satisfaction from that sense of being able to move between positions and identities. I recommend the experience, and hope that readers, both of this book and of the novels that I have chosen to discuss, will be open to a similar process of negotiation.

## Acknowledgements

I owe a large debt of thanks to the friends and colleagues with whom I work in Theoretical Studies for providing me with the time and opportunity to complete this book.

I am grateful to my editor Jackie Jones, both for her invaluable advice on the manuscript and her general reassurance in moments of panic.

I am also grateful to Sarah Lefanu for her comments on the manuscript, and if I have not been able to incorporate all of them here, I intend to do so elsewhere.



## A Note About Editions

It will be noticed that book titles quoted in the text are sometimes followed by two publication dates. Where two dates have been included in the same bracket, the first is the original date of publication, the second is the date of the actual edition from which I have quoted in the text. The reason for this arrangement is that, owing to the vagaries of paperback publishing, there is often a considerable gap in time between the American and British publication of the same book, and not all American titles are reprinted by British publishers.

## Chapter I

### Intersections

#### Introduction

Although the main focus of this study is feminist science fiction, it is clear that in recent years science fiction as a whole has been increasingly identified with such postmodernist concerns as the instability of social and cultural categories, the erosion of confidence in historical narratives and a seemingly concomitant inability to imagine the future. Familiar science fiction metaphors exploring the interface between human and machine, depicting the other as alien, or dislocating spatial and temporal relations appear frequently in postmodern narratives. The extension of communications technology into every aspect of social and cultural life is no longer an imagined or science fictional future; it has already taken place, with consequences that are both alarming and hopeful. As the distinction between the imaginary and the real, and the present and the future, becomes less obvious, the generalised definition of science fiction as a popular genre in which utopian or dystopian fantasies of the future are explored clearly requires further consideration.

It is not only the thematic and linguistic convergence of science fiction and postmodernism which suggests that such a reconsideration is appropriate, however. An equally significant convergence between feminism and science fiction since the 1970s has resulted in the production of texts in which gender and identity are central, as is the depiction of new and different sets of social and sexual relations. Feminist science fiction has brought the politics of feminism into a genre with a solid tradition of ignoring or excluding

women writers, and in so doing it has politicised our understanding of the fantasies of science fiction. To do so, it has drawn on feminist analysis of the construction of gendered subjectivity in order to suggest possibilities for more plural and heterogeneous social relations, and to offer a powerful critique of the way in which existing social relations and power structures continue to marginalise women.

The emphasis on gender and difference, in conjunction with the postmodern erosion of boundaries between high and popular culture, has had unsettling consequences for the genre, which, somewhat unexpectedly, has become a terrain for the ideological contestation of the politics of gender. Donna Haraway's definition of SF usefully describes the way in which the genre has incorporated these concerns: 'Science fiction is generically concerned with the interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others and with the exploration of possible worlds in a context structured by transnational technoscience.'<sup>1</sup> The way in which the 'problematic selves and unexpected others' within feminist science fiction challenge the fixed relations of gender, and of self and other, and insist on exploring other representational possibilities, is the subject of this book.

The book is, then, primarily a study of the ways in which feminist science fiction addresses questions of subjectivity, identity and difference, and challenges the dual definition of the 'alien' as other and of the other as always being alien. Science fiction provides a rich source of generic metaphors for the depiction of otherness, and the 'alien' is one of the most familiar: it enables difference to be constructed in terms of binary oppositions which reinforce relations of dominance and subordination. Since feminist science fiction occupies a marginal position in relation to other forms of cultural production, it is well placed to invest this and other metaphors with new and different meanings which undermine ostensibly clear-cut distinctions between self and other, human and alien. It explores possibilities for alternative and non-hierarchical definitions of gender and identity within which the difference of aliens and others can be accommodated rather than repressed.

The context for this study is provided by the intersections between feminism, postmodernism and science fiction, which are the subject of the introductory chapter. Although they are always problematic and often inconclusive, such intersections nevertheless

have the capacity to draw our attention to the need constantly to redefine positions and meanings, in order to include what has previously been excluded, and to recognise that new forms of social and cultural experience require new forms of response. The use of the term 'intersections' is intended to suggest those cross-over points where discourses become openly contradictory, and boundaries become flexible and subject to renegotiation. Feminist science fiction exists at just such a point of intersection, or intertextuality, where the paradoxical conditions of its own existence enable the production of texts that address new and different issues and audiences: its feminist intentions mean that it functions disruptively within a masculinist popular genre, the generic outlines of which are already in the process of redefinition as the boundaries between high and popular culture become increasingly insecure.

The texts that are discussed in subsequent chapters demonstrate the varied and often contradictory ways in which contemporary feminist science fiction has responded to the unstable terrain of cultural and gender politics. Despite their differences, there is still a sense of a shared agenda in these texts, since they are all concerned in some way with redefining the female subject outside the confines of the binary oppositions that seek to fix gender identities in the interests of existing relations of domination. The marginalised others of race and gender are central to the novels of Octavia Butler and Gwyneth Jones, and the discussion of their work in Chapter 2 focuses on the way in which the texts use the device of the alien to explore otherness. The reworking of the opposition between human and alien in Butler's work recalls the narratives of slavery, and the power relations inherent in those narratives remain a disturbing feature of the novels that are discussed here. Gwyneth Jones' novel is a complex and profoundly ironic study of the contradictions inherent in science fiction narratives when the alien becomes the expression of a culture's simultaneous fear of and desire for the other. This eminently postmodern narrative reflexively traces the way in which the generic device of the alien has been used to displace difference into the realms of the transcendental, so that the material implications of marginalisation and difference continue to go unrecognised. As an alien contact narrative, the text is therefore concerned with the conditions of its own existence as much as it is with the meanings attached to the device of the alien. Definitions of otherness thus become impossible to sustain as the question of who

is 'alien' becomes increasingly unanswerable, particularly from within science fiction narratives themselves.

Chapter 3 examines the way in which the generic conventions and narrative strategies of science fiction are subverted within the novels of C.J. Cherryh and Vonda McIntyre, as are the gendered and unequal power structures and social relations embedded within them. Both writers disrupt the definitions of otherness that are sustained by those conventions and strategies, particularly by the opposition between nature and culture, and in so doing produce narratives that are both contradictory and open-ended. Although some of the novels by C.J. Cherryh that are discussed in this chapter are peopled by generically familiar aliens, she also uses the notion of the genetically engineered human, who is therefore both alien and other, to problematise the distinction between human and non-human, self and other. Vonda McIntyre considers the way in which the interface between human and machine destabilises definitions of gender and identity, thus undermining the opposition between self and other. The 'cyborg monsters' of McIntyre's novels in particular are concerned to re-present gender outside the confines of fixed subject positions, so that other possibilities for social and sexual relations can be explored.

The social and political gains that women made in the 1970s, which have been significantly eroded throughout the 1980s, have found expression in the post-apocalyptic scenarios of feminist science fiction that are the subject of Chapter 4. The confidently depicted separatist utopias of the 1970s, such as those by Suzy McKee Charnas and Sally Miller Gearhart, contained many ambiguities about gender relations, and this has become increasingly obvious as more recent versions of women-only communities confront the essentialist nature of those utopias. The distinction between utopia and dystopia becomes less clear in the communities created by Sheri Tepper, Pamela Sargent, and Margaret Atwood, each of which refer to enclosure and liminality in a way that the earlier novels did not. The argument in this chapter suggests that the unresolvable contradictions that arise from this liminality reflect the writers' concern with gendered subjectivity and with redefining the limits of the self.

The final chapter is concerned with the impact of cyberpunk on feminist science fiction, particularly in the light of the often remarked upon absence of any real engagement with technology in feminist

science fiction. Cyberpunk has its own absences, however, one of which is the unacknowledged influence of feminist SF, and cyberpunk narratives are marked by anxieties about gender relations. This aspect of cyberpunk is discussed in relation to the work of William Gibson, whose writing is most clearly identified with the emergence of cyberpunk and the new spatial metaphor of 'cyberspace'. The main argument put forward in this chapter is that, despite the male ethos of cyberpunk and its largely uncritical celebration of the mysteries of the human-machine interface, its active engagement with technology and its oppositional qualities are of considerable relevance to writers of feminist SF, as the work of the writers discussed in the chapter demonstrates. Pat Cadigan, one of the few women writing in the cyberpunk idiom, is concerned to demystify the human-machine interface so that the new conceptual space opened up by cyberpunk can be used to reconsider gender and identity. The erosion of boundaries between the real and the simulated that is suggested by 'cyberspace' enables both Cadigan and Rebecca Ore to use this metaphor of cybernetic systems to explore questions of gender and identity, self and other.

The work of Marge Piercy and Elisabeth Vonarburg is more obliquely inflected towards the human-machine interface: a key metaphor for these writers is the cyborg, whose radical possibilities for gender and identity have been identified by Donna Haraway. She describes the cyborg as 'a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings'.<sup>2</sup> In the work of Piercy and Vonarburg, the human-machine interface becomes the site at which the oppositional relations between self and other can be reconfigured, so that difference can be seen to make a significant contribution towards the constitution of new kinds of subjects and subject relations.

## Intersections

The central argument in the book is that the aliens and others of feminist science fiction are explored within a framework that is increasingly informed by both feminist theory and postmodernism. Before any detailed discussion of specific texts can take place, it will be necessary, therefore, to provide an overview of the determining

characteristics of postmodernism and feminism, and of the intersections between them and the genre as a whole. The development of science fiction, from its origins in nineteenth-century gothic literature to the present day, has been more than adequately covered by other writers,<sup>3</sup> and since it is not the particular concern of this study, that knowledge has been largely taken for granted.

## Science Fiction and Postmodernism

Postmodernism has been described by Andreas Huyssen as existing in a 'field of tension between tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first'.<sup>4</sup> Huyssen is describing the implicit hierarchy of values within a set of cultural dominants that has operated to marginalise the products of popular culture, but which is becoming increasingly unstable. As generic outlines become blurred within postmodernism, the positioning of texts within high and popular culture has become uncertain, as the interaction between science fiction and postmodern fiction demonstrates.

While such interaction is recognised as taking place, its disruptive potential is not always given a similar recognition. This is the case in Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) which is otherwise open in its acknowledgement of the interplay between science fiction and postmodern fiction:

There is, then, ample evidence of postmodernist writing's indebtedness to the science fiction genre. But the indebtedness also runs in the opposite direction. Just as postmodernism has borrowed ontological motifs from science fiction, so science fiction has in recent years begun to borrow from postmodernism.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the two-way traffic between science fiction and postmodernism, McHale is nevertheless at great pains to describe the relationship between them in terms of an advance along 'parallel literary-historical tracks', whereby each has 'been pursuing analogous but independent courses of development'.<sup>6</sup> What is acknowledged as a fruitful exchange of motifs and *topoi* is not, then, considered sufficient to constitute a significant breakdown of the boundaries between high and popular culture, and all that has happened is that those boundaries have been slightly re-adjusted.

While postmodernist fiction may have a self-consciousness about its use of contradictory and competing discourses, its essentially 'literary' characteristics remain unchanged in McHale's view, just as its essential concerns continue to be issues of alienation and selfhood, refashioned in postmodernist style. Redefinition of these issues to take account of feminist deconstructions of the subject, for example, does not occur in McHale's account, any more than does a reconsideration of the relations between science fiction and postmodernist fiction, or of the meaning of the 'literary' itself.

A description of postmodernism that does take account of the possibilities inherent in postmodern intersections of the kind that are being suggested in this study is provided by Peter Brooker: he suggests that postmodernism is a 'shift, prompted and enabled by social, economic and technological change, into the heteroglossia of inter-cultural exchange, as idioms, discourse across the arts and academy, and across these and popular or mass forms, are montaged, blended or blurred together'.<sup>7</sup> The notion of 'inter-cultural exchange' is a useful way of thinking about postmodern intersections: it recognises the complex effects of such exchanges whilst maintaining the specificity of the sites from which such exchanges are initiated. Thus the intersections between science fiction, feminism and postmodernism that are discussed in this study do not produce a decentred and formless amalgam of discourses, nor do they result in the conflation of one site into the other(s), rather they produce new and challenging perspectives on each of those sites. In the context of his discussion of postmodernism and SF, Roger Luckhurst makes a comment that can be applied equally well to each of the areas under consideration here: 'The specificity of SF, its forms, temporality, and modes of enunciation, must be retained in order to say anything meaningful about it.'<sup>8</sup> If postmodern fiction and science fiction are not to be conflated, then neither are feminism and postmodernism, a point that is made later in the chapter.

In the sections that follow, postmodernism will be discussed in terms of Fredric Jameson's influential formulation of it as the 'cultural dominant' of late capitalism, and of Jean Baudrillard's emphasis on the displacement of the real by the simulacra. Both Jameson and Baudrillard are concerned with the way in which changes in the social and political spheres are increasingly expressed in terms of the cultural, so that, in a thoroughly commodified cultural environment, the ability to make meaningful interventions

has been thrown into question. Both also use the generic specificity of science fiction as a source of metaphors on which to draw when defining the ever-shifting environment of postmodernism. Science fiction renders temporal relations uncertain and makes the familiar appear strange, and its fantasies of the future provide a critical view of the present. Jameson in particular has referred to the way in which science fiction 'enacts and enables a structurally unique "method" for apprehending the present as history'.<sup>9</sup> Since postmodernism is equally preoccupied with such concerns, it is perhaps not surprising to find parallels being drawn between them.

One of the major problems with which postmodernism confronts us is precisely that of definition, particularly since postmodern theory itself has argued for the collapse of the universal narratives which sustained critical theory. If contemporary socio-economic conditions can be described in terms of postmodernity and their corresponding cultural relations are described in terms of the postmodern, then postmodernism itself can be described as a historical condition, or, as David Harvey suggests, as a 'historical-geographical condition of a certain sort'.<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson also views postmodernism as a historical condition, seeing it from within the framework of Marxism as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'. However, the attempt to provide some kind of historical specificity for postmodernism as a 'cultural dominant' is almost immediately undermined by the postmodern irony towards such unitary theoretical overviews. Since we are without recourse to grand narratives, and since we are situated, as Jameson says, 'within the culture of postmodernism',<sup>11</sup> theorisations of the postmodern become fraught with difficulty, appearing as both contradictory and self-referential.

The difficulty of finding an appropriately distanced and critical position from which to analyse the historical and cultural specificity of postmodernism does not, however, preclude the possibility that critical spaces can be negotiated and developed within the unresolved territory left by disintegrating critical and cultural boundaries and categories, in other words, at the intersections described earlier. While this approach does not obviate the difficulty of theorising the conditions of postmodernism and postmodern cultural production, it seeks to avoid the fixity of totalising theory by employing a decentred critical strategy in which boundaries are assumed to be flexible and subject to dissolution. The cultural

pessimism expressed by Fredric Jameson in his essay 'Postmodernism and consumer society' (1985), however, appears to leave little room for the development of oppositional positions in relation to the dominant characteristics of the postmodern, in contrast to what he sees as the manifestly subversive intent of modernist cultural practice.

Jameson suggests that postmodernism is a generalised reaction to 'high' modernism and as such has no particular coherence, but is rather a series of elements which, when taken together, are expressive of the socio-economic conditions of late multinational capitalism. In the postmodern period, the works of high modernism have themselves been co-opted into academic institutions, and in the process have lost their subversive and critical intent. The commodification of culture, the invasive domination of information technology, the decentring and fragmentation of the individual and the blurring of boundaries between high and popular culture are part of a significant cultural shift which corresponds to the socio-economic changes of late capitalism. Jameson uses the term schizophrenia to describe what he sees as one of the most striking characteristics of that shift, which is the breakdown in the previously stable relationships between signifiers which produces a 'rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers'.<sup>12</sup> Since understanding of the relationship between past, present and future, and of temporality generally, depends on the inter-relations between signifiers, once the chain of meaning is broken the schizophrenic subject is condemned to live in what Jameson describes as 'a perpetual present'. The schizophrenic present of postmodernism, in which signifiers are separated from their signifieds, can therefore be seen to mark the emergence of a new set of relations which are characterised by heterogeneity and discontinuity and dominated by the spatial rather than the temporal.

The most urgent feature of postmodern cultural relations is, then, the 'disappearance of a sense of history',<sup>13</sup> which produces a fascination with the 'hallucinatory splendor' of surfaces and a corresponding depthlessness. This depthlessness flattens out both history and experience and this is what finally erodes the relative autonomy of culture and with it the critical distance between culture and theory. It is the absence of this critical distance that is invoked by Jameson's use of the term schizophrenia, a use that is described by Jacqueline Rose as the 'psychic metaphorization of contemporary cultural and social space'.<sup>14</sup> It enables Jameson to make the sweeping



generalisation that the implosive spatial and social relations of postmodernism have extended into the realms of both the psychic and the social, and that in so doing they have deferred the development of any radical opposition to it as a cultural dominant.

The view that potentially oppositional responses have been all but excluded in postmodernism stems from Jameson's assumption that the erosion of the boundaries between high and popular culture has defused the radical and subversive intent of modernist cultural production. This ignores the oppositional capacities of popular culture by seeing it as part of that 'perpetual present' in which a commodified culture has expanded into all other spheres of social and psychic life. The new historical reality which this represents requires an appropriately new form of 'cognitive mapping' for which it seems we are, as yet, unequipped. This negative view of popular culture can also be found in an earlier article by Jameson on science fiction utopias, considered as part of those collective fantasies about the past and the future that are the expression of a culture's 'political unconscious'. The article discusses the complex ways in which contemporary science fiction 'registers fantasies about the future',<sup>15</sup> which are in effect representations of the most intolerable aspects of the present. The role of contemporary SF, then, is 'to demonstrate and to dramatise our incapacity to imagine the future',<sup>16</sup> and its failure to represent the future becomes the means by which we are enabled to contemplate 'our own absolute limits'.

Jameson's view of the negative capacities of science fiction is in marked contrast to his view of the radical capacities of modernism to be a 'Utopian compensation for increasing dehumanization on the level of daily life'.<sup>17</sup> Despite its relevance to a discussion of the postmodern condition, Jameson appears to regard SF as very much part of the 'increasing dehumanization' of life, rather than as a genre capable of making meaningful social and cultural interventions. This view fails to recognise the potential of science fiction to offer alternative and critical ways of imagining social and cultural reality, an aspect of the genre that has been favourably commented on by Teresa de Lauretis: 'The science fictional construction of a possible world, on the contrary, entails a conceptual reorganization of semantic space and therefore of material and social relations, and makes for an expanded cognitive horizon, an epic vision of our present social reality.'<sup>18</sup> The oppositional possibilities of science fiction lie in its capacity to contribute towards an 'expanded cognitive

horizon', rather than simply to reflect the way in which such horizons have been closed down within postmodernism.

Jameson has been criticised for overemphasising the hegemonic capacities of postmodernism, and it is clear that his analysis fails to take account of the way in which new and contradictory social constituencies have emerged within postmodernity to challenge existing hierarchies and subjectivities. The formation of new subject positions in terms of race, gender and class, and redefinitions of identity as provisional and plural are an important and oppositional response to the disappearance of the unitary subject, and yet their capacity to forge new ways of conceptualising the link between history and subjectivity is consistently underestimated by Jameson. In his emphasis on the hegemonic nature of postmodernism, Jameson imposes a curiously unilinear and unitary logic on its contradictory and incoherent features, but it is those contradictions that remain crucial in the resistance to totalising theories. The erosion of the boundary between high art and popular culture results in the production of texts that are undoubtedly contradictory, but this does not negate their utopian and radical possibilities, and in the case of feminist science fiction, it is the imagining of these possibilities that is of particular importance.

Jameson's account of postmodernism is predicated on the assumption that since the modernist aesthetic tradition is 'dead', all that can follow is empty repetition. The erosion of cultural boundaries and the development of new forms of cultural production, such as feminist science fiction, are therefore considered to be equally empty. However, the decentring of the modernist legacy, along with the decentring of the unitary subject, have been of immense importance as far as feminism and feminist cultural production is concerned, enabling the question of gendered subjectivity to become part of the postmodern agenda. The social and cultural significance of these developments is discounted as Jameson formulates the problem of gender and identity in purely aesthetic terms:

What we have to retain from all this is rather an aesthetic dilemma: because if the experience and the ideology of the unique self, an experience and ideology which informed the stylistic practice of classical modernism, is over and done with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing.<sup>19</sup>

Although feminist artists and writers, including those who write science fiction, have been very clear about the necessity to theorise their practice in relation to both modernism and postmodernism, Jameson takes little account of these views.

The collapse of the distinctions between past, present and future and between the real and the simulated are also central to Baudrillard's conceptualisation of the postmodern, and, like Jameson, Baudrillard also uses science fiction as a reference point. For both Jameson and Baudrillard, the influence of communications technology and the postmodern fascination with surfaces are seen as crucial influences in the shift in values that marks postmodernism, described by Baudrillard as the 'era of simulation': 'All the great humanist criteria of value, all the values of a civilization of moral, aesthetic, and practical judgment, vanish in our system of images and signs. Everything becomes undecidable.'<sup>20</sup> Just as Jameson notes the loss of 'critical distance' in postmodernism, so Baudrillard comments on the disappearance of the critical contradiction between the real and the imaginary, in a world which 'has become a collective marketplace not only for products but also for values, signs, and models, thereby leaving no room any more for the imaginary'.<sup>21</sup>

As relations of consumption have replaced those of production, so simulation has replaced the critical connections between theory and practice, the real and the imaginary, and as a result all signs and values have become non-referential, indeterminate and free floating:

At this level, the question of signs and their rational destination; their *real* and their *imaginary*; their repression; their reversal; the illusions they sketch; what they hush up, or their parallel significations – all of these are swept from the table.<sup>22</sup>

In a world of indeterminacy and hyper-reality, signs are freed from their relations with the real, and signs of the real are substituted for the real itself. Baudrillard's self-referential 'desert of the real' is a place in which the real exists only in an 'hallucinatory resemblance to itself', as simulation.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the relationship between reality and illusion can no longer be maintained, since the reality on which the illusory was based no longer exists. His analysis of the media in particular suggests that the boundaries between the real and the simulated are imploding, so that the hyper-real has become not a parody of the real, but more real than the real itself.

Baudrillard takes Disneyland as an example of the hyper-real,

and rather than treating it as an ideological account of the imaginary resolution of the unresolvable contradictions of American life, he suggests that 'Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real.'<sup>24</sup> In other words, the boundary between Disneyland and the 'real' America has dissolved, and the real has been replaced by simulation and the hyper-real. The hyper-real means 'the end of metaphysics, the end of fantasy, the end of SF'.<sup>25</sup> It is not entirely clear what version of the 'real' has been negated by the hyper-real, but Baudrillard's nostalgic lament for the disappearance of 'all the great humanist criteria of value' is reminiscent of Jameson's regret at the passing of the modernist aesthetic.

In the larger scale of things, Baudrillard suggests that history, too, has 'ceased to exist', and has become an unsustainable and implusive narrative, in common with the social and the political. In 'The year 2000 has already happened', he describes the 'end' and the 'disappearance' of history, and the implosion of the future into the science fictional nature of the present:

It is thus not necessary to write science fiction: we have as of now, here and now, in our societies, with the media, the computers, the circuits, the networks, the acceleration of particles which has definitively broken the referential orbit of things.<sup>26</sup>

In positing both the end of history and the absence of the future, Baudrillard appears to have abandoned the realms of the social and of the political. In the entropic era of simulation, the only oppositional response that is possible takes the form of silence and inertia on the part of the masses in the face of constant media 'noise' and excess information: this refusal to act or to respond constitutes, paradoxically, a political act carried out by those who are no longer subjects but who have been reconstituted as objects.

The highly abstract and metaphorical content of these formulations inevitably detracts from Baudrillard's often insightful analysis of the social and cultural dislocations that constitute the experience of postmodernity. By presenting simulation and the hyper-real as the dominant characteristics of the postmodern, Baudrillard has been able to account for the commodification of culture and the corresponding expansion of the cultural into the realms of the social, the economic and the political. Where Jameson's analysis of postmodernism continues to adhere to a theoretical

framework in which a Marxist analysis of capital and class relations has central significance, Baudrillard has instead evoked a curious totalitarianism of the hyper-real in which all forms of social life are reduced to simulacra, and all distinctions between the private and public, inner and outer, subject and object have become impossible to sustain. At the same time, however, Baudrillard's allegorical narratives are nostalgic for these former categories, even while they are documenting their breakdown.

In a useful overview of the development of Baudrillard's ideas, Best and Kellner suggest that his work should be read as a 'science fiction fantasy of a potential future',<sup>27</sup> rather than as social theory. Baudrillard's work has certainly been influenced by science fiction writers such as J.G. Ballard, and this description is helpful for indicating the extent to which Baudrillard's analysis of postmodernism has become increasingly ironic and metaphorical. In the essay 'Simulacra and science fiction' (1991), Baudrillard draws explicitly on science fiction to illustrate once again the profoundly negative consequences of the postmodern collapse of the distinction between the real and the simulated. He argues that 'classic SF' was a fiction of 'expanding universes' which can no longer be sustained in a system which is reaching its limits in terms of globalisation, media saturation and simulation. In a situation in which it is no longer possible to create the imaginary from the details of the real, SF has become implosive, striving to 'reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because the real has disappeared from our lives'. Science fiction, then, can only concern itself with reproducing an 'hallucination of the real', since it can no longer be 'a mirror held to the future'. Increasingly, as the borders between science fiction and the real are eroded, it becomes the task of contemporary SF to present us with the fiction that is our own world, in a final demonstration that 'The simulation is impassable, unsurpassable, *checkmated*, without exteriority'.<sup>28</sup>

Just as Jameson defined science fiction as an indicator of our failure to imagine the future, so Baudrillard suggests that, since 'we can no longer imagine other universes', then SF can only operate repetitively within the hyper-real to 'revitalize, to reactualize, to rebanalize fragments of simulation – fragments of this universal stimulation which our presumed "real" world has now become for us'.<sup>29</sup> The conditions of existence of contemporary science fiction are also those of postmodernism: where once it was the role of SF to

imagine fantasies of the future which confirmed the relation between the real and the imaginary, that role has been negated by the derealisation of the real. The task of science fiction, which is also the task of theory, is to re-invent the real as fiction, from within the hyper-real. Ideological contestation within postmodernism is thus inevitably forestalled by the circular relationship between the real and the simulated. The nature of the 'real' that would emerge from the 'revitalisation' of fragments of the simulated is, therefore, unclear, and the question of whose interests would be represented in it – and, indeed, *who* would be represented in it – is not asked. What does seem clear, however, is that as the specificity of human experience is displaced by simulation, then the lived realities of oppression and subordination experienced by women have no way of being expressed. Women remain outside the realms of language and of social signification even as the real is replaced by the simulated. The absolutely central questions of representation and of the historical and cultural construction of gendered subjectivity evidently do not get on the agenda in any re-invention of the 'real'.

Both Baudrillard and Jameson appropriate the science fictional, rather than the literary or philosophical, metaphor of utopia in order to demonstrate the way in which its progressive characteristics, which must include the possibility of imagining other ways of being, have been reversed by the dissolution of the boundaries between high and popular culture, utopia and dystopia, in postmodernism. By situating it within science fiction, the idea of utopia can be given a suitably ironic and postmodernist inflection, so that it becomes a vehicle for nostalgia, a place in which the future can no longer be imagined, functioning as the repository of the real which can never be realised. The totalising perspective which this particular intersection between science fiction and postmodernism has produced is unable to take account of the different ways in which postmodernism has opened up new cultural spaces within which radically different forms of social and sexual relations can be imagined, such as those offered within feminist SF. It is simply not enough to think of these significant conceptual reorganisations in terms of the circularity of 're-invention', or pastiche, since they are operating within the far more dynamic field of what Fred Pfeil calls

an epochal paradigm shift separating the progressive social thought and imaginary of the 1980s from that of the 1960s, and from Enlightenment- and organicist-driven thought and struggle *tout court*:

a struggle whose enabling conditions and energies are largely derived from the interaction of the new forces and relations of production we call 'post industrial' with the new non-essentialist, post-Enlightenment visions, practices, projects and energies which have come to us primarily out of contemporary feminism.<sup>30</sup>

## Feminism and Postmodernism

The aporias that occur in accounts of the interaction between science fiction and postmodernism, which ignore both their gender inscriptions and the possibility of different forms of relations developing between them, are a consequence of the modernist fear that the invasive products of popular culture would devalue the products of high art. As Andreas Huyssen suggests, this fear enables mass culture to be conceptualised as 'the homogeneously sinister background on which the achievements of modernism can shine their glory'.<sup>31</sup> More significantly, Huyssen also argues that the distinction between high and popular culture, although it is rendered in aesthetic terms, is in fact a gendered distinction. The privileged realms of authenticity and high art are reserved for the masculine, whereas the popular and the everyday, which is the concern of mass culture, has been duly feminised by being considered in terms of the inauthentic and trivial, and, in historical terms, it therefore became modernism's 'other'. Despite the transformations of postmodernism, elements of this anxiety continue to inform accounts of the postmodern, including those already discussed. The failure to acknowledge the possibilities inherent in the exchanges between high and popular culture, particularly where women producers and performers are concerned, can therefore be situated within the gendered anxieties about the dissolution of boundaries. It is, therefore, appropriate to consider feminist science fiction in the light of the intersections between feminism and postmodernism, and these intersections are discussed in the following section.

In her account of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon is careful to distinguish between postmodernism and feminism, suggesting that while postmodern texts are doubly coded as 'both complicitous with and contesting of the cultural dominants within which it operates',<sup>32</sup> the critical trajectory of feminism is oppositional, not complicitous. Attempts to conflate feminism and postmodernism by suggesting

that feminism is a product of postmodern theory therefore misunderstand the combative edge to feminist deconstructions of the self. It was, after all, necessary for feminists to point out the absence of gender in postmodern accounts of the decentred and fragmented subject. While there are common concerns in both feminist and postmodern accounts of subjectivity, identity and difference, this should not lead to a position in which one set of discourses can therefore be assumed to 'account' for the other, as happens in Craig Owens' suggestion that 'women's insistence on difference and incommensurability may not only be compatible with, but also an instance of postmodern thought'.<sup>33</sup> The suggestion is made within a discussion in which he acknowledges 'a blind spot in our discussions of postmodernism in general: our failure to address the issue of sexual difference – not only in the objects we discuss, but in our own enunciation as well'.<sup>34</sup>

The description of feminism as 'an instance of postmodern thought' is just such an example of the gendered 'enunciation' which Owens claims to be aware of, and stems from his assumption that 'few women have engaged in the modernism/postmodernism debate'.<sup>35</sup> This assumption is challenged by Meaghan Morris's account of the numbers of women who have, in fact, been involved in discussions about postmodernism, but whose contributions have gone either unacknowledged or unrecognised in what she calls 'the myth of a postmodernism still waiting for its women'.<sup>36</sup> In opposition to the suggestion that postmodernism has been an enabling environment for feminism, Morris emphasises the way in which feminism 'has acted as one of the enabling conditions of discourse *about* postmodernism', which makes it 'appropriate to use feminist work to frame discussions of postmodernism, and not the other way around'.<sup>37</sup>

Certainly, not all feminist writers are convinced of the value of postmodern theory. Christine Di Stefano is particularly critical of 'the postmodern call to give up the privileging of gender',<sup>38</sup> arguing that the postmodern emphasis on multiplicity and diversity results in a disabling pluralism in which the female subject is dissolved into a multiplicity of other differences. She suggests that postmodernist theories of difference cannot account for the way in which gender continues to be deeply embedded in social and cultural structures, which is why it remains central to feminist analysis. Indeed, it is the more complex questions of gender relations and the ways in which the