

RELIGION IN POSTMODERN SCIENCE FICTION:
A CASE STUDY IN SECULARITY

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Using recent debates in the humanities and social sciences, this dissertation argues that the category of the secular is currently being critiqued, contested, and modified from within. This dissertation considers postmodern science fiction, particularly the subgenre of cyberpunk, as a literary instance of this contestation. This study focuses on the ways cyberpunk fiction constructs religious others against which to define its protagonists, and on the way that the distinction between the secular and the religious is understood using concepts of subjectivity and history. Further, this work argues that the secular concepts common to postmodern science fiction can be considered a key expression of secular subjectivity as it undergoes new challenges to its legitimacy. Further, using examples from postmodern science fiction film, this work considers the ways that secular subjectivity may be undergoing further modifications that challenge the opposition of the religious to the secular.

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Chapter 1

Cyberpunk Fiction and the Secular

This work considers the kinds of subjectivity represented in cyberpunk, a subgenre of science fiction that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By the end of its first decade, cyberpunk had attracted strong interest from critics and theorists, who identified one particular cyberpunk novel as especially worthy of investigation: William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). In the 1990s, a second novel became important to the cyberpunk canon, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992). These two novels continue to serve as exemplars for cyberpunk as a whole, and are the most widely discussed works of cyberpunk fiction. In what follows, I will explore the prominent place both novels, and also a number of cyberpunk films, give to narratives of encounter between religious and secular characters and forces. The terms "religion" and "religious," as I use them here, refer to institutions, beliefs, practices, and subjects concerned with sacred categories¹. The term "secular," as I use it here, refers to a set of beliefs, practices, and institutions associated with the rise of modernity, particularly with the rise of science, capitalism, and

¹ To consider religion in terms of beliefs, practices and institutions is typical of the social-science approach that I will be discussing this chapter. One standard definition of this kind is Peter Berger's formulation of religion as belief in the sacred, a term he defines as "a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience" (*The Sacred Canopy* 25). In his article "Religion, Religions, Religious" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Jonathan Smith argues that this sociological way of using these three terms became the dominant usage in the 18th century, through a "process of transposing 'religion' from a supernatural to a natural history, from a theological to an anthropological category" (273). Hence, the terms became taxonomic tools for the discussion of the objects they named, a function that became increasingly important for social science in the 19th century when it became desirable to organize the "explosion of data" (275) concerning religions around the world, a development brought about by European colonial endeavor.

political institutions and subjects associated with the nation-state². In the futures imagined by cyberpunk texts, secular forces and their individual representatives come into contact with religious forces and subjects in ways that prompt sustained consideration of the categories of religion and the secular.

The religious figures and forces portrayed in cyberpunk have thus far received very little critical attention. As I will show, the theories of the secular that have shaped critical discussions of cyberpunk assume that religion holds little or no significance for an understanding of the present (or, presumably, of the future). However, the texts themselves allow religious institutions and believers to play a variety of important roles, some of which are threatening to their secular protagonists, some of which are helpful. I will argue that the presence of religious forces in these texts allows them to develop a complex and troubled representation of their secular protagonists, a representation that sheds light on how secular institutions are defined and on their powers and limitations. In this way, texts like *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* can serve to enrich and complicate a critical understanding of secular institutions and selves. These novels do not, I will argue, abandon secular categories for religious ones, nor do they transform secular categories in ways that would ultimately collapse the distinction between the religious and the secular. Instead, these novels trace the boundaries of secular selfhood and practice, subjecting them to critique but ultimately affirming them over and against the religious categories with which they are contrasted.

² For a succinct summary of this definition of the secular, particularly as it bears on the discussion of secularization theory that follows, see Casanova, *Public Religions* 20-25. It should be noted that in his discussion of the growth of the secular as a historical phenomenon, Casanova insists on a fourth factor that he claims was important to the expansion of secularization, namely the Protestant Reformation; see in particular pp. 21-23, and also Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

This engagement with religion coincides with challenges to the central categories of modernity used to define secularity. When cyberpunk emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminist, leftist, and postcolonial texts and movements had already begun to question and render unstable scientific rationalism, nationalism, and traditional notions of subjectivity. Cyberpunk texts reflect and magnify these instabilities, but they also work to refashion and reassert secular selfhood. The protagonists of cyberpunk must confront conditions in which the meaning, function, and power of secular institutions and categories must be refashioned in order to sustain the existence of the secular self. Cyberpunk often questions secular categories in the process of refashioning them, sometimes subjecting secular practices to sharp critique, but finally demonstrating their continuing viability. This process of critique and refashioning heightens the importance of religious alternatives to secular categories. In cyberpunk, these religious alternatives sometimes threaten secular selves directly, and sometimes serve to revitalize secular practice. In both cases, religious forces and subjects portrayed in these novels provide opportunities for secular selves to define, or redefine, their own powers and purposes.

Later in this chapter, and in the chapters that follow, I will seek to put cyberpunk's redefinition of the secular into conversation with recent scholarly discussions of the secular and its relationship to the religious. As I will show, theorists are beginning to challenge and redefine secular categories in ways that intersect with the dynamics of cyberpunk fiction. These scholarly discussions have placed new emphasis on the secular as a kind of selfhood, and have emphasized the conflicts that can arise between secular and religious forces and subjects. I will demonstrate how these recent discussions provide useful frameworks for identifying and understanding the religious

and secular elements of cyberpunk, which have been little discussed in cyberpunk criticism. At the same time, I will show how cyberpunk provides an opportunity to see recent critical debates in a more complex way. As I will discuss later in this chapter, recent theoretical discussions have had difficulty taking full account of secular tendencies towards conflict with the religious—tendencies that sometimes emerge in the very discussions that are attempting to outline non-antagonistic alternatives. The novels I am discussing reflect similar tendencies towards opposition, if not always towards conflict. Though they frequently trouble secular norms, they end by conferring legitimacy on their secular protagonists over and against the religious others with whom they differ. The novels demonstrate, on the one hand, the degree to which secular subjectivity can be troubled and complicated from within. On the other hand, the novels also demonstrate the tendency of secular selves and forces to stay separate from the religious forces and selves they perceive as “other.” As I hope to show in this chapter, cyberpunk fiction provides insight into this tendency toward separation, illuminating a key problem that is only partly grasped in current theoretical discussions. I turn now to a few examples of these discussions in order to illustrate their concerns and tendencies—particularly their interest in the way that the distinction between the religious and the secular is increasingly questioned.

“Distinctions long assumed”: Questioning the Sacred/Secular Binary

In a 2005 editorial for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Stanley Fish discusses the stance that he believes academics ought to take towards persons who carry their faith

into public life. Fish argues that recent debates on this matter are much more heated and thoroughgoing than they were previously. Towards his conclusion, he assesses the results of these debates and charges his audience to take account of them:

[T]he perspicuousness and usefulness of distinctions long assumed—reason as opposed to faith, evidence as opposed to revelation, inquiry as opposed to obedience, truth as opposed to belief—have been called into question...[T]he geopolitical events of the past decade and of the past three years especially have re-alerted us to the fact (we always knew it, but as academics we were able to cabin it) that hundreds of millions of people in the world do not observe the distinction between the private and the public or between belief and knowledge, and that it is no longer possible for us to regard such persons as quaintly pre-modern or as the needy recipients of our saving (an ironic word) wisdom.
(*Chronicle Online* 1/7/05)

Fish argues that residents of the academy need a new and less censorious attitude toward public expressions of religious belief. In particular, he critiques two assumptions that, he suggests, are typical for “academics,” though not necessarily for others. First, he critiques an assumed distinction between the non-rational (faith, revelation, belief) and the rational (reason, evidence, inquiry). Second, he calls into question an assumed distinction between the private and public spheres that might serve to keep the non-rational and the rational separate from each other. Fish assumes that academics are in the habit of looking down on those who fail to observe these distinctions, and that their condescension typically takes two forms: an assumption that those who express their religious beliefs in public are somehow anachronistic (“quaintly pre-modern”), and a conviction that such persons require some sort of aid (“saving wisdom”) from others who are in touch with current realities. Fish suggests that academics ordinarily believe the only way for “hundreds of millions” of their contemporaries to lose their “quaint” or “pre-modern” status is to submit themselves to a higher, more rational wisdom.

Referring obliquely to the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath, Fish argues that today, academics have more reason than ever to admit to their condescending views and then to lay them aside.

Fish's concern is clearly to challenge his audience to take a less judgmental and condescending view of the persons in the world whose "belief" is neither wholly private nor wholly subordinate to the realm of rational "knowledge." In pursuing this rhetorical goal, however, Fish must engage with a complex tension that will be important to the ideas I will be tracing in this chapter. First, he desires to challenge what he sees as the current version of the distinction between what might be called "religion" and the "secular." Fish mounts this challenge by constructing and then attacking a narrative with two groups of characters: a group of self-styled protagonists who either have no non-rational beliefs or keep them confined to the private realm, and a second group whose beliefs function in a less bounded way and who thereby present some sort of problem or challenge to the first group. This narrative, which Fish explains so that he may criticize it, is thus a narrative of the relationship between rational protagonists and non-rational figures whose status relative to the protagonists is ambiguous. The latter figures are, on the one hand, potential enemies, a possibility evoked by the sidelong reference to 9/11. On the other hand, they are potential peers, should they be persuaded to submit to the guidance only the protagonists can provide. The binary opposition between these two groups is, Fish suggests, "ironic" because the very idea of "saving wisdom" implies a debt to the terminology, and perhaps also the ideas, of (specifically Christian) religious faith. In the very construction and dismissal of this narrative, however, Fish assumes that the distinction he makes between those with non-bounded public beliefs and those with

privately bounded beliefs, or none, is a distinction with accurate descriptive power. By pointing out that there are “hundreds of millions of people in the world” not like “us,” Fish reasserts the very binary he is supposedly calling into question. His charge to “us,” which urges a rejection of sacred/secular, public/private binaries, is framed by the assumption that he is one of “us,” and that the difference between “us” and “hundreds of millions” of others is quite real.

I discuss this brief example because it illustrates the shifting procedures of the current discussion of “religion” and the “secular” that I want to explore, a debate strongly influenced by, and often in active dialogue with, the intellectual tradition of secularization theory. Secularization theory has claimed that most or all forms of religion are in the process of vanishing from the world and are being replaced by secular institutions, beliefs, and subjects³. In recent years, however, secularization theory has faced highly vocal and multifaceted challenges, including an increasing number of challenges from those Fish would describe as academics. As the following discussion will show, adherents of secularization theory have had to negotiate the degree to which the idea of secularization, and the binary it implicitly affirms, can still be considered viable. Meanwhile, others have dispensed with many aspects of the theory without yet

³ The term “secularization theory” derives primarily, but by no means exclusively, from sociology. As I will discuss later in this chapter, sociological approaches continue to exert a powerful influence on the terms and priorities of current discussions of the secular in other academic realms. As Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart point out, secularization theory has its intellectual roots in the work of nineteenth century social thinkers, most of whom confidently predicted religion’s decline (Norris and Inglehart 3). As my discussions of Cox, Berger, and Luckmann will show, secularization theorists deploy a variety of argumentative strategies for demonstrating the decline of religion and the rise of secular subjects and institutions. What unifies the various approaches is an assumption that religion is fading from a world increasingly defined in non-religious terms. This thesis is alternately termed “classical secularization theory” (see Gorski) and “the secularization thesis” (see Pecora chapter 1).

being ready to dismantle the secular/religious binary around which it is constructed. In fact, the ongoing debate I will be exploring continues to assume that the central terms derived from secularization theory, those of “religion” and the “secular,” are still useful coordinates. While there is not exact agreement about the nature and boundaries of the terms, these authors use the terms “religion” and “religious,” or “secular,” with the confidence that their academic interlocutors share an understanding of what those terms mean⁴. At the same time—and here Fish’s remarks may be indicative of at least one trend in discussions of “religion” and the “secular”—they use these terms, and the binary understanding that organizes them, with an awareness that this structure can no longer be taken for granted.

The opening of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart’s *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (2004) shows how even vocal adherents of secularization theory often acknowledge the contested status of their model. The authors begin by reminding their readers that secularization theory dominated academic thought in much of the previous century: “The death of religion was the conventional wisdom in the social sciences during most of the twentieth century; indeed it has been regarded as *the* master model of sociological inquiry” (3)⁵. They proceed to admit that it is no longer the master model, and that

⁴ This shared understanding is still used to make a proprietary claim on the very term “religion.” Jonathan Smith affirms that the term means what scholars of religion (who may or may not be believers of any religion themselves) decide it means: “‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and is therefore theirs to define” (281).

⁵ Similar claims about secularization theory’s dominance can be found in Casanova, *Public Religions* 17-18, and Pecora 7.

secularization theory is currently experiencing the most sustained challenge in its long history. Critics point to multiple indicators of religious health and vitality today, ranging from the continued popularity of churchgoing in the United States to the emergence of the New Age spirituality in Western Europe, the growth in fundamentalist movements and religious parties in the Muslim world, the evangelical revival sweeping through Latin America, and the upsurge of ethno-religious conflicts in international affairs. (3-4)

Part of the challenge Norris and Inglehart describe comes from the “health and vitality” of religious forces and institutions currently visible in the world. Their choice of words figures religion as an organic being, and asserts that this being is far from dead. In their mention of Islamic political parties, and of international conflict at least partly characterized as religious, Norris and Inglehart suggest that an additional aspect of the challenge to secularization theory derives from its public presence in many different areas of the globe. The claim that religion is alive, and is alive in public settings, poses a threat not least because it contradicts a common assumption in earlier secularization theory that the conditions of modernity allow religion to survive only in private realms⁶. Having conceded the living and public presence of forces that earlier theories dismissed into obscurity, Norris and Inglehart assert that even now, “the concept of secularization captures an important part of what is going on” (4). They maintain that despite what they concede is the renewed public presence of religion, “[s]ecularization is a tendency,” though “not an iron law” (8)⁷. It is important to note, however, that the lengthier passage

⁶ As I discuss later in this chapter, the most systematic articulation of this position from the era of secularization theory’s dominance in sociology remains Thomas Luckman’s *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (1963). A more recent argument in favor of what Casanova calls the “privatization of religion thesis” (35) is put forward by Wolfgang Schluchter in *Rationalism, Religion, and Domination* (1988); see in particular pp. 253-264.

⁷ For other assertions of secularization theory’s continuing relevance, see the work of Steve Bruce. His support of the theory has developed over the course of works he has

above does identify the current debate as “the most sustained challenge” that secularization theory has faced. The opening gambit of discussing current challenges to secularization theory (whether or not a given author agrees that the theory ought to be challenged) is now a familiar starting point for discussing the relationship between the religious and the secular⁸.

The contested status of secularization theory has pressing implications for the way cyberpunk fiction can be read. As I will show, some of the most influential cyberpunk criticism has assumed that secularization will, in fact, become dominant and displace religion, and there has been little attention to the tensions and conflicts regarding religion and the secular in the most prominent novels in the cyberpunk canon. Attention to newer developments in critical debates about secularization can lead us to a new appreciation of these tensions and conflicts; as I hope to demonstrate, attention to these elements of cyberpunk will show that the fiction has been more attuned to challenges to the secular than most of its critics. However, in order to understand the assumptions that have guided most cyberpunk critics thus far, it is important to understand the norms of secularization theory, particularly its earlier and still influential expressions from the 1950s and 1960s, when secularization theory rarely questioned its own assumptions.

Secularization Theory: Norms and Assumptions

written in the last decade: *Religion in the Modern World* (1996), *Choice and Religion* (1999), and *God is Dead* (2002). For further defense of secularization theory, see also Demerath (2001).

⁸ Opening gestures similar to those of Norris and Inglehart can be found in a number of other recent texts, including Casanova’s *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), Berger’s introduction to the volume *The Descularization of the World* (1999), Asad’s *Formations of the Secular* (2003), and deVries and Sullivan’s introduction to *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular Age* (2006).

One typical adherent of secularization theory from this period is Harvey Cox⁹, who argues in *The Secular City* (1965) that the process of secularization has run parallel to the process of urbanization. His argument links the spatial transformation of urban life to the conceptual transformation of religion into what he sees as secular terms (38-59). This transformation is, for Cox, irreversible; he argues that secularization and urbanization have established a supremacy that religion, in whatever guise, will not be able to challenge:

It will do no good to cling to our religious and metaphysical version of Christianity in the hope that one day religion or metaphysics will once again be back. They are disappearing forever and that means we can now let go and immerse ourselves in the new world of the secular city. (4)

Here, Cox makes an interesting distinction between a “religious and metaphysical version of Christianity” and a secular version of it. The former is no longer a viable choice, he claims, because the entire category of “religion or metaphysics” that would be needed to authorize it has vanished. By speaking of either holding onto this category or releasing it from our grasp, Cox expresses the idea that “we” are the active subjects who can, but also must, face the reality of secularization. There is a clear separation between the position

⁹ It should be noted that unlike the other two figures I discuss in this section, Cox is not a sociologist but a theologian; his work is associated with the “death of God” school of theology. For further examples of this school, see Altizer and Vahanian. Berger’s somewhat condescending attitude toward the “death of God” school suggests that he might not see his own work as part of the same conversation as Cox’s (*Sacred Canopy* 166), but as Casanova implies, the overall story of secularization theory’s dominance at mid-century makes it useful to see that era’s theological and sociological approaches to secularization as part of the same conversation (*Public Religions* 11).

of the secular “we,” who are destined for a future in a secular urban space, and what he designates “religion or metaphysics”; “they” have vanished into the past.

As his argument progresses, Cox makes clear that there is some sense in which “religious” terms are still relevant to modern life, but he insists that this relevance is only possible if those terms change in such a way that they can confront secular subjects in their current state: “[I]t is pointless and unfair to try to force secular man into asking religious questions, consciously or otherwise, before we can converse” (81). In this formulation, the constitution of “secular man” is not to be challenged or altered by “religious” phenomena; rather, those phenomena are only admitted into discussion insofar as urban, secular subjects can understand them. Further, Cox argues that the historical process that created the secular city was authored in part by Judeo-Christian systems of belief. He points particularly to what he sees as the secularizing implications both of early Judaism and of early Christianity (60-84) and he insists that the central message of the Christian gospel is ultimately secularizing: “The Gospel does not call man to return to a previous stage of his development. It does not summon man back to dependency, awe and religiousness. Rather it is a call to imaginative urbanity and mature secularity” (83). By using the language of calling or vocation, Cox speaks of the new secular and urban living he recommends as a kind of obligation. However, his assertion that this obligation is a matter of *refusing* feelings of “awe and religiousness” significantly alters the traditional Christian meaning of the term “vocation”¹⁰. In Cox’s view, there is a paradoxical sense that the Christian Gospel, one of the very sources of meaning that has often been identified with “religiousness,” far from being some sort of

¹⁰ See Max Weber’s definition of the traditional Christian notion of calling in chapter 3 of *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*.

refuge for those who might not wish to live in the secular city, now functions to *forbid* such a wish. The call of the Gospel today, Cox tells his readers of 1965, is to go forth into the city and be secular.

Not all mid-twentieth century secularization theorists are as committed as Cox to a linear narrative of the decline of “religion or metaphysics.” In contrast to his view of secularization as an irreversible process that replaced religious spaces and subjects with secular ones in a more or less direct fashion, Peter Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) argues for a more dynamic concept of secularization that would establish a dialectical relationship between religious and secular forces¹¹. In a move somewhat similar to Cox’s, Berger suggests that some religious phenomena might possibly have led to their own decline, claiming that “the Western religious tradition may have carried the seeds of secularization within itself” (110). However, for Berger, the way in which the seeds of secularization develop is dynamic and multi-faceted. In his analysis of the growth of religion as a social force, Berger deploys a three-stage model of development in which believing subjects first posit an external belief system to structure the world, subsequently take their own explanations as reality, and finally internalize these explanations as truths inhabiting their own consciousness (3-28). It is subsequent to the third stage, internalization, that Berger sees the possibility of a secularizing turn. This turn may occur, he argues, when individual subjects experience some personal or historical event that challenges the validity of their convictions—particularly events such

¹¹ Berger was certainly not the first to argue for such a view, and his approach can be seen as influenced by Max Weber. Bernice Martin (161) and Steve Bruce (“The Curious Case” 87-88) both suggest that Berger’s approach to secularization in *The Sacred Canopy* and other early works has affinities with Weber’s. For discussion of the roots of Weber’s dialectical approach in the works of Nietzsche, see Pecora 11-12. For a more skeptical treatment of the connection between Weber and Nietzsche, see Gane chapters 3-4.

as violent atrocities that call into question the very integrity of sacred categories. Such moments summon up the need for what Berger and others call *theodicy*, a term Berger defines as religious explanations for “phenomena of suffering, evil and, above all, death” (53). Berger suggests that when believers attempt to understand these phenomena through theodicy only to be dissatisfied with its comforts, they may turn against the institutions from which their beliefs derived, and towards a non-sacred understanding of their circumstances instead¹².

The dialectic of secularization Berger constructs is ironic, since in his view theodicy’s very attempt to validate religious faith by reconciling even the most horrific human experiences to a religious framework (for example, explaining how a particular atrocity can be seen as an expression of divine will) can cause the belief system as a whole to suffer a loss of legitimacy. Despite the more complex dynamics of this argument, Berger’s version of secularization theory sounds a note of *inevitability* very similar to Cox’s. Long before the concept of “secularization” is thinkable for the believer, Berger sees its latent possibility in the fact that there is always (in his view) a degree of alienation involved in religious belief. He asserts that “religious meanings are objectivated projections. It follows that, insofar as these meanings imply an overwhelming sense of otherness, they may be described as *alienated projections*” (89, italics original). By claiming that the relationship between believers and their beliefs is an alienated one, Berger is not saying that this relationship necessarily produces a *sense* of alienation in the believer. In fact, he asserts that the “alienated projections” of

¹² See Berger’s discussion of the variety of problems that he believes have confronted Christian theodicy in chapter 3. For a more detailed discussion of the nature and function of theodicy, particularly in the context of Christianity’s history, see chapter 5 of Blumenberg’s *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

religious belief are ordinarily a part of what causes them to have value for the believer: “The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order” (26). For Berger, alienation only becomes an impetus for secularization when the “sacred cosmos” in which believers invest themselves stops functioning as “an ultimately meaningful order,” as when, for example, Christian spokesmen found themselves unable to explain why God would allow the Holocaust (79). Late in *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger argues that late stages of religious development have the effect either of “liberalizing” or diluting religion so that it resembles a kind of commodity in competition with others, or of annexing it into less and less influential realms of society (150-153). Thus, Berger’s version of secularization theory still tends, like Cox’s, to assume that decline is religion’s natural destiny.

Despite the fact that Berger’s approach is more nuanced than Cox’s, it is clear that Berger shares with Cox not only a belief in the inevitable decline of religion, but also a sense that there are two sets of coordinates available to chart this decline. One set of coordinates is *spatial*; it allows for a differentiation among various kinds of social arenas and also among various kinds of subjective consciousness. As I mentioned earlier, secularization theory has tended to claim that religion will inevitably be confined to small and almost entirely private arenas because it no longer possesses the power or legitimacy to organize public institutions. In his critique of secularization theory in *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), Jose Casanova names this “privatization theory” and views it as the lynchpin of secularization theory as a whole (35-39). This issue of spatial differentiation through privatization is particularly important to the compartmentalizing

approach to religion I will be tracing in my discussion of *Snow Crash*. As I will demonstrate, the novel develops secularizing strategies whereby religion can be segmented and kept separate from other social phenomena, while at the same time troubling and questioning this segmentation in ways that reflect a new sense of anxiety about religion's status in the world. In this way, the novel seems indebted to, or at least unconsciously aligned with, the norms of secularization theory, even as it confronts the reality of religious forces that limit the power of these norms.

In the era of secularization theory's ascendancy, when such anxiety had yet to make itself felt, the most comprehensive elaboration of privatization theory was Thomas Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (1967). Luckmann contends that religion is becoming "invisible" because it is now an institutionally specialized matter. Official religious institutions no longer exert a sacred influence on public life, which now functions according to secular norms. As Luckmann puts it, "The more the traces of a sacred cosmos are eliminated from the 'secular' norms, the weaker is the plausibility of the global claim of religious norms" (85). Luckmann claims that institutional annexation, whereby religion is relegated to specialized social institutions, is paralleled by annexation in religious practice. In his view, individuals maintain their religious beliefs by cordoning them off from other more secularized parts of their lives: these beliefs become, for many, "'part-time' religious roles" (85). Luckmann suggests that this segmentation of roles will tend to restrict the "religious" parts of a believer's life far more than it restricts the "secular" ones: "[T]he individual ... tends to restrict the relevance of specifically religious norms to domains that are not yet pre-empted by the jurisdictional claims of 'secular' institutions. Thus religion becomes a

‘private’ affair” (86). The momentum of Luckmann’s logic could be questioned; it would be possible to imagine a “part-time” believer who acts out various religious and non-religious roles in such a way that the relationships among roles are fluid, and the various parts of life in which they are enacted are likewise less bounded, each fluctuating in the amount of “jurisdiction” it grants to the others. For Luckmann, however, as for Cox and Berger, this kind of individual seems difficult to imagine. All three of these theorists seem committed to separating their two objects of study, “religion” and the “secular,” as a matter of theoretical principle, and for Luckmann, this separation can be mapped more or less directly onto the individual¹³. In the novels I will be discussing, spatial separation is assumed as a norm that distinguishes between “religious” and “secular” kinds of persons and practices. At the same time, this norm is contested and subjected to various stresses that the novels work both to produce and to contain. The novels thus paradoxically uphold and challenge secularization theory’s reliance on spatial categories of understanding.

In addition to the idea of *spatial* separation, secularization theory also seems committed to the idea of *temporal* separation. This may seem to be an obvious point, since secularization theory is necessarily a theory about changes that occur over time¹⁴.

¹³ Luckmann’s discussion of “part-time roles” raises the question of exactly how such roles affect individual or social identity. However, Luckmann is not interested in pursuing these implications, and simply observes that internal partitioning results in “a prereflective attitude in which one shifts from ‘secular’ to religious performances in routine fashion” (86). As I discuss later, questions of secular selfhood or identity have more recently come into view in a complex way.

¹⁴ It should be noted that the spatial and temporal dimensions of secularization theory I am discussing have parallels in the origins of the term “secular.” The Latin *sæculum* was originally a temporal term designating the space of human history over and against divine, eternal temporality. However, as William Swatos and Kevin Christiano point out, “[l]ater the term would come to be used to distinguish between civil and ecclesiastical

What I wish to point out is an aspect of the theory that is more elusive because the assumption behind it seems more entrenched and only partly articulated. Secularization theory, I suggest, has been concerned to justify itself by appealing to some sense that beliefs (and believers) can be judged according to a standard of historical relevance. Cox, for instance, is concerned not simply to point to a specific set of historical phenomena that he sees as secularizing. He wishes to encourage his readers to think in terms of the age that (he claims) they are living in, and to be aware of themselves as subjects in a secular time. He makes this encouragement clear in his injunction against retreating from the secular city, and against speaking in explicitly “religious or metaphysical” terms to other people who live there. Berger offers no such direct guidelines for conduct to his readers, but he is clearly committed to the idea that religious believers lose their faith because of their *own* historical awareness; for instance, he believes that contemplating historical events such as the Holocaust can disconnect believers from their faith, based on their sense that “history” no longer allows for certain kinds of beliefs. In Luckman’s view, as well, there is an assumption that believers cordon off their beliefs into private social roles, and even into private areas of their own consciousness, because at some level their own sense of history “knows” that such beliefs are no longer valid. This way of characterizing religious beliefs will be important to my discussion of *Neuromancer*, which mediates the relationship between its secular

law, lands, and possessions” (211). Thus, *sæculum*, and the later term *sæcularis*, were used to make spatial as well as temporal distinctions between what was considered sacred and what was not. I follow Hans Blumenberg’s argument that more recent uses of the term “secular” in secularization theory are not necessarily indebted to the earlier terms for their content, although the formal similarity may still be significant; see in particular *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* chapter 2. For a brief genealogy of the development of the term “secular,” see Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* pp. 21-22.

protagonists and their religious allies by highlighting the anachronistic qualities of the latter. The novel even suggests that its religious characters “know” they are anachronistic holdovers from a previous historical moment, thus confirming the greater historical relevance of the secular protagonists.

Ironically, the ascendancy of secularization theory ended, in part at least, because of historical events that challenged the theory’s norms. To return for a moment to *The Sacred Canopy*, it is worth noting that towards the end of his argument about secularization, Berger glances briefly at the potential role of secularization in non-Western religions. He cautiously but firmly predicts that the patterns of decline and of privatization that he believes are true for Christianity in the West are very likely to set the pattern for what happens to other religions elsewhere (171). However, before the 1970s were at an end, political events in the Middle East, particularly the rise of a Shi’ite Muslim state in Iran in 1979, would demonstrate the limitations of this prediction. Meanwhile, in the United States, the increasing presence of Christian belief in public debate (illustrated by the emergence of the Moral Majority in 1978) suggested that political life in traditionally Judeo-Christian nations did not always develop as secularization theory predicted. By the early 1980s, prompted in part by these global events, an increasing number of voices began to challenge secularization theory’s validity¹⁵, and in 1984 Peter Berger, reversing his earlier position, claimed that “while there has been a crisis of religion in the modern world, there now appears likely to be a

¹⁵ For a brief bibliography of the sociological debate over secularization theory from the late 1970s through the 1980s, see Casanova, *Public Religions* 235-236. For a more extended history of the debate, see Swatos and Christiano.

crisis of secularization as well” (14)¹⁶. By 1994, Jose Casanova, in his landmark study *Public Religions in the Modern World*, could pose the following rhetorical question: “Who still believes in the *myth* of secularization?” (11, italics original). Casanova’s confidence concerning the mythical nature of earlier concepts of secularization is grounded in his observations of religion in public life during the 1980s, when, he claims, “[d]uring the entire decade it was hard to find any serious political conflict anywhere in the world that did not show behind it the not-so-hidden hand of religion” (3). Casanova argues that it is impossible to consider this state of affairs as some kind of exception to a secularizing rule, and that “religions are here to stay, thus putting to rest one of the most cherished dreams of the Enlightenment” (6). In referring to secularization theory using the rhetoric of “myth” and “dream,” Casanova expresses a confidence about the incorrectness of secularization theory that is directly opposed to earlier, mid-century confidence in its correctness. Particularly significant are the implications of the pithy phrase “here to stay.” The phrase asserts that religion is both spatially present, “here” in the same space as the scholar who is analyzing it, and that it will “stay” in a temporal sense, sustaining its coexistence with the secular in the same historical moment. To see recent history in this way collapses the spatial and temporal separation constructed (in ideas if not in reality) by secularization theory. However, as I noted in my discussion of Fish, the collapse of such distinctions does not necessarily mean the collapse of the secular/religious binary itself. Instead, as I will demonstrate in later chapters, the

¹⁶ Of particular interest to the history of debate over the secularization thesis is Steve Bruce’s attack on Berger. For Bruce’s critique of Berger, see “The Curious Case of the Unnecessary Recantation: Berger and Secularization.” For one of Berger’s more recent claims that he has been correct to reverse his original position, see his introduction to *The Desecularization of the World*. Also of interest is Harvey Cox’s reversal of his version of secularization theory; see *Religion in the Secular City* (1984).

presence of religion in the same time and place as the secular can prompt a reinvestment in secular categories over and against religious ones, and a reassertion of the difference between the two.

Secularization Theory and Cyberpunk Criticism

I have rehearsed the dynamics of mid-century secularization theory partly because they provide context for the new debates I will be discussing in the next section.

However, I find this body of theory important for another reason: its assumptions are similar to those that have most strongly influenced critical discussions of cyberpunk fiction. The study of cyberpunk has agreed overwhelmingly that it should be understood as an expression of postmodernism. The link between cyberpunk and postmodernism is most famously made by Fredric Jameson, who claims in *Postmodernism* (1991) that cyberpunk is “the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself” (419, italics original). Scott Bukatman has explicitly seconded Jameson’s evaluation (*Terminal Identity* 6, 147), and so has Larry McCaffery, who argues that cyberpunk, perhaps more than any contemporary art form, is powerfully equipped to represent the postmodern experience Jameson describes as normative under late capitalism (16)¹⁷. I suggest that the claim that cyberpunk is thoroughly postmodern

¹⁷ For more examples of the connection between cyberpunk and postmodernism, see Csicsery-Ronay, “Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism” (1988), McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992) chapters 9-10, Tabbi (1995) 208-227, Cavallaro (2000) 10-11, Heuser (2003) xxv, Rapatzikou (2004) 37-45, and Tatsumi (2006) chapters 7-8. It should be noted that not all accounts of postmodern literature and culture give attention to cyberpunk fiction. Linda Hutcheon’s landmark study of postmodern aesthetics, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, does not discuss cyberpunk as a genre or individual cyberpunk

might usefully be linked to a second claim Jameson makes, namely that postmodernism is a complete state of secularization. He describes postmodernism as “more effortlessly secular than any modernism could have wished,” and argues that with the advent of postmodernism, “religious traditionalisms seem to have melted away without a trace” (387)—a claim that echoes (and amplifies) earlier predictions of religion’s inevitable decline.

Jameson is aware that a number of religious subjects and movements might still claim to be aligned with various “religious traditionalisms,” but he categorically denies the possibility that such claims could be valid. In his discussion of “what is now sometimes called ‘fundamentalism’” (387), Jameson assumes that recent manifestations of religion must be seen as inauthentic:

It would be abusive or sentimental to account for such new “religious” formations by way of an appeal to some universal human appetite for the spiritual, in a situation in which spirituality by definition no longer exists ... I take it as axiomatic that what is now called fundamentalism is also a postmodern phenomenon, whatever it would like to think it thinks about a purer and more authentic past ... [I]t may be considered (without any disrespect) to have a simulated relationship to the past rather than a commemorative one, and to share characteristics of other such postmodern historical simulations. (387-390).

Jameson denies any potential continuity between contemporary fundamentalism and traditional modern or pre-modern religions, either at the level of individual belief (since he sees no “universal human appetite for the spiritual” that could bridge the gap between postmodern selves and earlier eras) or at the level of institutions (which can *simulate* a connection to the past but cannot actively *commemorate* older systems of belief). Like

writers, nor does David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*. My claim is not that all scholars of the postmodern privilege cyberpunk, only that most critics of cyberpunk link it to postmodernism.

Luckmann (who discusses the struggles of those who continue to embrace their religion “naively” but insists that “the term is not used pejoratively” (85)), Jameson claims that he intends no disrespect to fundamentalists. He simply insists that their claims cannot possibly square with the postmodern realities against which they must ultimately be judged. Jameson’s view is not necessarily the last word on this matter; other theorists have been more willing to see spiritual possibilities in postmodernism¹⁸. What is significant, I suggest, is that the theorist who has most authoritatively linked cyberpunk to postmodernism has also seen postmodernism in terms of a strict model of secularization that was already under attack by the early 1990s, and that Casanova would dismiss as a “myth” (11) in 1994. Given this attachment to the assumptions of early secularization theory, it is not surprising that neither Jameson nor most other critics of cyberpunk have noted the prominent place it often grants to religious characters and forces.

In later chapters I will address a small body of work that has differed with the assumptions implicit in Jameson’s view. Critics such as David Porush claim that far from expressing a state of complete secularization, some cyberpunk novels actually express spiritual longings and attempt to grant some validity to religious or metaphysical beliefs, institutions and practices (see Porush, “Hacking the Brainstem”). While I find this position admirable in its attempt to challenge the assumptions that prevail in consideration of cyberpunk, I assert that a different approach is needed. In my view, the novels I will consider do not actively *affirm* any manifestations of sacred energies.

¹⁸ For a discussion of postmodernism contemporaneous with Jameson’s that argues for its spiritual or “enchanted” potential, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1992). For a discussion of postmodern fiction as expressive of this potential, see McLure, *Late Imperial Romance* (1994) and “Postmodern/Post-Secular” (1995).

However, they are much more *aware* of such energies than many critics have assumed, and their structures of plot and characterization do make a space for characters who are clearly designated “religious.” In the futures imagined by cyberpunk, religious beliefs and practices have not withered away, and continue to have power to shape the world. Further, they share at least some of the same *space* as the secular (by interacting with secular characters through shared institutions, economies and technologies), and exist in the same *time* (their relationship to the past is not, in Jameson’s phrase “simulated”). Although religion is present in cyberpunk, it is always encountered from the outside, that is, from the position of characters who are not committed to religious beliefs and practices and who retain some kind of attachment, however troubled, to some secular categories. These protagonists are caught up, whether willingly or no, in complex conflicts, debates, negotiations, or alliances with religious forces and the characters who represent them. What previous criticism has missed by ignoring these interactions (or, more rarely, by reading them as a sign of religious longing) is how much of the energy of these novels is generated neither by a simple assumption of secular norms, nor by a turn to religious alternatives. Instead, these novels explore interactions between and among sacred and secular subjects and forces.

I will argue that the novels’ accounts of these interactions are aligned with the views of secular protagonists and controlled (sometimes only in the final instance) by secular priorities. Nevertheless, the interactions trouble secular assumptions, creating opportunities for a more complex understanding of the novels’ protagonists, and a more three-dimensional view of the norms that govern the protagonists’ actions. Thus, these interactions between and among sacred and secular forces are paramount for a

responsible understanding of the texts. Unlike Jameson's *Postmodernism*, the novels I will consider do not assume that the fate of the secular is a foregone conclusion. Instead, these novels express a more dynamic, troubled, self-reflexive set of secular norms, fostering awareness of the presence and power of religion, even as religion remains an "other" that cannot ultimately be absorbed into the lives and perspectives of the protagonists. Questions about the viability of the secular self linger in the conclusions of these novels, which do not fully resolve some of the critiques of the secular that occupy the body of the texts. Nevertheless, the position of the secular subject is affirmed as more viable or sustainable than its religious alternatives. Thus, the presence of religion both destabilizes secular norms (by suggesting religious alternatives to them) and validates those norms (by suggesting that religious alternatives are ultimately even less satisfactory).

In order to understand the significance of cyberpunk's version of secular subjectivity and practice, I turn now to a new scholarly conversation about the status of the secular that has developed since secularization theory has ceased to be dominant. This new conversation has questioned secular norms and definitions of secular subjectivity, expanding the terms of discussion and opening up new possibilities for understanding the relationship between religious and secular subjects, institutions, and forces. The terms and concepts developed by this new conversation enable a more complex examination of the dynamics of cyberpunk fiction, which portrays troubled, unstable encounters between the secular and the religious that earlier secularization theory had ceased to see as a historical possibility.

Secular Selves: The Emerging Debate

One of the cornerstones of the new debate I will be discussing is an acknowledgment of the pervasive presence of religion in the world, not only in private life but also in public. The stance and terminology of Casanova's *Public Religions* has been particularly influential in this regard. The term "public religions," in particular, has become a shorthand means to express the idea that secularization theory's basic assumptions are incorrect. For example, Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan deploy the term in the preface, and in the title¹⁹, of the 2006 essay collection *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*:

The apparent triumph of Enlightenment secularization, manifest in the global spread of political and economic structures that pretended to relegate the sacred to a tightly circumscribed private sphere, seems to have foundered on the unexpected realization of its own parochialism and a belated acknowledgment of the continuing presence and force of "public religions" (the term is Jose Casanova's). (ix)

In this passage, the authors use Casanova's term "public religions" as they make claims about the consequences of this phenomenon. Interestingly, the consequences they see have something to do with persons, and not simply with incorrect theories. The passage interprets the fact of "public religions" (a fact the authors claim has received only "belated acknowledgment") as evidence of an essential failure on the part of "Enlightenment secularization," which they pronounce guilty of "parochialism." The phrasing of this passage does not specify what individuals or groups should be judged

¹⁹ The term is deployed again, with an attribution to Casanova, on page 2 of de Vries's introduction to the volume.

guilty of “parochialism”; the possessive “its” refers back to secularization’s “apparent triumph” without saying whose (false) triumph this might be. In the introductory essay that follows the preface, however, de Vries makes clear that specific kinds of subjects are under indictment. This indictment is voiced through Hans Joas’s consideration of the term “post secular”: “In the words of Hans Joas: “Post-secular” ... doesn’t express a sudden increase in religiosity, after its epochal decrease, but rather a change in mindset of those who, previously, felt justified in considering religions to be moribund” (2-3)²⁰.

From Joas’s point of view, the term “post-secular” does not describe new political or social conditions with respect to religion; rather, it marks a new *realization* on the part of those to whom religion’s presence in the world is surprising. Thus, Joas suggests that to study the “post-secular” effectively, one must shift focus from the traditional sociological object of study (religion) to the *subject* engaged in this study. In other words, Joas brings attention to the category of the secular self, and to the demands and responsibilities that self faces when it inhabits the same space, and the same time, as the religions it purports to examine. If Joas is correct, then what I have termed secularization theory’s spatial and temporal collapse has occurred only in a realm of academic conceptions; in reality, religion has been present all along. Joas insists that those who formerly believed in religion’s absence must now begin to examine themselves.

A similar shift of focus to the question of the secular self is already present, though not prominent, in Casanova’s *Public Religions*. The majority of Casanova’s argument is concerned to correct the mistakes of secularization theory by tracing the

²⁰ De Vries translates this passage from Joas’s 2004 book *Braucht der Mensch Religion? Über Erfahrungen der Selbsttranszendenz*, page 124. An English translation of the entire volume by Joas, entitled *Do We Need Religion? On the Experience of Self-Transcendence*, is forthcoming.

dynamics of public religions in a series of case studies. However, the author makes clear that he believes an accurate look at public religions means more for the social sciences than simply acknowledging earlier mistakes:

[I]t is not reality itself which has changed, as much as our perception of it, and ... we must be witnessing a ... revolution in scientific paradigms ... [T]here can be no doubt that we are dealing with a radical change in intellectual climate and in the background worldviews which normally sustain much of our social-scientific consensus. (11)

By focusing his attention on “our perception,” Casanova is demanding not simply a fresh look at the phenomena that he and other sociologists of religion typically examine, but also a fresh self-examination; the perspectives from which the phenomena are being examined, he suggests, must also come under scrutiny. This suggestion indicates that Casanova might intend more than a rhetorical flourish when he refers to “the *myth* of secularization” (11); there is a suggestion that as secular academics develop more accurate views of public religions, they may come up against not merely individual errors but a set of false beliefs (myths) that will have to be cleared away. Further, Casanova’s mention of secularization theory as “one of the most cherished dreams of the Enlightenment” underscores his belief that secular academics might have a non-rational attachment to the myths they must now debunk. Hence, when Casanova speaks of a “radical change” in the way that the “social-scientific consensus” operates, he leaves open the possibility that, in his view, secular academics might have to effect deeper transformations of their own vocations, perhaps even of their identities, in order to change their “background worldviews.” This question of the identity and position of the

secular self has only increased in importance since Casanova's announcement of "radical change."

It should be noted that the idea of a need for secular self-transformation, or at the very least self-examination, was a small but visible part of conversation in the social sciences even when secularization theory was dominant, and that this idea has, for some, led to the conclusion that the secular/religion binary has limited value²¹. Meanwhile, outside the social sciences, a number of different voices have questioned the validity of secular subjectivity, and the value of the religion/secular binary. Liberation theology, for instance, has insisted that the deepest expression of Christian theology involves a commitment to revolutionary political practice²². Feminist theology has pointed out that traditional notions of a separation between the material and the spiritual has been used to justify oppression and sexism²³. More recently, the theological movement known as Radical Orthodoxy has made an attempt to absorb the structures of the Enlightenment into explicitly Christian theology²⁴. These developments indicate that the secular/religion binary, as understood by secularization theory, has been and continues to be something many can do without. Still, there remain those who are unwilling to give up the binary,

²¹ See the work of Robert Bellah, in particular his critique of secularization theory in *Beyond Belief* (1970), where he suggests that the prevalence of secularization theory has more to do with the desire of its adherents to believe in their own destiny as bringers and defenders of rational "light" than it does with an empirically verifiable sociological thesis (237). Bellah argues for what he calls "a nonantagonistic differentiation" (244) between religious and secular phenomena, indicating that he thinks some kind of differentiation might be valid on occasion. Nevertheless, Bellah occupies a much different position from the other social scientists I have been discussing, since he suggests that the social sciences would do well to modify, if not to abandon, the religion/secular binary, a project he has pursued in subsequent work. See in particular his collaborative sociological study *The Habits of the Heart* (1985, 1996).

²² See Gutierrez, Boff, Berryman, and Sigmund.

²³ See Ruether, Cooley, and Aquino.

²⁴ See Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*.

however much it may need to be troubled or modified. In his 2006 book *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, Vincent Pecora begins his argument by addressing the concerns of scholars of religion who might call themselves secular (over and against whatever they may designate as religious) and who are still wrestling with the binary they see as an organizing principle. Pecora attempts to assess the ties between the secular and the religious and also the tensions between them, specifically as these ties and tensions bear on the question of what it means to be a secular scholar. According to Pecora, many in his audience find themselves in the following dilemma:

[I]t is not uncommon for those who engage in the study of society and culture to assume two somewhat contradictory things more or less simultaneously: that all religious traditions are inextricably caught up in, even defined by, questions of material and political power; and that religion, whatever a largely secular elite may think, matters a great deal ... We want to criticize the imperial hubris of the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition, even as we worry about ignoring that tradition's role as a (perhaps *the*) foundation of the secular Enlightenment, that is, the moral-political outlook of a modernity we would be loath to abandon (1).

The first sentence above describes a difficult conflict concerning the place of religion in academic discussion, one that Pecora sees as almost intractable. As he suggests, it is obviously very difficult for secular thinkers to balance claims about the importance of religion for contemporary life with claims that religion is almost always determined by other, non-religious forces²⁵. At a certain point, Pecora indicates, either religion will be declared an effect of some secular phenomenon ("material and political power"), or it will be acknowledged as a phenomenon in its own right, one that "matters a great deal."

²⁵ In the passage I am discussing, Pecora implies that "material and political power" is intrinsically secular without stating this position directly. It is true that one of Pecora's purposes is to question whether secular institutions really are separate from religion. However, Pecora still assumes the secular nature of "material and political power" as a default position, for his audience if not always for himself; see 16-17.

In the former case, religion as a category is cancelled and absorbed into the “moral-political outlook” of modernity. In the latter case, “religious traditions” remain distinct, and their relationship to other non-religious phenomena becomes a matter for concern.

The second sentence above reveals more fully who, in Pecora’s discussion, are the parties concerned to decide the question of religion’s status. Pecora sees a potential conflict concerning the historical roots of the relationship between the religious and the secular (still taken as a valid and useful binary by a collective “we” in which Pecora includes himself), and this conflict, like the question of religion’s status, is described as intractable. If Pecora is correct to suggest that secular thinkers are concerned to critique the very religious tradition that is, arguably, the underpinning of the modernity on which their critique is founded, it would seem that to strike at this tradition is to risk striking at secular thought as well. Moreover, while the first sentence suggests that the relationship of the religious to the secular is one of potential conflict, if not mutual exclusivity, the second sentence suggests that the two seem inextricably bound together. If Pecora’s analysis of the current moment is correct, then secular thought is not presently able simply to assume its own historical ascendancy over religion, nor is it able to assume that it is definitively separate from religion at all. At the same time, however, Pecora continues to use the very binary language he is concerned to trouble (“the secular Enlightenment” versus the “Judeo-Christian tradition”), a language that assumes opposition and, at least implicitly, invites conflict. The audience Pecora imagines is thus an audience aligned with “the secular Enlightenment” even as it confronts new questions about the roots, scope, and purpose of secular phenomena.

Subjects in Conflict: Three Current Perspectives

I want to consider some likely members of the audience Pecora addresses, intellectuals who question the religion/secular binary in a number of ways, but are also committed to using it. These thinkers acknowledge that, as Vincent Pecora puts it, “the more straightforward or standard narrative of secularization is at this point distinctly frayed at the edges” (16); nevertheless, they are interested in continuing the narrative, frayed though it might be, instead of unraveling it altogether. To emphasize the importance of this contested binary in critical conversation, I will consider three of the most prominent participants in current debates concerning religion and the secular: Slavoj Žižek, Talal Asad, and William Connolly²⁶. All three address the new conditions in which secularization narratives are highly contested, and all three attend to these conditions by paying attention to the secular as a category of selfhood²⁷. Each is situated in one or more intellectual traditions that have made the question of subjectivity a high

²⁶ Charles Taylor is notably absent from my discussion. Taylor has made valuable contributions to the current debate, especially what is thought to be his major contribution, *A Secular Age* (2007). Thus far, however, his contributions have provided valuable surveys of the concept of the secular without engaging the new context of secular/religious conflict in as much detail as the thinkers I am considering, particularly as regards the nature and function of secular institutional power. See Asad’s critique of Taylor’s limitations in *Formations of the Secular* 2-7.

²⁷ Jose Casanova has begun to approach this territory as well in his recent essay “Secularization Revisited: A Reply to Talal Asad.” The essay honors Asad for providing “a way of deconstructing the secular self-understanding of modernity that is constitutive of the social sciences” (20), indicating Casanova’s own interest in further critique of secular subjectivity. Furthermore, Casanova insists that such a critique “should be high on the agenda of a self-reflexive comparative historical sociology of secularization” (17). However, Casanova has thus far stopped short of actually deploying his own sociological approach (used to powerful effect in his study of world religion) to consider secular subjectivity in a systematic way.

priority (in the case of Žižek, a combination of Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis²⁸; in the case of Connolly, a variety of Western epistemological traditions, notably those of Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze²⁹; in the case of Asad, the works of Nietzsche and Foucault³⁰). Each has brought his tradition(s) into contact with the specific question of how subjects who designate themselves as “secular” can most effectively encounter others who can be designated “religious.” Each of these three authors, in one way or another, considers the question of how, and with what results, secular subjects might inhabit the same time, and the same space, as non-secular others—others whom secularization theory had confined to limited, non-public spaces, or dismissed altogether. Cyberpunk, in its own way, is also concerned with secular subjects sharing space and time with religious others, though this aspect of cyberpunk has been little understood. I will return to the three authors I discuss here in the chapters that follow, for they provide a vocabulary helpful for describing the complex space and time of the novels I will be discussing, even as the novels themselves can enrich critical understanding of how secular subjectivity can be challenged and reworked.

More than Connolly or Asad, Slavoj Žižek occupies a position with clear affinities to the categories of earlier secularization theory. *The Fragile Absolute: or, Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (2002) opens with the following claim:

²⁸ Žižek announces this hybrid theoretical program most explicitly in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989).

²⁹ For a brief summary of Connolly’s allegiance to Nietzsche and Deleuze, see *Why I Am Not a Secularist* chapter 1, particularly pages 26-29 and 41-46. For a statement of his alliance with Spinoza, see “Europe: A Minor Tradition.”

³⁰ For an analysis of the influence of Foucault, and through him of Nietzsche, on Asad’s work, see David Scott, “The Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad.”

One of the most deplorable aspects of the postmodern era and its so-called “thought” is the return of the religious dimension in all its different guises: from Christian and other fundamentalisms, through the multitude of New Age Spiritualisms, up to the emerging religious sensitivity within deconstructionism itself (so-called “post-secular” thought). (1)

The hostile tone of this passage leaves little doubt that Žižek believes “the return of the religious dimension” is unfortunate (in his words, “deplorable”), though as the following discussion will show, his attitude toward religion is more complex than it might seem. However, it is important to examine the assumption underlying the hostility. Žižek suggests that religion is not simply a separate intellectual category but is differentiated from other “dimensions” of the world in a more thoroughgoing way. He does not make clear what should assure us of this difference; traditional secular privatization theory, which argues for the separation of religion through institutional differentiation, could certainly supply the needed assumptions. What is clear, however, is that Žižek believes religion is separate enough from everything else that it can fade from the historical scene (which is, necessarily, constituted by other “dimensions” that are not religious) and then return to it. As his discussion proceeds, Žižek intensifies the hostility of his stance toward religion in a way that takes him beyond the assumptions of earlier secularization theory. For example, he identifies “fundamentalism” as the most visible (and implicitly the most deplorable) mark of religion’s difference; he claims that “the authentic Christian legacy is much too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks” (2). The use of the word “freaks” suggests what Žižek takes to be the monstrous nature of fundamentalism’s otherness. By dismissing at least some of his “deplorable” opponents as “fundamentalist freaks,” Žižek is suggesting that they either do not merit analysis or are not susceptible to it. In the cogent phrasing of Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, this kind of thinking

classifies fundamentalists as “the really other Others” (11) who must be opposed, among other reasons, for the sake of lower-case others who are comprehensible and merit political protection and recognition. This terminology of “freaks” will reappear in my discussion of *Snow Crash*, which also represents religion in terms of traumatic, and possibly monstrous, difference.

The denunciation of “the return of the religious dimension” indicates that Žižek wants to clear a space for non-religious subjects to resist this return. However, his sense of what such subjects ought to do is more complex than his opening gesture might suggest. In fact, Žižek’s hostility toward the fundamentalist-as-freak has its counterpart in a *positive* valuation of some aspects of Christianity. It is this valuation that prompts Žižek to claim that there is something worth fighting for, something “precious,” in the Christian legacy, that must not fall into fundamentalist hands. The specific name for this something, he argues, is *agape*, the concept of Christian love developed most fully in the writings of Paul. For Žižek, the attraction of this concept lies in its resemblance to psychoanalysis, particularly because of Paul’s discussion of the relationship of law to transgression. Like Freud, Žižek argues, Paul understands that the relationship of law to transgression is one of mutual dependence; though moral law officially exists to prohibit sin and point the way to correct behavior, unofficially it exists perpetually to generate the category of transgression, which it can never fully erase. In the following portion of Žižek’s argument, *agape* becomes a central theoretical category:

What if the Pauline *agape*, the move beyond the mutual implication of Law and sin, is *not* the step towards the full symbolic integration of the particularity of Sin into the universal domain of the Law, but its exact opposite, the unheard-of gesture of leaving behind the domain of the Law itself, of “dying to the law,” as Saint Paul put it (Romans 7:5)? In other words, what if the Christian wager is *not*

Redemption in the sense of the possibility for the domain of the universal Law retroactively to “sublate”—integrate, pacify, erase—its traumatic origins, but something radically different, the cut into the Gordian knot of the vicious cycle of Law and its founding Transgression? (100)

What is striking about this analysis is how closely it makes *agape* resemble the procedures of psychoanalysis itself; *agape* disrupts “the universal domain of the Law” by questioning the relationship between the subject who sins and the law that is transgressed. Žizek sees this disruption as productive of a new, more liberated subject; he claims that “it is, perhaps, only as the result of psychoanalytic treatment that one can acquire the capacity to enjoy *doing* one’s duty” (141). Žizek does not grant Christian doctrine this power of freeing us to enjoy our duty. Instead, he sees *agape* as a significant, but merely prototypical, expression of what is only fully discovered later in psychoanalysis. The implication of Žizek’s argument is that Christian believer attempting to live out the principle of *agape* is likewise a prototype of the more fully liberated subject produced by Lacanian Marxism.

Žizek thus secularizes *agape* in the sense that he claims to complete this Christian concept by translating it into secular terms. This act of completion is a delicate one, since (in Žizek’s view) the “precious” Christian legacy that resembles Lacanian theory resides in the same body of theology that produces “deplorable” manifestations of religion. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*³¹ (2003), Žizek further develops his view that Christian

³¹ Žizek’s title refers to one of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” specifically a passage concerning the hidden role of religion in the theoretical power of historical materialism. Žizek, however, wishes to reverse Benjamin’s original formulation in order to criticize what he sees as a false turn toward theology in deconstruction: “[T]he time has come to reverse Walter Benjamin’s first thesis on the philosophy of history: ‘The puppet called “theology” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for any one if it enlists the services of historical materialism, which today, as we know, is

theology is a kind of nascent Lacanian Marxism. He concludes with an expectation of “the ultimate heroic gesture that awaits Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself—like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge” (171). The specific significance of Christ’s sacrifice, in Žižek’s view, is a willingness to forego the presence of the divine Other:

When Christ dies, what dies with him is the secret hope discernible in “Father, why hast thou forsaken me?”³²: the hope that there *is* a father who has abandoned me ... The point of Christianity as the religion of atheism is ... [that] it attacks the religious hard core that survives even in humanism, even up to Stalinism, with its belief in History as the “big Other” that decides on the “objective meaning” of our deeds. (171, italics original)

By targeting humanism and Stalinism, Žižek is clearly critiquing a set of opponents quite different from the “fundamentalist freaks” he attacks in *The Fragile Absolute*. He seems to want to accomplish more with the idea of “Christianity as the religion of atheism” than simply keeping “fundamentalists” at bay; he sees his heretical version of Christianity as useful in combating other positions, both Marxist (Stalinism) and non-Marxist (humanism) that, in his view, still contain a “religious hard core.” As his hope for a “heroic gesture” of renunciation makes clear, however, the Christianity he values is an atheistic Christianity whose followers renounce the “core” of their theology in order to free themselves from connection to a “big Other.”

By shifting his critique from “fundamentalist freaks” in *The Fragile Absolute* to a generalized “religious hard core” in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek seems to distance

wizened and has to keep out of sight” (3). Žižek is concerned to bring attention to the hidden dimension of explicitly political meaning (specifically Marxist meaning) that, in his view, controls the “puppet called ‘theology’” in current poststructuralist theory.

³² See Matthew 27:26 and Mark 15:34; see also the origin of these lines in Psalm 22:1.

himself somewhat from a focus on fundamentalists as “really other Others” (Jackson and Pellegrini 11). Instead, he critiques a wider array of belief systems that, in his view, rely on a belief in the “big Other.” However, in both works, he is concerned to control the meaning of Christian theology, and continually to rework it until it can be seen as a “religion of atheism” that he can endorse. In one sense, the “religion of atheism,” what Žizek calls a “treasure” or “the authentic Christian legacy,” collapses the difference between Christian theology (or at least his ideal version of it) and Lacanian Marxism. At the same time, Žizek seems to insist that there is a difference that cannot fully be erased by the translation of terms he is concerned to effect. This paradox, in which Christianity is aligned with the materialist non-Christian self and at the same time figured as “other,” is expressed in the following passage:

My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is susceptible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach—and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience. (6, italics original)

The exclusive materialist claim Žizek makes on the “subversive kernel of Christianity” is consonant with his overall project. However, the claim that “one should go through the Christian experience” in order to become a Marxist is more disruptive. Žizek does not specify how such an experience of conversion (to Christianity, and subsequently to Marxism) would work. This sudden “vice versa” twist may simply be a way to insist that being a dialectical materialist is the same as being a certain kind of heretical, atheist Christian. In both cases, Žizek implies, there is a radical break from a “big Other” that allows for new political possibilities. The procedures of Žizek’s argument, however,

continually renew the difference they claim ultimately to erase. *The Fragile Absolute* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* convey the sense that the dialectical materialist (Zizek himself) must try repeatedly to absorb “the religious dimension,” specifically certain aspects of Christian theology, that can be neither erased nor abandoned. Even if Zizek is correct concerning Pauline theology’s power to cut the “Gordian knot” that ties law to transgression, his own project ties another such knot between the kind of secular self he approves and the theology that the secular self is supposed to supercede. I will be observing a parallel dynamic at work in the secularizing assumptions of *Snow Crash*. In its narrative of conflict with religion as a virus that brainwashes its followers, the novel expresses the impulse to break with religious paradigms. However, as the novel explores the idea of religion as a virus, it also expresses the impulse to rework or rehearse this break, thus renewing connections between the secular self and its religious others.

Zizek’s work actively engages with religion, both as opponent and as potential ally, to advance the interests of a “heretical” project of dialectical materialism. Anthropologist Talal Asad, by contrast, tries to explore the relationship between the secular and the religious in a more self-reflexive and disinterested way. Asad first considers the role of religious forces as *other* to secular selves and institutions in essays collected in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993)³³. In that work, however, his focus is primarily on religion as an object of study. The position of implicitly non-religious subjects, and the meaning of their institutions and practices, are only partly in focus. Secular selves, and the institutions they inhabit, assume the foreground in *Formations of the Secular* (2003). The book’s first chapter is entitled: “What Might an Anthropology

³³ See in particular Asad’s consideration of the “othering” of Islam in his discussion of the Salman Rushdie affair in chapters 7-8.

of Secularism Look Like?” Asad makes clear that this question grows out of his conviction that “anthropologists have paid scarcely any attention to the idea of the secular” (21), even though “it is common knowledge that religion and the secular are closely linked, both in our thought and in the way they have emerged historically” (22). Asad does not immediately make clear who is encompassed by the possessive in the phrase “our thought”; he could be referring specifically to the thinking of anthropologists, or more broadly to scholars in general. However, he makes anthropology his specific object of critique when he claims:

Any discipline that seeks to understand “religion” must also try to understand its other. Anthropology in particular—the discipline that has sought to understand the strangeness of the non-European world—also needs to grasp more fully what is implied in its being at once modern and secular. (22)

Asad is careful to distance himself from a Eurocentric fascination with non-European forms of the sacred that are supposedly non-rational (22-23), and as the passage above implies, he insists that the secular, the “other” of religion, deserves the same anthropological scrutiny as religion itself³⁴. However, this insistence does not lead Asad to the conclusion that there is no actual difference between the secular (which he sees as centered in Europe, and in the concept of modernity) and the non-secular. In fact, Asad assumes that the terms “modern” and “secular” still retain some distinct meaning for the anthropologist, and that anthropology itself can accurately be described as “secular.” Further, this distinct meaning survives even after “modern” and “secular” have become objects of critique.

³⁴ Asad’s reference to “the strangeness of the non-European world” is aimed not at some actual, objective strangeness but at a Eurocentric worldview’s *perception* that the non-European world is strange.

Asad's procedure in *Formations of the Secular* thus expresses a dynamic balancing act. On the one hand, Asad wishes to defamiliarize what he sees as secular beliefs, assumptions and practices in order to disrupt the idea of secularism as a norm. For instance, he is careful to scrutinize "a number of familiar oppositions—*belief* and *knowledge*, *reason* and *imagination*, *history* and *fiction*, *symbol* and *allegory*, *natural* and *supernatural*, *sacred* and *profane*—binaries that pervade modern secular discourse, especially in its polemical mode" (23). This list of binaries has some terms in common with the list compiled by Fish in the passage with which I began this chapter. Asad's intent, like Fish's, is to confront readers with the kinds of presumptive, either/or distinctions secularism makes in its "polemical mode." On the other hand, Asad insists on a very real difference between religion and the secular. This difference relies partly on "familiar oppositions" that Asad encourages us to mistrust, but this fact does not, in his view, make the difference any less real. He asserts that "[t]he secular ... is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)" (25). By insisting that the secular is not "continuous with the religious," Asad distances himself from the idea that the secular is an illegitimate cover for a form of religion that refuses to name itself as such: "I simply want to get away from the idea that the secular is a mask for religion" (26). At the same time, however, Asad does not allow the concept of the secular to have a completely independent existence, insisting that "the sacred and secular depend on each other" (26). For Asad, this interdependence does not lead to shared identity.

Asad emphasizes the difference between religious and secular phenomena by stressing questions of power, and by insisting that secular power operates to produce distinct kinds of subjects. For instance, he points out that the instability of certain secular terms is less important than the fact that the terms, and the things they name, have very real influence in the realm of politics:

Many critics have taken the position that “modernity” (in which secularism is centrally located) is not a verifiable object. They argue that contemporary societies are heterogeneous and overlapping, that they contain disparate, even discordant, circumstances, origins, valences, and so forth. My response is that in a sense these critics are right ... but that what we have here is not a simple cognitive error. Assumptions about the integrated character of “modernity” are themselves part of practical and political reality. They direct the way in which people committed to it act in critical situations. These people *aim* at “modernity,” and expect others (especially in the “non-West”) to do so too ... The important question ... is not to determine why the idea of “modernity” ... is a misdescription, but why it has become hegemonic *as a political goal*, what practical consequences follow from that hegemony, and what social conditions maintain it. (12-13)

Asad is interested in the secular (both the term and the phenomena that term serves to name) because of what he sees as its “hegemonic” influence on world politics. Further, he is not convinced that the secular can be usefully understood (or materially altered) by pointing out that the term is incoherent or oversimplified. Rather, he draws attention to modernity (where, he claims, “secularism is centrally located”) as a political project with real effects. Asad’s particular focus in *Formations of the Secular* is the influence of secularism on Europe’s relations with postcolonial nations and peoples. He is interested, for example, in “the attempt to construct categories of the secular and the religious in terms of which modern living is required to take place, and nonmodern peoples are invited to assess their inadequacy” (14). Asad’s concern is not that the category of

“modern living” lacks coherence; incoherent or not, he claims, it operates on “nonmodern peoples,” attempting to convince them of their “inadequacy” relative to the standards of modernity. In Asad’s view, the power of secular categories lies in their ability to “mediate people’s identities, help shape their sensibilities, and guarantee their experiences” (14). This formulation stresses the way that secular power shapes not only institutions but also the subjects who inhabit institutions, affecting their “identities,” “sensibilities,” and “experiences”³⁵. In later chapters, I will return to Asad’s model of the secular both as a way of mapping the secular forces and selves portrayed in cyberpunk, and as a way of considering how cyberpunk novels might address their readers as secular subjects, thus operating as instruments of secular power.

Like Asad, political theorist William Connolly sees the religion/secular binary as a valuable model for understanding intellectual and political conflict. Unlike Asad, however, Connolly actively pursues new ways to structure the relationship between the religious and the secular. His project is elaborated in *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (1999). Despite the book’s title, Connolly makes clear that in refusing to name himself a secularist, what he wishes to avoid are dogmatic strains of *secularism* that he finds unproductive. The title references Bertrand Russell’s *Why I Am Not a Christian*, a text Connolly cites as influential in his own early intellectual growth. Eventually, Connolly explains, he “called into question many things Russell endorsed. That included secularism” (3). Connolly’s rejection is motivated by a desire to move beyond the bounded notions of thought, selfhood, and public life that characterize Russell’s thought:

³⁵ Asad makes clear that his focus on power owes a clear debt to the work of Foucault, even though he does not attempt a faithful use of Foucault’s terms and ideas; see p. 16. For a lengthier consideration of Asad’s relationship to Foucault (and through Foucault, to Nietzsche as well), see Scott, “The Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad.”

“I continue to admire Russell’s opposition to bullies on the Christian right ... [but] I have increasingly found secular conceptions of language, ethics, discourse, and politics in which Russell participated to be insufficiently alert to the layered density of political thinking and judgment” (3-4). Connolly claims that the secularism he wishes to avoid is too flat and simplistic in its thinking about “language, ethics, discourse, and politics,” and he believes that a more fruitful secular thought will be able to acknowledge and engage the “layered density” of thought and practice. Connolly names the view that would acknowledge this complexity “deep pluralism.” He sees this more complex kind of secular thinking as an antidote to “the immodest demands of transcendental narcissism” (8), a phrase he uses to describe absolutist claims to intellectual and political authority—including claims made by secular thinkers and political agents.

In his general descriptions of a public sphere animated by “deep pluralism,” Connolly gives the impression that he has completely abandoned the kind of secularism he finds dissatisfying. For instance, he is critical of a tendency among some secularists who “first purport to leave religious/metaphysical perspectives in the closet at home and then quietly draw upon a subset of them to elevate themselves into pillars of public authority” (15). What separates traditional secularists from others, in this view, is that the former *pretend* to have no public connection to religious or metaphysical assumptions. Connolly insists that a more pluralistic secular subject must openly discuss the presence of “religious/metaphysical perspectives” within secular thought, and that secular subjects should cultivate “those fugitive spaces of enchantment lodged between theistic faith and secular abstinence” (15). In his desire to explore “fugitive spaces” that are not part of traditional theistic religion, but are also not part of the traditional

landscape of secularism, Connolly hopes for a secular subjectivity that is more multivalent and less disdainful of non-rational discourse. In pursuit of this way of being, Connolly encourages his readers to explore what he calls a “visceral register of subjectivity and intersubjectivity” (3). The term “visceral” is his way of insisting that non-rational modes of being are intimately bonded to psychic life. In Connolly’s view, this “visceral register” cannot be divorced from the rest of the self (that is, it is intrinsic to “subjectivity”); further, it cannot be left at home and is inevitably intertwined with the way subjects interact in public (that is, it is intrinsic to “intersubjectivity”). According to Connolly, “[M]odern secularism ... either ignores [the visceral] register or disparages it. It does so in the name of a public sphere in which reason, morality, and tolerance flourish. By doing so it forfeits some of the very resources needed to foster a generous pluralism” (3). In this view, “modern secularism” limits its ability to encourage the public virtues of “reason, morality, and tolerance” by ignoring the “resources” available in the “visceral register” of subjectivity. Thus Connolly suggests that the public sphere “modern secularism” claims to want is only available once the “visceral register” becomes an acknowledged asset rather than a suppressed liability.

As his argument progresses, however, Connolly demonstrates a troubled and contradictory relationship to the powers and capabilities of the secularism he officially rejects. Though he does not make this clear at the beginning of his argument, one of the reasons Connolly cultivates the “visceral register” of subjectivity is that he wants a secular subject who can *compete* more effectively with various other kinds of subjects. This desire emerges in an extended discussion of conservative public intellectual William Bennett, whom Connolly sees as a formidable opponent. In a discussion of Bennett’s

role in national debates about drug use, and about cultural values more generally, Connolly characterizes his opponent thus:

Bill Bennett knows people like me. He may even be obsessed with us. At least he talks about us a lot ... [E]ach of us, as a type, is energized, even intoxicated on occasion, by the appearance of the other type. The only thing is that Bennett has been far more effective at identifying, marking, and demonizing my type than my type has been at replying to him. We don't seem to understand how he feeds off us, how he uses us to engender, enlarge, and energize the "cultural war" he wages. (100)

Connolly points out that he and Bennett are both "types" who tend to become "energized" or "intoxicated" (not by amiable feeling, he implies) in each other's presence. By itself, this description has a pluralistic spirit, acknowledging difference without yet attempting to make a claim about its meaning. What follows this observation, however, is the rather different claim that Connolly's own "type" has been less successful than Bennett's in public struggle, and that this lack of success has to do with insufficient knowledge (Connolly's type doesn't "seem to understand" how Bennett does what he does) and with poor tactics (Connolly's type has failed effectively to target and vilify its opponents, as Bennett has done). What makes Bennett so much more effective than his opponents, accordingly to Connolly, is that "Bennett knows how to work the visceral register" (104) while Connolly's "type" does not. Here, Connolly's interest in the "visceral register" takes on a more partisan valence. There is less concern for a general condition of "generous pluralism" and more concern for the power to engage in cultural conflict with opposing "constituencies" who, Connolly believes, have thus far been able to control the "visceral register" in public debate.

Connolly criticizes secularists for their “general secular wish to provide an authoritative and self-sufficient public space equipped to regulate and limit ‘religious’ disputes in public life” (5). According to this claim, secularists are motivated not by the dictates of their own rational principles, but by a “wish” to control other, non-secular participants in public debate. Later, however, Connolly argues:

[T]here is never a vacuum in those domains where the arts of the self do their work. The cultures in which we participate regularly work on these fronts. And today, the cultural right works more actively on several of them than any other group through its organization of TV evangelical programs, talk shows, authoritative patterns of gossip, authoritative patterns of narrative, and so forth. Liberals and the left have ceded too much of this territory to the right. (176)

The language of “fronts” and “territory,” which is rare in Connolly’s argument, suggests an intense cultural struggle that must be fought at all levels, including those in the “visceral register.” What Connolly wants most, it seems, is to reclaim more public “territory” for secularism³⁶. It may be true that the kind of secularism Connolly constructs is less liable to “transcendental narcissism” than the kind he rejects. Nevertheless, its multivalent nature, far from mitigating public conflict, seems to ensure that it will continue to struggle, on multiple levels, with non-secular others (named, at

³⁶ In this approach to Connolly’s limitations, I differ with Colin Jager’s recent critique of *Why I Am Not a Secularist*. In his article “After the Secular,” Jager argues that the power of Connolly’s model of public engagement is limited because it does not develop a sufficiently complex notion of subjectivity (304-307 and 320-321). Jager suggests that public subjectivity can be made more productive “by imagining it as a practice modeled on literary representation,” particularly aesthetic practices aligned with romanticism (307). Whether or not this reworking improves upon Connolly’s model of subjectivity, I submit that the problem lies elsewhere. What Connolly underestimates is not the complexities of religious and/or secular subjectivity, but the differences (which are not merely conceptual) that continue to spur conflict between them—differences that affect the motivation of *Why I Am Not a Secularist* more than he seems to grasp. Jager’s approach is closer to my own in some portions of his more recent work *The Book of God*; see p. 221.

different points, “bullies on the Christian right” (3) or simply “the right” (176)). The competing impulses of Connolly’s argument will serve as a useful point of reference for my discussion of *Snow Crash*. In this novel, as in *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, a pluralistic desire to open up dialogue between secular and religious forces, and to explore the dynamics of the “visceral register” of subjectivity, is finally superceded by a desire for the *power* secular subjects need in order to control their destinies, and to limit the influence and place of religion.

Zizek, Asad and Connolly each express at least some desire to understand secularism critically (though Zizek evinces less of this desire than the others). What the tendencies of these three thinkers suggest, I argue, is that the challenge to secularization theory has prompted thinkers still concerned about the fate of the secular to focus on questions of power, particularly power exerted by competing kinds of subjects in public conflict with one another. In place of a common belief in the ascendancy of the secular (and in the authority of the institutions and practices thought to embody secularism) that dominated mid-century academic thought, there is now a desire to reassess the influence of religion, particularly in its public manifestations, and also to reassess the capacities of secular thought and practice. What Zizek calls the return of religion prompts a desire to fight off a variety of opponents and to annex the “authentic Christian legacy” for Marxist purposes. What Asad calls secularism prompts a desire to understand how secular forces act on non-secular individuals, groups, and nations and to grasp the way secular power creates certain kinds of subjects. What Connolly calls “deep pluralism” seems to involve both a desire to control contested public territories for secular purposes and a desire to subject secularism to more rigorous critique. The common denominator among all three

thinkers is an assumption that the relationship between the religious and the secular is not an abstract conceptual matter, but an ongoing cultural and political process that involves not simply broad institutional forces, but active subjects engaged in projects of discussion, debate, persuasion, and domination. It is important to note that in the projects of Žižek, Asad, and Connolly, this process does not promise an end to the secular/religion binary, and religious subjects remain distinct from, and frequently “other” to, secular selves.

The Protagonists and Perspectives of Cyberpunk Fiction

As I discussed earlier, critical discussions of cyberpunk have assumed its close alignment with postmodernism. Further, Fredric Jameson’s authoritative declaration of this alignment occurs within a larger argument that assumes postmodernism is “a situation in which spirituality by definition no longer exists” (387), and only “simulated” (390) connections to past forms of belief are possible. Other theorists who have privileged cyberpunk have not been as direct as Jameson has about their assumptions of secularization as a norm. In practice, however, they have proceeded as if the religious elements in cyberpunk were not present at all, and their methods evince a suspicion of what Harvey Cox would call “religious or metaphysical” beliefs. For instance, Andrew Ross’s *Strange Weather* (1991) features both a skeptical, materialist reading of New Age spiritual beliefs and practices (see chapter 1) and a reading of cyberpunk fiction that ignores its incorporation of religious characters and institutions (see chapter 4). N. Katherine Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) evinces a similar pattern of

manifestly secular, materialist reading practices and avoidance of religion as a topic in cyberpunk. I do not claim that Jameson or others are in some way obligated to address the religious figures and institutions in cyberpunk (or that they are obligated to give more credence to religious or metaphysical perspectives). I only point out that there has been a consistent pattern of ignoring these elements on the part of critics who value cyberpunk for its relevance to materialist views of culture.

This confluence of assumptions helps to explain why critics of cyberpunk have had little to say about the presence of religious characters and institutions in the texts they discuss. Yet, as I have asserted, the novels most central to the cyberpunk canon, Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, are strongly concerned with religious phenomena, and their central conflicts feature complex relations between secular protagonists and other characters who are clearly designated as "religious"; they identify themselves in terms of belief in the sacred, and their practices are organized by these beliefs. As I have demonstrated in the previous section, the new debate concerning the status of the secular has emphasized the question of how secular subjects might confront, control, negotiate, or welcome others who are designated religious. This debate prompts a new examination of fictional narratives of secular/religious encounters, particularly narratives that tell their stories through the perspectives of their secular protagonists—a key formal feature of Gibson and Stephenson's work. I will use the central texts of cyberpunk to show how a consideration of these narratives can enhance and complicate the ongoing critical debate. As I discussed above, Connolly protests that secular subjects know too little about what he calls the "visceral register," and have not had enough influence in "those domains where the arts of the self do their work" (176). I

agree with Asad that, contrary to Connolly's claim, secular forces manifest themselves in an array of forms, at least some of which could be seen as arts of the secular self. I will argue that cyberpunk provides one example of such an art, a narrative device for working through a complex set of negotiations and conflicts between secular selves and religious others. Occasionally, these interactions resemble the "deep pluralism" Connolly prizes most. More frequently, they evince antagonism and a struggle for territory that Žižek might recognize (and that Connolly might find more interesting than he would readily admit). Invariably, however—and here I see the crucial importance of Asad—the texts I will be discussing are concerned with secular/religious encounters as defined by questions of power. I will argue that some features of these novels enact secular power through narrative strategies that limit or contain the significance of religious elements in the texts, while at the same time troubling and questioning these limitations.

Before I begin a consideration of cyberpunk as secular narrative, a more general definition of the genre is needed. One distinguishing mark of cyberpunk in the first decade of its existence was its insistence upon naming (and selling) itself as a literary and cultural movement. Far more than the science fiction writers of the New Wave in the 1960s, cyberpunk writers, whose work came to prominence in the 1980s, wrote and acted as a loose but effective confederation, defining and defending their work as a particular, and particularly valuable, category within science fiction as a whole. The short fiction collection *Mirrorshades*, published in 1986, was a visible marker of this confederation, featuring multiple contributions from the two most well known cyberpunk writers of the decade, Bruce Sterling and William Gibson. Sterling served as the editor of *Mirrorshades* and also wrote a preface for it. The preface has since been anthologized in

*Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Fiction*³⁷, and has been identified as a manifesto for the subgenre as a whole. In this manifesto, although Sterling is careful to declare cyberpunk's allegiance to a number of established science fiction principles and authors, his focus is overwhelmingly on cyberpunk as a "new movement" (ix) in science fiction, a "modern reform" (xv) that can lay claim to cutting-edge status both within and without the usual boundaries of science fiction. Chief among the proofs of this status, according to Sterling, are three characteristics: a new degree of attention to current global conditions and to an emergent global culture, a strong interest in the penetration or saturation of technology into daily life and into the human body itself, and a commitment to literary styles associated with postmodernism (ix-xiv). Most cyberpunk fiction is set on Earth in a future that logically, if experimentally, seems to derive from our own present, and the economy of cyberpunk settings is some advanced form of capitalism. The elements that distinguish these settings from the present are shown as results of processes already at work in the writer's time and place. There are few alternate universes in cyberpunk, few interstellar spacecraft or alien visitors. In terms of motif, cyberpunk routinely features highly modified cyborg bodies and selves, and frequently narrates explorations of some kind of virtual reality. In terms of style, cyberpunk borrows from such postmodern touchstones as Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs and J.G. Ballard (though there is also an alliance with the styles of early 20th-century noir fiction). Thus, in Sterling's model, cyberpunk extrapolates its fictions directly from the present, attempting to follow the current of late

³⁷ The phrase "storming the reality studio" is taken from Burroughs; see the epigraph that opens the collection. For the passage from which the phrase originates, see *Nova Express* 59.

capitalism in order to watch its already-visible dynamics intensify. To define cyberpunk further, I will briefly discuss one of the most well-known examples of short fiction in the cyberpunk canon, William Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic," first published in 1981.

The plot of "Johnny Mnemonic," in its broad outlines, has very little to indicate that the story is science fiction at all; in summary form it might well be a thriller set in the present. Johnny, the protagonist and narrator, works as a data courier, transporting stolen electronic information from sellers to buyers. In the story's opening, Johnny attempts to confront a criminal colleague who normally acts as his broker, and who has just taken out a contract on his life. The data Johnny is carrying has been stolen (accidentally, it would seem) from a powerful criminal syndicate anxious to retrieve or destroy it, and the broker knows he will not be safe until Johnny has been eliminated. When the confrontation turns violent, Johnny gets the upper hand by recruiting the help of a passerby, a woman named Molly who is skilled in physical combat. Shortly thereafter, Molly helps Johnny evade an assassin sent by the crime syndicate itself, and guides him to a computer hacker named Jones who helps him decode the information he is carrying. At the story's climax, Molly kills the assassin in single combat, after which she and Johnny establish a lucrative partnership as data thieves and blackmailers.

The cyberpunkness, as it were, of the story emerges in details of plot and style, and in thematics. The story features a number of cyborg bodies. Johnny carries data in a hard drive implanted into his brain, Molly has mirrored lenses surgically implanted over her eyes and razors implanted under her fingernails, the assassin's main weapon is a deadly molecule-wide thread installed in the tip of his thumb, and the Lo Teks, the urban gang who serve as spectators to the climactic single combat, cultivate a mode of

appearance that includes implanted canine teeth. The cyborg motif is taken further in the character of the hacker Jones, who is not a human but a dolphin, a veteran of human naval warfare, whose military-implanted sensors enable him to read the contents of Johnny's mind. There is also the setting, a geodesic-domed city that, unlike the settings of either the utopian novels of the mid-century Golden Age or the dystopian novels of the New Wave, evinces a highly specific and recognizable decay much like that of our own urban present (a motif repeated, in convincing detail, by the film *Blade Runner* in 1982). The story's climax takes place in Nighttown³⁸ (the area occupied by the Lo Tekes), a place with no electrical grid, no computers, and no official infrastructure, an area where "the neon arcs are dead, and the geodesics have been smoked black by decades of cooking fires" (14). It is deliberately similar in ambience to a modern American ghetto or a Brazilian favela, or other similar environments on the fringes of global capitalism. The story's style is a pastiche of technical and non-technical terminology, of high and low cultural energies, much like the world of the story itself.

Defenders of cyberpunk have stressed its liberatory and critical energy³⁹, and certainly "Johnny Mnemonic" contains moments that, when connected to one another,

³⁸ The name is presumably derived from the "Circe" section of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

³⁹ Cyberpunk's supporters tend to emphasize the way that cyberpunk satirically represents current conditions in order to emphasize their strangeness; see Sterling, McCaffery and Brown. Meanwhile, its detractors see its tendency merely to extrapolate its narratives from current conditions as evidence of an inability, and perhaps an unwillingness, to consider alternatives; see Csiscery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism," Proietti, and Stockton. I see cyberpunk as positioned somewhere between the hopes of its defenders and the condemnations of its detractors, both satirizing and capitulating to the late capitalist futures it predicts. Linda Hutcheon's concept of postmodern literature as "both complicitous with and critical of ... prevailing norms" (224) might provide a resolution to the debate over cyberpunk's political status, but the utopian priorities of science fiction criticism make it unlikely that many critics will occupy this middle ground. For a recent example of how science fiction criticism's

would seem to contain such energy. Take, for instance, the story's account of life at the margins of late capitalism. Gibson figures the Lo Teks not as the residue of a less developed past but as the potential representatives of an emergent future, a counterforce to the dominance of corporations (including the crime syndicate itself, which "owns comsats and at least three shuttles," and which Johnny describes as "a true multinational" (8)). It is in the world of the Lo Teks that Molly, using handmade and highly idiosyncratic technology, is able to defeat the syndicate's sophisticated assassin, "kill[ing] him with culture shock" (21). And it is also here that Johnny realizes how unsatisfying his place in the world below has become, how much he is an empty receptacle, storing data without controlling it, a switching-point for exchange value with little opportunity to evolve into something more. "I saw how hollow I was," he says, "[a]nd I knew that I was sick of being a bucket" (21). Johnny's new life among the Lo Teks is far more safe and communal than the old world of back-alley deals and betrayals below, and any of Johnny's future enemies will have "a long climb through the dark" (21), and specifically through a tech-free zone not under the control of any outside force, before they can reach him (and of course Johnny adopts canine Lo Tek bodily fashions that render him quite unlike his former self, making him difficult to identify). To borrow terms from Darko Suvin's analysis of Gibson's work, the story's conclusion would seem to affirm the ability of the "Little Man" to avoid the "killing meshes" set to trap him by the "Powers-That-Be" (353), and he does so by using the tools of those powers against

utopian expectations affect its approach to cyberpunk, see Freedman 191-200. For a recent expression of science fiction criticism's utopian priorities, see Part 1 of Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*.

them. At the same time, the story affirms this kind of rebellion as the right thing to do by portraying capitalist forces as criminal and illegitimate.

It is important to notice, however, that in the story's conclusion, Johnny and his sidekick-bodyguard Molly are *in* the world of the Lo Teks without ever quite being *of* it. Even though Gibson, like many cyberpunk writers, acknowledges the power of those disenfranchised energies that were kept out of science fiction, and of culture more generally, in the middle of the 20th century⁴⁰, he also chooses a protagonist who can shuttle back and forth between disenfranchisement and hegemonic power. Johnny clearly enjoys and celebrates his new Lo Tek existence, but he does so because its crude but highly effective resistance to the interconnectedness of global capital allows him to work as a blackmailer without being caught or killed—and that work is what finances his new existence even as the work itself is grounded in his previous life as a cog in a capitalist machine. There is an obvious parallel here to Gibson as a cyberpunk author who has harnessed various “low” popular energies in the interest of a new literary hegemony within science fiction, positioning himself as paradoxically marginal and central at the same time⁴¹. The phrase *cyberpunk* embodies the paradox I am describing, combining as it does the rebellious, anarchic, and anti-commercial energy of *punk* with the high-tech, global and (necessarily, if uneasily) capitalist connotations of the prefix *cyber*. “Johnny Mnemonic,” like much of cyberpunk, is concerned to think about the uses and

⁴⁰ Towards the beginning of his career, Gibson wrote “The Gernsback Continuum,” a short story that attacks mid-century science fiction as creatively stifling and culturally moribund. Not all critics have subscribed to this condemnatory view of mid-century science fiction; see Ross chapter 3.

⁴¹ Again, it is worth noting that this narrative dynamic resembles Linda Hutcheon's argument that postmodern fiction tends to be both complicit with and critical of its contextual norms; see note 39.

implications of the power that global capitalism has generated, and the way it has made that power available to a class of skilled workers (computer hackers being the most archetypal). These workers can, at times, discover ways to use capitalist hegemony without being directly used by it. I find this concern in cyberpunk important because of its implications for secular subjectivity. Cyberpunk stays focused on the power subjects can wield, and on the perils they must face, within a space and time defined by the secular forces of modernity, and above all by the force of capitalism. In my discussions of *Snow Crash* and *Neuromancer*, I will consider the way that cyberpunk represents capitalism as the primary secularizing force in its futures. I will also discuss the way that the novels embrace, however skeptically, capitalism's potential for individual liberation and enjoyment—a potential Asad calls “secular redemption” (*Formations* 152).

The narrative focus and limits of cyberpunk can be clarified further by briefly examining its relationship to the previous history of science fiction. In its combination of counter-cultural subversion and hegemonic identification, cyberpunk authors synthesize the energy of their immediate predecessors in the New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s with that of the mid-century science fiction of the Golden Age. The latter, also known as the pulp era, resembles the moment of cyberpunk in that it is manifesto-oriented and agenda-driven, but the agenda in question expresses what Brian Attiebery calls “the core values held by the technological elite” (39). The hero of mid-century Golden Age narratives is almost invariably a technocrat (an engineer being a standard archetype) who possesses (or, the stories imply, ought to possess) the power necessary to run a society, and who often makes decisions with a kind of imperious indifference to the feelings of those whose fate is being determined. This sometimes results in narratives with an indifferent

or even cruel attitude towards ordinary individuals, but these narratives advocate their own cruelty as the necessary price of effective and visionary guidance. In the typical Golden Age story, as Attebery phrases it, “[s]o long as the solution seems neat and efficient, the human cost (never borne by the engineer himself) seems worthwhile” (39). In the New Wave, this focus on the authority of an emergent technocratic class gives way to various counter-cultural experiments with marginal, and usually less technically enlightened, protagonists who often act in a spirit of subversion. In the words of Damien Broderick, “New Wave writers began to peel open the ideological myth of supreme scientific competence and galactic manifest destiny” (52). Cyberpunk would seem to occupy a middle ground that borrows the rebellious romance energy of the New Wave while returning, somewhat, to the hegemonic perspectives of mid-century pulp.

Cyberpunk’s particular synthesis of Golden Age and New Wave, however, expresses narrative priorities that are usually foreign to science fiction. In particular, cyberpunk places a strong emphasis on the category of the *protagonist* and to a point of view centered on the protagonist’s fate. In the more canonical Golden Age narratives, the technocrat-engineer is a purely representative figure, and frequently not a very charismatic or memorable one. In the case of the most respected Golden Age texts, Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy, Hari Seldon, the chief protagonist, is dead within a few pages of the opening. The character, insofar as the term is applicable, is expressed entirely in terms of Seldon’s ideas, which dominate the events of the ensuing narrative. Protagonists of the New Wave are perhaps more individuated and more memorable, but they possess the abstract quality of heroines and heroes of romance narratives (like the prince/prophet figure of Paul Atriedes in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, for example), and the

narrative emphasis is less on the destinies of individuals than on the working-out of an idea. The human subject has often a strong priority in science fiction, but not a *narrative* priority per se. As Farah Mendlesohn puts it:

Where mainstream fiction writes of the intricacies of human relationships, the discourse of sf is about our relationship to the world and the universe ... It is [a] reversal of romance, the insistence that romance is *out there* rather than internal, that frequently results in non-sf critics judging sf deficient in characterization and emotion ... [I]t is the idea that is plot and character ... and it can survive the death of any of the protagonists. (Introduction 9-10, italics original)

Mendlesohn implies that the narrative procedures of science fiction involve a tradeoff; focus on character is sacrificed for the sake of broader and more dynamic ideas, and concern for human interiority is displaced by the wonders of the exterior world.

Mendlesohn's definition of science fiction in general⁴² helps to underscore how cyberpunk departs from science fiction's usual priorities. Cyberpunk asserts the deep importance of the individual subject as a primary way for narratives to express their meaning (as in "Johnny Mnemonic," which focuses its narrative on the fate of a single individual). At the same time, cyberpunk's scope (focused on the near future, and on the experience of social and economic conditions that resemble present realities) is rather more limited than science fiction tends to be. It is also worth noting that, although science fiction novels in general are scarcely ever named after their protagonists, such

⁴² Mendlesohn's 2003 definition of science fiction derives from assumptions that have been standard since science fiction theory was first given a definitive formulation by Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). Suvin's definition focuses on what he calls the *novum*—his term for the way(s) in which the world of a science fiction text differs from that of the text's audience. According to Suvin, the *novum* is the primary determinant of the text's meaning (4-8), and this tends to diminish character as a narrative priority: "The world of a work of SF is not a priori intentionally oriented towards its protagonists, either positively or negatively" (11).

naming is fairly common in the work of William Gibson. Furthermore, unlike the science fiction Mendlesohn describes, the concerns of “Johnny Mnemonic” (chiefly the possibility of survival, even freedom, at the fringes of capitalism) would have great difficulty surviving the death of the titular protagonist.

In its greater focus on character in general, and on the protagonist in particular, as the source of narrative meaning, cyberpunk is a type of science fiction more closely aligned with the traditional priorities of the novel. As a genre, the novel has long been associated with the category of the subject, and for the past century, theories of the novel have increasingly emphasized its role in the expression and construction of subjectivity. For Lukacs, the novel reflects a new crisis of human subjectivity unknown to pre-capitalist eras⁴³. For Walter Benjamin, the novel is likewise a manifestation of a crisis of isolation resulting from the breakdown of traditional pre-capitalist communities, a crisis it can indicate but not solve⁴⁴. Ian Watt emphasizes the role of the novel in defining and expressing modern subjectivity⁴⁵, and, in a different context, so does Benedict Anderson, for whom the novel plays a role in the construction of national identity⁴⁶. Furthering earlier discussions of the novel’s role in constituting subjectivity, Catherine Belsey has argued that fiction can play a key role in the construction of subjects by offering reading experiences that encourage assent to pre-given ideologies. Belsey elaborates this theory

⁴³ See *The Theory of the Novel* chapter 4. For more recent discussions of the novel’s role in the formation of modern subjectivity that have affinities Watt’s approach, see McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel* (1987) chapters 3 and 6, and also Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity* (1992) chapter 2.

⁴⁴ See “The Storyteller” 87-88, 98-101.

⁴⁵ See *The Rise of the Novel* 15-21.

⁴⁶ See *Imagined Communities* Chapter 2. For a discussion of Anderson in the context of the new debates concerning the secular, see Asad 193-194.

in a discussion of “classic realism,”⁴⁷ her term for what she sees as the dominant narrative trends of capitalism (62). According to Belsey, classic realism’s power lies in its capacity to determine the likely meaning of a text by controlling, at least to some degree, the perspective from which textual information is communicated. Belsey argues that this structuring of the relationship between reader and text does not simply influence readers, but can in some sense constitute them *as* readers and as subjects:

To argue that classic realism interpellates subjects in certain ways is not to propose that this process is ineluctable: on the contrary it is a matter of choice. But the choice is ideological: certain ranges of meaning (there is always room for debate) are “obvious” within the currently dominant ideology, and certain subject-positions are equally “obviously” the positions from which these meanings are apparent. (64)

According to Belsey, the classic realist text encourages readers to adopt interpretations that coincide with “dominant ideology” (out of a wide array of *possible* interpretations) as their own, and it accomplishes this by providing points of view from which the “dominant ideology” appears as the “obvious” choice. In Belsey’s view, classic realism influences what meanings readers receive from texts by influencing the way in which they identify with them. Thus, classic realism “interpellates”⁴⁸ subjects, constituting them by authorizing subject-positions available when the reader adopts the point of view the text indicates as “obvious.”

⁴⁷ In her discussion of this term, Belsey notes that there are many types of fiction that have been designated “realist.” However, she defends the term “classic realism” because, she claims, the term “makes it possible to unite categories which have been divided ... [T]he phrase permits the inclusion of all those fictional forms which create the illusion while we read that what is narrated is ‘really’ and intelligibly happening” (47-48).

⁴⁸ Belsey uses the concept of interpellation developed by Louis Althusser; see “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” For Belsey’s treatment of Althusser, see 52-59.

Belsey's emphasis on the power of fiction to influence the interpretive position of the reader is essential to an understanding of the secular subjects of cyberpunk fiction. The conflicts and alliances between secular and religious characters that appear in this fiction are staged from the point of view of the secular characters, with whom readers are thus encouraged to identify. For example, in *Snow Crash*, secular protagonists aligned with the values of rationality, autonomy, and self-assertion clash with irrational, collective energies associated with religious faith. While the novel allows for a few moments of what Connolly might call "deep pluralism" in which the protagonists see beyond the usual limits of their own secular positions, these moments are ultimately suppressed so that the protagonists might successfully defend themselves from religious others who threaten to occupy all available territory (not unlike the "freaks" Slavoj Žižek is concerned to defeat). In my chapter on *Neuromancer*, I will address a more complex interaction between a secular protagonist struggling for independence from the necessities of his life in the semi-criminal world of corporate commerce and a group of religious believers who serve as his allies. Though these two novels differ in terms of their affect or "feeling" about the religious "others" their protagonists encounter, they share a similar narrative strategy that establishes a secular perspective as the "obvious" point of textual entry. This point of view is critiqued, at times even subverted, but it is never abandoned; it remains the perspective readers are encouraged to adopt as their own. In this way, cyberpunk seeks to interpolate or construct a secular subjectivity, one that has been little explored in cyberpunk criticism and is still in the process of being defined in critical discussions of religion and the secular. In my final chapter, I will discuss how cyberpunk films complicate secular subjectivity, offering viewers open or multiple

perspectives from which to approach the conflicts they portray, including perspectives that are not wholly secular. Nevertheless, both cyberpunk fiction and film offer readers and viewers secular perspectives as viable (if not the most viable) way to approach the construction of selfhood.

From the subject-position it constructs, cyberpunk produces narratives of secular practice that are, in Pecora's phrase, "distinctly frayed at the edges" (16). Though cyberpunk tells its stories from the perspective of secular protagonists, these characters are often positioned at the *margins* of secular institutions, viewing them skeptically, even rebelliously, even as those institutions establish the norms by which the protagonists live. The actions of these protagonists often probe the limits of secular institutions, sometimes attempting to transform them, sometimes accepting what cannot be changed about them, but always attempting to grasp their meaning, particularly the ways in which secular structures of power affect their own destinies. One of the chief ways in which the meaning of secular power is revealed, I will argue, is through the protagonists' encounters with their religious others, encounters that enable the texts to map differences and similarities between the religious and the secular. In these encounters with religion, cyberpunk offers us a case study not only of the secular self, but also of the institutions that construct it—including the institutions of narrative. Cyberpunk thus provides a way to understand conflicts between religion and the secular that, as recent theories of the secular remind us, are dominant features of the current moment.

Chapter 2

Fighting the Freaks: Religion as Virus in *Snow Crash*

As I discussed previously, theorists of the secular have given increasing attention to the question of secular subjectivity. These theorists ask not only what institutions, concepts and forces might be defined as secular but also what kinds of subjects inhabit these institutions, adhere to these concepts, and work through these forces. Although these questions have recently become more pressing (in large part, I have suggested, because of challenges to secularization theory), they are already visible in the work of the first influential thinker to consider the relation of the secular to selfhood, namely Max Weber. In considering who, exactly, might be secular, Weber gives at least two answers, linked but also notably different. In “Science as a Vocation,” Weber sees academic endeavor as the locus of the secular, and describes intellectuals as actively committed to secular, rational principles that produce increasingly secular and rational ends (142-148). In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, by contrast, Weber sees a more unintentional kind of secular force at work. The material accumulation of capitalist labor, he argues, secularizes religious purpose in ways that the individual subject who endeavors to accumulate wealth may not consciously intend (162-181). In both these accounts, Weber makes two assumptions concerning secular subjectivity. The first is that the secular is expressed in and through certain kinds of *work*, and the second is that the growth of the secular involves a *rationalization* of all areas of knowledge and practice,

translating sacred or “enchanted” beliefs into rational, instrumental terms⁴⁹. At present, prevailing assumptions about secular subjectivity seem to have much in common with Weber’s formulations. There is the assumption that many, perhaps most, academics who inhabit non-religious institutions can accurately be described as secular in some way. This assumption is expressed indirectly in the implied “we” or “us” I noted in my discussions of Fish, Pecora, and Connolly. Peter Berger, discussing the question of academic secularity more directly, has identified “an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences, that is ... secularized,” and he asserts that “this subculture is the principle ‘carrier’ of progressive, Enlightened beliefs and values” (*Desecularization* 10). There is also an assumption, somewhat less prevalent, that secular subjectivity, or at least an impetus to secular subjectivity, is likely to be found wherever people labor within or under the conditions of capitalism. This latter view is expressed in Asad’s work; I will consider his discussion of the secularizing powers of capitalism later in this chapter⁵⁰.

As an explanation of where secular subjects exist and how they operate, these assumptions have definite limitations. It seems simplistic, for instance, to assume that secular subjects are either intellectual laborers who self-identify as such, or more

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the concept of rationalization and its prominent place in Weber’s work, specifically in his discussions of religion, see Gane chapters 2 and 3.

⁵⁰ My later discussion will serve to clarify the relationship between capitalism and secular subjectivity in current debate. However, it should be noted here that there are few current thinkers who see capitalism, as a global phenomenon, as leading *directly* to a more secular state of world affairs. On the contrary, there is a widespread recognition that the political, social, and cultural changes wrought by capitalism often prompt the growth of religious forces as a response. Further, there is a growing understanding that globalization often enables the spread of religions in a variety of ways. For a summation of recent discussions of the relationship between global capitalism and religion, see Beckford (2003) chapter 4.

intellectually passive subjects whose secularity is expressed through production and consumption. By assigning the secular subject either a very self-conscious and active role or a more or less passive one, emerging theories of the secular subject do not provide a sufficiently complex model of secular *agency*. The novel I will discuss in this chapter, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, can serve to complicate an understanding of secular agency. The chief protagonist of *Snow Crash*, humorously named Hiro Protagonist, participates in both intellectual and non-intellectual forms of labor. At the beginning of the novel, he is an energetic worker in an accelerated late-capitalist economy, an amiable occupant of what Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, called the "iron cage" (181) of capitalist endeavor. Over the course of the narrative, however, Hiro takes on the role of secular intellectual, launching an extensive study of a form of religion that threatens to overwhelm his world. To some extent, this latter role ends up being more important than the former; Hiro finds his clearest and most meaningful purpose in his endeavors as a sort of sociologist of religion. Ultimately, however, *Snow Crash* seems concerned to unite these two kinds of labor through a practice that is both deeply theoretical and eminently practical (and profitable), namely computer programming. As I hope to show, *Snow Crash* uses the metaphor of programming (henceforth called hacking) to champion a kind of secular labor, and a kind of secular subjectivity, that can control the place of religion in the world and grant meaning and freedom to secular endeavor. At the same time, however, *Snow Crash* troubles the category of rationalization. The novel articulates deep hostilities towards religion through the character of Hiro's partner Y.T., and deep anxieties about the continuing viability of the secular subject.

Secular Work and the Problem of Agency

Much of the anxiety *Snow Crash* expresses concerning secular subjectivity comes from its portrayal of life and labor inside capitalism. As I noted in chapter 1, the future cyberpunk imagines is intended as an extension of the present global moment, and this creates opportunities for satirical reflections on late capitalism. For instance, typical protagonists in the work of Gibson are freelance workers with few institutional ties who engage in criminal or semi-criminal “biz” (a term that frequently appears in Gibson’s early fiction). These protagonists’ endeavors are fraught with dangers specific to the economy they inhabit. The titular character of “Johnny Mnemonic” is treated by his business associates as a “bucket” carrying data in his brain as if it were a suitcase—a characterization that seems to satirize the life of the low-level sales worker or distributor, criminal or otherwise. However, Gibson tends to set limits on the corrosiveness of the satire implicit in this kind of protagonist. He gives his protagonists a world-weariness and a keen (if sometimes inarticulate) sense of the ways that they are being manipulated by the larger powers that control their existence; they believe that life could be otherwise⁵¹. Further, Gibson often provides glimpses of “normal” individuals who lead comfortable and unremarkable lives inside familiar national and cultural institutions.

⁵¹ In this evaluation of Gibson’s protagonists, I differ with the Carl Freedman, who insists that that an attitude of cynical acceptance is the norm in *Neuromancer* and other Gibson novels (*Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2003) 195-198). Gibson’s protagonists may express cynicism about the world in which they must labor, but they also express discontent, rebellion, and even rage. What is striking about the attitude of Stephenson’s protagonists is their relative *lack* of cynicism; they tend to accept the late capitalist norms in which they find themselves *as* norms, and do not seek, or even conceive of, alternatives.

Thus, Gibson allows for a distinction between ordinary spaces, where social and economic laws function in a “normal” way, and dangerous spaces that function more unpredictably; the latter are, to some extent, exceptional spaces rather than do not represent socioeconomic norms. In *Snow Crash*, however, there is no distinction between normal spaces or practices and exceptional ones. The state has withered away, what was formerly known as national identity has become a series of franchises⁵² (such as Mr. Lee’s Greater Hong Kong, Metazania, and New South Africa), and so have the institutions that ensure the enforcement of what was formerly known as law and order (Metacops, Judge Bob’s Judicial System, The Hoosegow). Crime, however, does not exist in the traditional sense, and formerly criminal organizations (such as the Mafia) now compete as franchises along with all the others. Further, spaces and practices apart from capitalist endeavor seem to have shrunk to a residual minimum. There is almost no public space in *Snow Crash* where individuals may gather for purposes other than work, and at the same time there is almost no private space of leisure and recreation. With one set of exceptions I will discuss presently, every character in the novel is *at work* in almost every scene.

This portrayal of the conditions of late capitalism affects the novel’s use of settings, as well as its characterizations. In *Snow Crash*, even the most seemingly ordinary spaces—corporate cubicles, convenience stores, suburban homes—are fraught with immediate and potentially fatal dangers associated with market competition, while settings readers might normally see as criminal are shown to be fully corporate and not

⁵² Stephenson’s portrayal of nationalism as one franchise option among others might productively be seen as a way to extend and complicate some current thinking about the relationship between nationalism and secularism; see Asad, *Formations of the Secular* 193-194.

nearly as chaotic or unstable as they might appear from a distance. The characters who inhabit these spaces respond to the dangers around them as normal features of their lives. Although most of the novel follows Hiro and his business partner Y.T., *Snow Crash* also contains a few tangent narratives that effectively erase the distinctions between ordinary life and its supposedly more dangerous alternatives. In one of these side narratives, we encounter a young Mafia franchise manager, name-tagged and with clipboard in hand, beginning his busy day of collections and extortions. In another narrative tangent, we meet a computer programmer for a large corporation (called the United States of America) who is used to the fact that her employer routinely interrogates workers using mind-altering drugs. Perhaps the most arresting of these side narratives is the comic tale of a sentient cyborg guard dog who makes pre-programmed distinctions between “nice” people he must protect and “bad” people he must kill—simple distinctions which, as the rest of the novel reminds us, are not available to the fully human characters. In keeping with this kind of satire, *Snow Crash* introduces Hiro Protagonist not as a computer hacker (at first, hacking is his semi-remunerative part time job), but as a pizza delivery driver for the Mafia (now a leader in pizza delivery). Hiro is strongly, even enthusiastically, invested in his work, and his enthusiasm is highly sensible, since a late delivery can result in his execution. In *Snow Crash*, the life-or-death struggle that drives the criminal or semi-criminal protagonists of Gibson is part of the daily experience of persons working in fast food.

The fact that Stephenson intensifies cyberpunk’s focus on the cruelty of late capitalism, however, does not lead directly to a more thoroughgoing critique. In fact, it initially encourages an acceptance of the conditions that prevail in the novel. If the story

of Hiro's risky job is a pointed acknowledgment of the ruthlessness of market competition, it is also a way of underscoring the apparent inescapability of the market⁵³. *Snow Crash* takes its first two chapters to narrate an action sequence in which Hiro nearly fails in a difficult delivery. However, these opening chapters emphasize not the need for a change in the system we are observing, but simply Hiro's need to succeed in meeting his delivery deadlines. This emphasis is created by two carefully balanced narrative elements. First, Stephenson narrates in the present tense, making frequent use of free indirect discourse⁵⁴, encouraging our identification with Hiro, whose struggles constantly threaten him with death. Second, Stephenson frequently undercuts the tension of this narration in a way that suggests the scenarios he is describing are predictable and banal. The effect of these two strategies can be felt in the following passage, which occurs just after Hiro has crashed his car into a swimming pool while attempting a shortcut through a gated and incorporated "Burbclave":

Hiro ... gets out of the car and pulls his swords out of his trunk, straps them around his body, prepares for a breathtaking nighttime escape run ... The border with Oakwood Estates is only minutes away ... and he knows how these Burbclave cops operate ... He has a good chance of making it. But it's going to be interesting ... Above him, in the house that owns the pool, a light has come on

⁵³ As I noted in chapter 1, this extension and acceptance of the current conditions of global capitalism has been a recurrent point of critique in cyberpunk criticism in general. Some of the sharpest of these critiques have been leveled against *Snow Crash* in particular; see Moulthrop (1993), Stockton (1995), McCallum (2000), and Proietti (2000). More recently, discussions of *Snow Crash* have undertaken a more neutral approach related to the question of the "post-human"; see note 65.

⁵⁴ In my use of this term, I follow Dorrit Cohn's definition of this type of narration in *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. It should be noted that Cohn prefers the term "narrated monologue," but is clearly referring to the same phenomenon (see 107). According to Cohn, the power of this narrative technique lies in its mixture of a sense of access to the interior of a character with a sense of narrative authority: "Imitating the language a character uses when he talks to himself, it casts that language into the grammar a narrator uses in talking about him" (105).

... It is a nice family, a safe family in a house full of light, like the family he was a part of until thirty seconds ago. (18)

The present-tense narration, combined with free indirect discourse that allows us to follow the train of Hiro's thoughts, emphasizes the danger of Hiro's position without inviting us to analyze the factors that create the danger in much detail. Hiro views the house containing the "nice family" with momentary longing and then begins his efforts to escape. As readers we must make a decision to pause, pulling against the velocity of the text and its attachment to Hiro's point of view, to consider the paradoxes inherent in this longing. The "nice family" Hiro was very recently a part of (the Mafia) is now likely to punish him for wrecking his car, even to kill him should his delivery fail. Further, the actual family in the house is paying for the security forces from which Hiro must flee. Thus, Hiro's longing suppresses sustained consideration of the regulatory violence that threatens him, a violence that is in play in almost every space in the world of *Snow Crash*, emphasizing instead the protagonist's *response* to the dangers around him. At the same time, the descriptive phrase "breathtaking nighttime escape run" deflates the tension of the scene and makes it *less* breathtaking. Hiro has presumably been this close to death many times before, and while we may be surprised that he carries swords in his car, he treats them as the ordinary tools of his trade.

In focusing on its characters' struggles for success and survival, and in portraying these struggles as normal, *Snow Crash* leaves little room in the text for any metaphysical aspirations on the part of the protagonists, not even in the places that occasionally offer glimpses of transcendence in other cyberpunk novels, such as realms of virtual experience. Often in cyberpunk, the networked virtual space usually named cyberspace

is accessed through direct connection to the user's brain and represented in poetic, even sublime, fashion. "Cyborg hackers," as David Porush phrases it, "take the next evolutionary step that was begun in Daedalus's dream of flight to become electronic angels, free from the laws of physics" (538). As I will discuss in the next chapter, Gibson sometimes uses metaphysical and/or spiritual terms to describe the experience of cyberspace. By contrast, *Snow Crash*'s version of cyberspace (called the Metaverse) is simply a three-dimensional world of graphically rendered streets and buildings accessed by way of a computer screen and a pair of headphones. Users encounter one another through digital self-representations not unlike those of today's interactive multi-player video games and seem to do little in the Metaverse but transact business and socialize (thus, this space functions as one of the few spaces where we occasionally glimpse capitalist subjects who are not at work). Stephenson, an amateur programmer himself, describes the programming that allows the Metaverse to work in considerable detail, and focuses on the mechanical causes that produce virtual effects⁵⁵. In doing so, he discounts the possibility that cyberspace offers any transcendence of material realities. Even though Hiro, as a talented hacker, can inhabit the Metaverse as a "warrior prince" with an unbroken winning streak in virtual sword fighting, his virtual status is only a minor compensation for the fact that he "live[s] in a shithole" (63) in his actual physical life. By presenting a world in which human life consists almost entirely of work, and in which

⁵⁵ It should be noted that Stephenson's practically-minded approach to the construction of his fictional world has served as actual inspiration for real-world computer programmers; see Rossney. Further, Stephenson's attention to the socioeconomic workings of his world has prompted some readers to value it not so much as an apocalyptic warning, but simply as an accurate prediction of things to come. References to the novel as a predictive model appear in a number of surprising places, including respected journals of law and political science; see Branscomb (1995) 1640, Kobrin (1997) 65-66, and Kang (2000) 1152.

almost the only identifiable public, leisured space is virtual (the Metaverse), *Snow Crash* raises its own version of the question with which I began this chapter, namely the question of secular agency. The novel is attuned to the ways that subjects are shaped by the forces of the economy in which they participate, and it repeatedly asks the question of how much (or how little) control it is possible for subjects of capitalism to have over their destiny or identity.

Thus, the novel raises questions similar to those raised by Talal Asad in his consideration of capitalism as a secularizing force. In *Formations of the Secular*, Asad describes what he sees as the frequently coercive character of secular power structures (particularly those associated with capitalism), and at the same time he suggests that their tendency towards coercion is a part of their very real effectiveness. One of the most memorable examples of this double-edged analysis is a discussion of what Asad calls “America’s project of secular redemption” (152). Asad uses this phrase to name the practice of political reform through economic globalization—specifically the reform of non-Western nations in order to make them resemble the liberal democracies of the West⁵⁶. One of the key claims underlying this practice, he asserts, is the belief that “the opening up of free trade with the West and the blossoming of a market society will reinforce human rights” (153). Asad offers the following analysis of this belief:

My thought is not that this claim is arrogant, or otherwise morally tainted, but that it may be true ... In an interdependent modern world, “traditional cultures” do not spontaneously grow or develop into “modern cultures.” People are pushed, seduced, coerced, or persuaded into trying to change themselves into something else, something that allows them to be redeemed. It may not be possible to stop

⁵⁶ Asad illustrates this theory by citing Justin Brown, a US Trade Representative for the World Trade Organization (151). For a more thorough defense of this theory, see Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*.

this process; it may be a wonderful thing that the process takes place as it does because people really are redeemed through it. I do not argue for or against such directed changes here. I merely emphasize that they are not possible without the exercise of political power that often presents itself as a force for redeeming “humanity” from “traditional cultures.” (153-154)

Asad insists that neither the growth of the global market nor the spread of doctrines of human rights are natural developments⁵⁷. On the contrary, he insists, they take place in and through the exertion of various kinds of force, including coercion, persuasion, and seduction. By labeling it “secular redemption,” Asad portrays America’s efforts to transform “traditional cultures” as tied to a non-sacred (and, supposedly, culturally non-specific) notion of “humanity.” Proponents of the doctrine claim that that such a notion creates a stronger basis for human rights⁵⁸. It is interesting that Asad does not invalidate this notion of human rights; in fact, he suggests that it may indeed have redemptive value, whatever forces are used in its deployment. Asad does not necessarily subscribe to this secular “humanity” as a superior concept, but he concedes, with an indeterminate degree of irony, that the growth of a global market “may be a wonderful thing.” Whether or not it is wonderful, what is important, according to Asad, is that the secularizing effect of the market is actual, and that the market has considerable power to remake the subjects who come to participate within it. Asad leaves open the question of exactly how this power may operate in a given instance (persuasion operates in some instances, coercion in

⁵⁷ Since Asad sees nothing inevitable or natural in the global spread of democracy and economic liberalism, there is probably a touch of irony in his choice of the organic term “blossoming” in relation to the global market, and also in his choice of the potentially theological words “redeemed” and “redemption” to describe the market’s effects.

⁵⁸ See Fukuyama’s defense of the doctrine of “universal recognition” in *The End of History and the Last Man* chapter 19.

others), which also leaves open the question of how much agency individual subjects may or may not possess in a given instance of “redemption.”

The question of how capitalism “redeems” individuals, and of how much agency such redemption does or does not allow, is also central to *Snow Crash*. The novel frequently offers justifications for the coercive and even violent forces at work in the economy it portrays. The spread of the Mafia is shown to create safer urban neighborhoods, and market competition has prompted the franchise to “have black, Hispanic, and Asian capos who will respect your cultural identity” (146). The interrogation sessions to which the United States of America subjects its workers build an ethic of loyalty, and submission to the tests without complaint is “a mark of pride and honor” (290). At least one national franchise, Mr. Lee’s Greater Hong Kong, seems genuinely committed to the idea that it can transform its “citizens” by creating an ethos of “high-tech personal accomplishment and betterment of all peoples” (99), though this is only possible inside of a controlled environment policed by cyborg guard dogs. It is difficult to determine whether these and other justifications are intended as actual defenses, or are simply pat excuses for systemic violence and oppression. Not all of these defenses are spoken by equally trustworthy voices or from equally trustworthy points of view. However, even if all such defenses are to be taken seriously, they must be balanced against the fact that the novel’s most persistent metaphor for the growth of the franchise economy is the virus:

The franchise and the virus work on the same principle: what thrives in one place will thrive in another. You just have to find a sufficiently virulent business plan, condense it into a three-ring binder—its DNA—xerox it, and embed it in the fertile lining of a well-traveled highway, preferably one with a left-turn lane. Then the growth will expand until it runs up against its property lines. (191)

By comparing franchises to viruses, Stephenson offers a model of capitalist growth that has little to do with the dedication or energy of individual entrepreneurs and more to do with whether or not the franchise's business plan is "sufficiently virulent" to attract customers and control workers. This way of characterizing the spread of capitalism is hardly original to Stephenson; it is at least implicit in Weber's discussion of labor and material accumulation in *The Protestant Ethic*⁵⁹. However, *Snow Crash* allows us to understand the viral tendencies of capitalism in subjective terms, observing the novel's various characters as they exercise greater or lesser degrees of agency within a textual space whose "property lines" are (almost) completely occupied by capitalist forces. As I will show in the sections that follow, *Snow Crash* complicates the notion of capitalism as a virus by showing how this idea is in tension with the various narratives of struggle—for survival, for success, and for individual agency—that pose a possible alternative to the viral model, and a more complex sense of how secular forces can, or cannot, redeem the subject. In order to construct this more complex model, *Snow Crash* establishes religion as a point of contrast for its late capitalist setting, a potential alternative space and practice that can serve to test and redefine secular endeavor.

The Secular Individual Versus the Religious "Freaks"

As previously discussed, there is one exception to the rule of work that controls the spaces of *Snow Crash* and the lives of its characters; this is the realm of religion. The

⁵⁹ See in particular pp. 181-182.

novel opens up this realm in a series of incremental revelations, and it is interesting to note that the first of these revelations—in fact the first hint that religion exists at all in the novel—comes from L. Bob Rife, a media mogul and outspoken advocate of capitalist growth as a force for social betterment. Rife organizes the Raft, a floating city that circumnavigates the Pacific Ocean, collecting prospective immigrants as it passes along the coast of Asia and then depositing them off the coast of North America. In the course of a television interview, Rife argues that the Raft is an example of capitalist redemption at work:

“Industry feeds on [Raft dwellers] and spits back images, sends out movies and TV programs, over my networks, images of wealth and exotic things beyond their wildest dreams, back to those people, and it gives them something to dream about, something to aspire to. And that is the function of the Raft. It’s just a big old krill carrier.”

[T]he journalist gives up on being a journalist, just starts to slag L. Bob Rife openly ... “That’s disgusting. I can’t believe you think about people that way.”

“Shit, boy, get down off your high horse. Nobody really gets eaten. It’s just a figure of speech. They come here, they get decent jobs, find Christ, buy a Weber grill, and live happily ever after. What’s wrong with that?” (119)

Rife admits that there is a certain amount of coercion and exploitation in his version of immigration. His corporation “feeds on” the inhabitants of the Raft as a source of television programs and films that portray life on the Raft as adventurous and dangerous; these narratives sell well with “Burbclave” dwellers, whose children wear “Ninja Raft Warrior pajamas” (18). Raft dwellers then come ashore in the heart of the franchise economy and are absorbed into it, adding ““more fuel”” (118), as Rife puts it, to the capitalist machine. Unlike the proponents of “secular redemption” Asad describes, Rife makes an argument that does not rely on a common notion of humanity, but on a different

common value, namely material success. Rife insists that the cycle of exploitation and absorption he effects is a good thing, and that most inhabitants of the system he advocates “live happily ever after.” The happiness Rife offers those who take the Raft, however, is contingent on their willingness to enter a highly competitive economy that offers strong incentives for success, but little latitude in how success is defined.

The phrase in Rife’s defense of capitalism that obviously separates it from the “secular redemption” Asad describes is “find Christ,” which suggests that Rife believes capitalist redemption and Christian redemption can go hand in hand. As *Snow Crash* progresses, the commitment to a mix of Christianity and capitalism Rife espouses is revealed as a conspiracy to gain absolute control over individual subjects in the economy he advocates. This conspiracy poses a direct threat to the agency of the novel’s secular protagonists, and the struggle against it becomes the focus of their labors. Hiro and Y.T. uncover the conspiracy as they investigate a phenomenon called “Snow Crash” that Rife is masterminding. In the novel’s early going, nothing seems to connect the three things that are called, or associated with, Snow Crash. First, in the world of programming, hackers become sick, and in some cases fall into comas, after looking at bitmaps (screens filled with elementary programming code) that spread through a computer virus called Snow Crash. Second, in physical reality, people are beginning to use a drug, also called Snow Crash, that causes them to lose consciousness and babble in an unrecognizable language. Third, a new religious franchise, called the Reverend Wayne’s Pearly Gates, is attracting legions of new followers with a combination of nationalism, Elvis worship, and some version of Pentecostalism. One of the Reverend Wayne’s bestselling publications is “*How America Was Saved from Communism: ELVIS SHOT JFK*” (194). Readers first

get a look at this title, and at what goes on at the Pearly Gates, when Y.T. visits a franchise location as part of a Mafia plan to investigate Snow Crash. She observes the experience available to worshippers—after, of course, they have made a donation, i.e. paid a fee:

The customer stomps toward the double doors, drawn in by hypnotic organ strains. The interior of the chapel is weirdly colored, illuminated partly by fluorescent fixtures wedged into the ceiling and partly by large colored light boxes and simulated stained-glass windows. The largest of these, shaped like a fattened Gothic arch, is bolted to the back wall, above the altar, and features a blazing trinity: Jesus, Elvis, and the Reverend Wayne. Jesus gets top billing. The worshipper is not half a dozen steps into the place before she thuds down on her knees in the middle of the aisle and begins to speak in tongues: “ar ia aria r isa ve na a mir ia i sa, ver na a mir ia a sar ia . . .” (195-196)

The image of a believer kneeling and speaking in tongues before Christ, the Reverend Wayne, and Elvis, with the first getting “top billing,” modifies the traditional Christian trinity to create a symbolic hegemony in which official Christianity makes room for commodified demagoguery and pop-culture chauvinism. These elements are not, apparently, meant to form a coherent theology; they seem to provide an opportunity for a non-rational response from the believer in the form of tongues. Early on, however, Stephenson confines his readers to guesswork, providing little detail concerning how followers of the Reverend Wayne understand his teachings, or their own role as believers.

As the text progresses, Stephenson suggests that the followers have no *understanding* as such, merely a vague set of feelings marked by an equally vague set of stock terms. This characterization comes into focus in a conversation between Y.T. and one of the Reverend Wayne’s followers. Y.T. discovers that the hackers who fall sick after exposure to the mysterious bitmaps in the Metaverse are often recruited and/or

kidnapped into Rife's organization, taken to the Raft, and then returned to North America as practitioners of the Reverend Wayne's religion. In the following exchange Y.T. speaks first:

"Where were you before? You didn't grow up on the Raft, did you?"

"I was a systems programmer for 3verse Systems in Mountain View, California," the woman says, suddenly whipping off a string of perfect, normal-sounding English.

"Then how did you get to be on the Raft?"

"I don't know. My old life stopped. My new life started. Now I'm here." Back to baby talk.

...

"You want to leave? I can get you out of here."

"No," the woman says. "I've never been so happy."

"How can you say that? You were a big-time hacker. Now you're kind of a dip, if I may speak frankly."

"That's okay, it doesn't hurt my feelings. I wasn't really happy when I was a hacker. I never thought about the important things. God. Heaven. The things of the spirit. It's hard to think about those things in America. You just put them aside. But those are really the important things—not programming computers or making money. Now, that's all I think about." (263)

In this passage, the former hacker rejects the values of material accumulation in favor of "the things of the spirit." The vagueness of her vocabulary, the paucity of her spiritual autobiography, and the simplistic distinction she makes between her former life of production and consumption and her new life of spiritual enlightenment all suggest that her beliefs are based on a distinction she herself cannot properly articulate. Y.T. notices that the woman's arms are "all tracked out like a junkie's" (265) and discovers that, while on the Raft, former hackers are forced constantly to give blood. The vampiric relationship Rife's organization seems to have with the (previously) most rational and

educated of its followers, combined with the imagery of addiction⁶⁰ (the needle-tracked arms), underscores the way that the Reverend Wayne, and his financial backer L. Bob Rife, victimize secular subjects in order to perpetuate their franchise.

By drawing a contrast between her interlocutor's former life of material success and current life as a follower of the Reverend Wayne, Y.T. implies that she sees secular endeavor, competitive and dangerous though it might be, as preferable to removing oneself from the realm of work to become "kind of a dip" instead. This is not the novel's most articulate critique of the Reverend Wayne's religion, but it does point to a *contrast* between religious and secular ways of being that the novel develops more carefully through the adventures of Y.T. Before she becomes involved, together with Hiro, in an investigation of Snow Crash, Y.T. works as a skateboard courier. Readers are allowed access to her point of view through free indirect discourse, and early in the novel, she seems to think about little besides her immediate work assignments and the various technical gadgets and learned skills that allow her to do it effectively. For instance, her high-tech skateboard allows her to attach herself to the back of fast-moving freeway traffic; as with Hiro's job, the novel describes this life-threatening practice as thrilling and, at the same time, quite normal. Despite their relative lack of reflective depth, Y.T.'s passing thoughts do emphasize a sense of individual freedom and empowerment. On one occasion, having used a passing car to gain speed, she thinks to herself that "[t]he world is full of power and energy and a person can go far by skimming off just a little bit of it"

⁶⁰ It should be noted that *Snow Crash*'s linking of religion to addiction can be seen as part of a larger discourse of addiction in cyberpunk, one in which not only religious experience but also secular forms of transcendence (such as virtual reality) can be addictive. For a discussion of this issue, see Weinstone. See also my discussion of addiction as a problem for the secular protagonist of *Neuromancer* in chapter 3.

(33). Moments like this emphasize Y.T.'s individualism and her freedom of movement within the system off of which she skims energy (a fact further underscored by the implicit rebelliousness of her use of a skateboard and the novel's reference to her as a "thrasher"⁶¹). Y.T. is assertive both in her business dealings and her personal (and sexual) relations with others, and her assertiveness is shown in a wholly positive light. The self-given name Y.T. stands for "Yours Truly," and she frequently speaks of herself in the third person, as if attempting to underscore her status as a protagonist in a narrative. This feature of the text prompts Barbara Browning to suggest that Y.T. "even manages to infect the narrative voice which calls itself by its own name every time it mentions her" (50). As I will discuss in the next section, Y.T. must ultimately share narrative authority with Hiro Protagonist. However, *Snow Crash*'s use of free indirect discourse in its portrayal of Y.T. certainly underscores her individualistic self-assertion⁶².

Through Y.T.'s interaction with the followers of the Reverend Wayne, the novel enacts a broader and more thoroughgoing affirmation of secular individualism. By contemplating the followers of the Reverend Wayne, Y.T. begins to reflect more broadly on the kind of agency she wants to possess, and on her place in the "power and energy" of the world she is coming to understand. In one of her first looks at Rife's followers, Y.T. "finds herself in what looks like an open-air insane asylum. Or a Moonie festival or something" (178). Each participant in this festival wears an expression of "childlike glee

⁶¹ For a discussion of the connection between US skateboarding culture and counter-cultural individualism, see the documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys*.

⁶² Browning's observation that Y.T. "manages to infect the narrative voice" (50) is especially persuasive because the free indirect discourse frequently deployed in the portrayal of Y.T. almost always encourages readers to identify with her and approve of her actions and emotions. It should be noted, however, that free indirect discourse does not always encourage such positive identification; for a discussion of the variety of reader-character relations free indirect discourse can create, see Cohn chapter 3.

that does not look right on a bunch of thirty-something people with dirty hair” (178). On another occasion she sneaks into one of Rife’s enclaves on Mafia business and sees the following: “The campfires provide enough plain old regular visible light to show this sorry affair for what it is: a bunch of demented Boy Scouts, a jamboree without merit badges or hygiene” (260). For Y.T., both the lack of meritocracy—that is, the lack of opportunity for individualistic endeavor to gain recognition—and lack of hygiene, that important middle-class endeavor to police the body’s exposure to infection⁶³, are key indicators of what is wrong with following the Reverend Wayne. When she is temporarily captured by Wayne’s followers and forced to participate in their way of life, Y.T. finds herself drawn to the sense of community the franchise provides, which she admits is “perversely comforting. She knows that she’s with a lot of other people like her, and that she’s safe. She knows the routine. She knows where she belongs” (322). This sense of belonging (built through repetitive group work and through ritual chants and games) is only strong enough to suspend Y.T.’s suspicions temporarily. The return to a more secular and individualist perspective happens in a flash:

From time to time, she actually recognizes one of the people [around her]. But they don’t seem to recognize her; they just look right through her. Glassy-eyed. Like they’ve brainwashed.
 Like Y.T. was brainwashed.
 She can’t believe it has taken her this long to figure out what they were doing to her. And that just makes her more pissed. (325)

It is shortly after this revelation that “it starts coming clear to her, again, that these people are all twisted freaks” (341). In my discussion of Slavoj Žižek’s use of the word “freaks”

⁶³ For further discussion of the complex connections between Y.T.’s rebellious individualism and her concern with hygiene, see Browning 44-51.

to describe the fundamentalists he claims are his natural opponents, I noted how the term suggests that “fundamentalist freaks” are beyond the reach of analysis. Because of their “really other Other” (Jackson and Pellegrini 11) status, however, these figures serve as powerful points of contrast that, for Y.T., help to redeem the world of secular endeavor to which she returns. Through the narrative of Y.T.’s temporary conversion and subsequent re-secularization, *Snow Crash* invites readers to consider that the dangerous, unstable world of labor (in which Y.T. circulates energetically and, to a certain extent, freely) is preferable to the novel’s most visible alternative, a life as a freakish follower of the Reverend Wayne. If Y.T.’s dangerous, demanding work as a courier initially appears as a normal way to make a living in the novel’s economy, the contrast between this life and life as a dutiful fundamentalist makes the deadliness of her profession (which provides opportunities for self-assertion) appear not simply as a necessary evil, but as an attraction. Y.T.’s escape from the clutches of the Reverend Wayne involves a series of increasingly harrowing and dangerous acts, the climax of which involves a wreck on a crowded freeway. In contrast to the circumstances Y.T. is escaping, however, these dangers figure as gateways to liberation.

Linguistic Hacking: the Power of Secular Consciousness

While Y.T.’s interaction with the Reverend Wayne’s followers expresses the difference between religious and secular ways of life in emotional and visceral terms, Hiro’s investigation of *Snow Crash* is a matter of rational, academic investigation. After learning from Y.T. that *Snow Crash*, the popular new drug that induces glossalalia, is

made from the blood of hackers “infected” by the sickness-inducing bitmaps, Hiro realizes that these hackers often babble in seeming incoherence, just like Snow Crash addicts, and that both kinds of babbling are related to the tongues spoken by the followers of the Reverend Wayne. Thus, the various manifestations of Snow Crash, which are first presented as unrelated, are gradually linked together by the following phenomena: addiction, mental incapacity and/or enslavement, irrationalism, and glossolalia. At one point Hiro asks his ex-girlfriend Juanita, who first sets him on the path of his investigation: ““This Snow Crash thing—is it a virus, a drug, or a religion?”” She casually responds, ““What’s the difference?”” (200). As I will discuss later, Juanita is the only character in the novel who defends any manifestation of religion in a convincing way, and the only character who attempts to make meaningful distinctions among religions (as opposed to grouping them together as a single phenomenon that can be called by a single name). However, even Juanita remarks that drugs, religions, and viruses are difficult to tell apart. The implicit argument of this remark is that while religion may require more critical analysis than Y.T. gives it, such analysis is likely to confirm the idea that religion is opposed to rationalism and individualism.

This binary understanding of the distinction between religion and the secular continues to inform Hiro’s discoveries about Snow Crash, and about the rational (and implicitly secular) practices that can combat it. Unlike Y.T.’s investigations in material reality, Hiro’s search for the truth about Snow Crash takes places almost entirely in the Metaverse, mostly in conversation with an advanced piece of software called the Librarian. This investigation takes Hiro into matters of religion and the secular, but by a route much more circuitous, and much more academic, than Y.T.’s. Much of Hiro’s time

is spent in a research file named “Babel/Infocalypse” and it leads Hiro into a study of the Biblical story of Babel, and into the intricacies of historical circumstances that correspond to the story. Babel, in the account of Genesis, is a story of human overreaching and divine judgment. Humans build a tall tower as a monument to their greatness, and God interrupts the building of this tower by effecting a change in human language. The narrative, taken from Genesis 11:4-9 of the New King James version, is as follows:

And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the earth.” But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

This narrative posits, as a starting point, a moment in history when language was unified. As the Librarian explains to Hiro: ““Early linguists, as well as the Kabbalists, believed in a fictional language called the tongue of Eden, the language of Adam. It enabled all men to understand each other, to communicate with each other without misunderstanding”” (278). The point of Babel, therefore, is linguistic differentiation as punishment. The Infocalypse, which makes a unified, reliable system of communication impossible, is portrayed as an evil, and a deserved one, justly created by supernatural means and administered (downloaded into the human mind, as it were) by God himself. As Hiro begins to contextualize the Babel story within a larger study of the Sumerian culture to

which it presumably refers, another potential meaning emerges, one that sheds a more positive light on the Infocalypse and grants a potentially heroic role to human agents who know why, and how, to make it happen, namely hackers.

This re-imagining of Babel relies on Hiro's discovery that all the various kinds of "babble" related to Snow Crash are in fact manifestations of a virus, or rather metavirus, that can be spread visually (by a bitmap), intravenously (by a drug), or aurally (by Pentecostal tongues). The disorienting heterogeneity of these paths of infection is explained by the fact that this virus takes up residence in the brainstem, bypassing the higher brain altogether. As Hiro explains, although it interacts with genetic material, the metavirus is essentially *linguistic*, "'based in the deep structures of the brain, that everyone shares. These structures consist of basic neural circuits that have to exist in order to allow our brains to acquire higher languages'" (395). The metavirus is thus an ur-language that acts as the neurolinguistic foundation for any other forms of language that a human brain acquires. It is the operating system, as it were, on which various pieces of software (acquired languages) can be run, and this grants extraordinary power to anyone who can manipulate it. "'[S]omeone who knows the right words can speak words, or show you visual symbols, that go past all your defenses and sink right into your brainstem'" (395). Hiro discovers that Sumerian civilization was controlled almost entirely by sets of linguistic programs written in the language of the metavirus and administered by priests, who controlled the daily activities of individuals without their conscious consent⁶⁴. It turns out, then, that Pentecostal "babble" is anything but

⁶⁴ The fact that the metavirus is a linguistic phenomenon suggests the influence of Burroughs, who explored the idea of language as a virus in *Naked Lunch* and in later works; see in particular *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962) 49-54. Burroughs's interest in

incoherent; it is, in fact, an ancient equivalent of a programmer's code, a linguistic version of the rather lengthy strings of ones and zeroes that control the operations of a computer. In the case of the metavirus, the master programmer is L. Bob Rife, who wants to reintroduce the metavirus as a form of social control and also as a way to control the flow of information. When *Snow Crash* users or followers of the Reverend Wayne or infected hackers speak in tongues, they are manifesting the receptive state in which they can be "programmed" with instructions and controlled absolutely—and they are, potentially, infecting others so that they enter the same state of helplessness. Thus, the novel's key example of religion figures it as a force that destroys agency, making believers the objects of the intentions of others (who "program" sets of actions and even states of mind) rather than subjects of their own rational intent.

The metavirus thus indicates that *Snow Crash* portrays religion as a more or less unified entity, each manifestation of which has a common, viral heritage that tends toward the irrational, even the antirational. It is important to note that the metavirus spreads most effectively by way of a religious institution (as opposed to a burger franchise or a pop song), and Hiro's investigation of the early history of the metavirus underscores this connection. After the fall of Sumerian culture, Hiro discovers, the metavirus was spread by way of a pagan cult devoted to the goddess Asherah, where it was disseminated partly through tongues and partly through contact with temple prostitutes. This revelation further historicizes the continuity of ancient religion with the Reverend Wayne's franchise. Hiro makes this connection unmistakable: "The cult of

Mayan codices may have inspired Stephenson's decision to make the metavirus originate in an ancient pictographic language; some elements of *Snow Crash*'s Sumerian society recall Burrough's preface to *Ah Pook Is Here!* (1979). For further discussion of Burroughs's influence on cyberpunk as a whole, see B. Wood.

Asherah lives. The Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates is the cult of Asherah'" (403).

Though *Snow Crash* suggests that all capitalist franchise activity is viral, the special connection between religion and the metavirus qualifies this critique. As Hiro's investigation progresses, the fact that capitalism spreads whenever it has "a sufficiently virulent business plan" (191) is eventually overshadowed by the novel's conviction that religion carries *the* virus, the metacontaminant that destroys rational thought and agency. The novel occasionally qualifies this view of religion. For instance, Hiro's ex-girlfriend Juanita claims that "'all religion used to be viral—a piece of information that replicated inside the human mind, jumping from one person to the next. That's the way it used to be, and unfortunately that's the way it's going right now'" because of L. Bob Rife's deployment of the metavirus. At the same time, Juanita urges Hiro not to "lump all religion together," and gives him some hints to help him investigate historical "attempts to deliver us from primitive, irrational religion" (201). Juanita's own attempt to make *Snow Crash* into something "rational" will be discussed later, but it should be noted that despite occasional attempts to differentiate types of religion from one another, the novel tends to enforce the idea that religion is good only insofar as it resembles secular practice, that is, insofar as it is recognizably "rational" in secular terms.

Stephenson underscores the fact that "rational religion" is closely aligned with (perhaps even indistinguishable from) secular endeavor by arranging a correspondence between the novel's main action and the ancient past that Hiro investigates. In the main action, Hiro foils Rife's plan to spread the Metavirus, first by writing software to block its presence in the Metaverse, and then by releasing a linguistic "program" that short-circuits its oral/aural spread in physical reality. The "disinfectant" that protects the

Metaverse is written by Hiro himself, but the linguistic program is not. In fact, the new “babble” is quite old. Its author is Enki, a priest of the original Sumerian culture, and by Hiro’s account an extraordinarily gifted one who ““had the ability to ascend into the universe of language and see it before his eyes. Much as humans go into the Metaverse”” (277). In a later discussion, Hiro modifies this definition in a way that creates a more precise analogue between Enki’s role in history and his own: ““Enki was [a priest] who just happened to be especially good at his job. He had the unusual ability to write new [programs]—he was a hacker. He was, actually, the first modern man, a fully conscious human being, just like us”” (397). Out of whatever impulses—individualism, anarchism, boredom—this “fully conscious” being wrote a verbal program that, when circulated among the members of his society, rewrote their basic neural programming in such a way as to block their receptivity to further verbal programming. The novel posits Enki’s act of deprogramming as the “historical” event behind the Biblical story of Babel. Thus, the story of Enki is a myth of a bureaucratic functionary who lashes out against the system that initially created him, freeing himself and others from its constraints.

By referring to Enki as a hacker, Hiro suggests that the act of hacking is deeply connected to questions of agency and consciousness. This connection is made more explicit in Stephenson’s extended essay on computer programming, *In the Beginning . . . Was the Command Line*. In this text, Stephenson’s chief concern is what he sees as a dangerous dependence on, and belief in, the apparently magical power of the graphic user interface (GUI), the series of windows, buttons, scroll bars, and tabs by which most users manipulate software on their computers’ operating systems (such as the various versions of Windows and Mac OS). For most users, Stephenson says, the GUI is the closest they

will ever come to a real understanding of how a computer functions and how they themselves interact with the material workings of the digital realm. He describes the packaging and sale of operating systems, often accompanied by expensive publicity campaigns, as invitations to participate in an illusion of agency; actually, Stephenson argues, the GUI encourages a user to have a fundamentally passive relationship with the computer's material functioning. The specific solution Stephenson puts forward is a renunciation of (or at least a strongly skeptical attitude toward) the GUI, and a commitment to the more demanding command line interface (the black screen with lines of code visible to Windows users only in those brief moments when their PCs are booting up). The command line interface requires the user to conceive of his or her computer as a device that responds to commands—and hence to think of himself or herself as the active, choosing agent who issues those commands. For Stephenson, the extraordinary difficulty that most users experience in their struggles with command-line operating systems (such as Unix or Linux) is the necessary price they must pay for actual agency in the digital realm. Without this agency, corporations that produce and market software have the lion's share of power. As Stephenson reminds us, actually “the dominance is inside the minds of people who buy software. Microsoft has power because people believe it does. This power is very real” (144)—and it is also very similar to the power wielded by the Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates. Against this kind of participatory brainwashing, Stephenson urges us to remember that “if you don't like having your choices made for you, you should start making your own” (151). For Stephenson, the act of hacking rationalizes or disenchants the user's relationship to the computer, restoring the sense of a

concrete, cause-and-effect relationship between the subject who does the programming and the object being programmed.

The kinds of hacking performed in *Snow Crash*, however, go a bit further than the stance of *In the Beginning*; the actions of Enki, and later of Hiro, actively *force* others to start making their own choices. In a discussion with Uncle Enzo, head of the Mafia, and a number of others who are trying to defeat Rife's plan, Hiro describes the likely effects of the radical deprogramming Enki performed on his fellow Sumerians:

“Some probably did [starve]. Everyone else had to use their higher brains and figure it out. So you might say that the [program] of Enki was the beginnings of human consciousness—when we first began to think for ourselves. It was the beginning of rational religion, too, the first time that people began to think about abstract issues like God and Good and Evil . . . Babel is a gateway in our minds, a gateway that was opened by the [program] of Enki that broke us free from the metavirus and gave us the ability to think—moved us from a materialistic world to a dualistic world—with both a physical and a spiritual component.” (398)

Hiro's account argues that “rational religion” is always on the side of the hacker, the committed rationalist who sees through the GUI of religious practice to the code beneath—and can manipulate that code in such a way as to *alter* and/or *destroy* religious belief and practice. At the moment that Hiro releases Enki's original program into the ears and minds of Rife's brainwashed followers, he is performing an act of radical higher criticism, forcing believers to become conscious of their belief, and hence to believe it much differently. Some may starve, literally, spiritually, or both, but all will have to start believing their religion with their “higher brains,” or not at all. Viewed in this way, the hacker liberates humans from the slavish impulses/codes of the brainstem and creates an open-ended future for human history. Hiro speculates: ““Maybe the [program] of Enki wasn't such a bad thing. Maybe Babel was the best thing that ever happened to us””

(279). Hiro thus suggests a revision of the myth of Babel as a fortunate, and indeed wholly necessary, fall. As noted previously, *Snow Crash* gives some lip service to the value of “rational religion.” The novel’s actual narrative focus, however, is on the rational, secular practice of hacking as the best antidote to the irrational religion exemplified by the cult of Asherah.

A Little Bit of Asherah: The Visceral Register of Secular Subjectivity

Although *Snow Crash*’s most dominant myth is that of the hacker as the agent who makes meaningful secular endeavor possible, Stephenson makes some effort to hack his own myth even as he creates it. The mastermind of the Snow Crash conspiracy, it should be recalled, is secular media mogul L. Bob Rife, whose decision to use the virus of religion as an instrument of domination is an outgrowth of his capitalist ambition. At one point, Rife remarks that his corporation is ““working on refining our management techniques so that we can control ... information no matter where it is—on our hard disks or even inside our programmers’ heads”” (116); this goal is literally realized when the metavirus transforms hackers into passive, programmable objects. This is a much different kind of power from Hiro’s agency as a hacker, but its motivation is ultimately secular. Rife has no actual investment in religion as such; for him, it is merely a means to an end. However, the novel argues that megalomaniacal projects like Rife’s inevitably (if unfortunately) accompany secular progress because irrational, viral tendencies are hardwired into human subjectivity. Hiro reminds his allies, and by extension his readers, that “[a]ny information system of sufficient complexity will inevitably become infected

with viruses—viruses generated from within itself” (396). Further, he suggests that what is true of information systems in general is particularly and materially true of the human brain, where the metavirus has taken up permanent residence. In fact, ““because of its latency—coiled about the brainstem of those it infects, passed from one generation to the next—it always finds ways to resurface”” (401). In other words, rationality is perpetually liable to infection by irrationality. Hiro explains at greater length:

“A viral idea can be stamped out—as happened with Nazism, bell bottoms, and Bart Simpson T-shirts—but Asherah, because it has a biological aspect, can remain latent in the human body. After Babel, Asherah was still resident in the human brain, being passed on from mother to child and from lover to lover” (399).

The omnipresence of the metavirus, which is latent in all human brains, becomes a kind of running joke among the novel’s non-religious characters. Significantly, these jokes refer to the metavirus by one of its religious manifestations, Asherah. When his technologically sophisticated motorcycle breaks down, Hiro thinks to himself that “Asherah’s possessed his bike” (326), and Uncle Enzo, the head of the Mafia, jokes at one point that ““there’s a little bit of Asherah in all of us”” (408). Thus, Hiro’s investigation of *Snow Crash* leads to an understanding of religion as a constitutive element of human endeavor, albeit one that must be contained and managed.

The novel also gives voice, however, to a more pointed critique of religious believers as “freaks” through the character of Y.T. These two different reactions to the presence of religion in the world of the novel—Hiro’s rational understanding of it as an unavoidable if dangerous virus and Y.T.’s less reasoned and more hostile rejection of it—remain two separate responses, each apparently legitimate, that simply occupy different

narrative and thematic valences. I find the novel's exploration of these two different valences particularly important because it can help to complicate William Connolly's analysis of secular subjectivity. Connolly insists that secular subjectivity must be seen as possessing multiple registers, some of which partake of rational thought less than others. Further, he argues that secular commitment to rational thought is troubled and complicated by the material structure of the brain itself. Connolly discusses the relationship of the "higher" brain to its "lower" regions, specifically the amygdala. The latter, he explains, creates problems for any simplistic secularist model of human intellectual activity because "[w]hen receiving, say, a sign that it has stored as an indication of danger, the amygdala reacts quickly, relatively crudely, and with intense energy" (28). The "prefrontal cortex," by contrast, "receives its version of the message more slowly, processing it through a sophisticated network in a more refined way and forming a more complex judgment" (28-29). There is no point, Connolly argues, in somehow championing the higher brain at the expense of the lower, and what secular thought should do instead is to make space for both crude (read, among other things, religious) and sophisticated (read, primarily, secular) ways of receiving signs. He asserts that secularism's lack of attention to visceral registers of subjectivity "requires [secularism] to misrecognize itself and encourages it to advance dismissive interpretations of any culture or ethical practice that engages the visceral register of being actively" (29). According to this line of thought, a secularism that makes space for the visceral register will be more open to (or at least less dismissive of) various forms of religious being and practice. Connolly hopes that it is possible "for believers and nonbelievers from a variety of faiths to double over in laughter together ... across the

space of difference ... Doing so partly *because* each party harbors in itself an ineliminable element of difference from itself ..." (45). If Connolly's hope were to be fulfilled, it would be possible for secular subjects more easily to acknowledge their infection by and participation in religious principles and practices often viewed as "other" (perhaps "really other Other" (Jackson and Pellegrini 11)) to secular norms of being.

While Connolly's faith in the conciliatory power of the visceral register may be admirable, *Snow Crash* provides a powerful example of the way that secularism can maintain its distance from religion precisely by making use of the visceral register. It is certainly true that Hiro and his secular allies joke about the ubiquitous presence of the metavirus—a workable example, for Connolly's purposes, of secular subjectivity acknowledging an "ineliminable element of difference from itself." However, this self-reflexive understanding does nothing to affect Hiro's determination to contain the religion/virus/drug that threatens secular well-being. Further, as I have suggested, Hiro's investigation of the metavirus never suggests that Y.T.'s more visceral objections to religion need to be qualified or rationalized. If two protagonists' attitudes are set side by side, the contrast is stark; Hiro's careful attempts to articulate the passage from "irrational" to "rational" religion are qualitatively different from Y.T.'s visceral reactions to the "twisted freaks" she must confront (and eventually escape). Interestingly, however, this difference is not likely to be felt *as* a difference even by attentive readers of the novel. There is, instead, a sense that each of these positions ultimately stabilizes and reinforces the other. Y.T.'s view of religion may be phrased in an inflammatory way, but she is only practicing the kind of discursive hygiene that Hiro is engaged in when he stops the spread of the metavirus. Y.T.'s hostility is, in a sense, a *natural* response, the

response of the healthy body to the threat of disease, of the healthy mind to the threat of brainwashing. The catalyst for this parallel between Hiro and Y.T. is the metavirus, religion itself, the other against which the secular subject must attain (or perhaps is able to achieve) self-definition. Further, Y.T.'s seemingly instinctive hostility towards religion allows for a secular mode of being to *occupy* the visceral register. Thus, while the metavirus naturally finds its home in the visceral register (the lower brain), a gut reaction against its control can reside there as well.

As I noted in chapter 1, Connolly is interested in the visceral register not only because he desires less contentious interactions between religious and secular subjects, but also because he wants to articulate a secular subject that can compete against various religious opponents. We see a possible example of this kind of subject in the figure of Y.T., who successfully shakes off the influence of the metavirus through anger and self-assertion, but the presence of this kind of subject brings *Snow Crash* no closer to a more tolerant or conciliatory relationship with religion. On the contrary, the novel's two protagonists allow for a multivalent secular discourse that still conceives of religion as opposed and "other" to itself, and still thinks in terms of a competition with religion for discursive space and power. Thus, *Snow Crash* is an example of an art of the secular self, specifically a narrative art that articulates an image of "religion" in terms of its difference from secular subjects. These subjects represent a set of secular values and express them from points of view that the novel establishes as normative. *Snow Crash* situates its readers in such a way that they can participate in different registers of being that reinforce each other, reinforcing the validity of secular subjectivity. *Snow Crash* expresses an *apparent* diversity of secular responses to the presence of religion, but this array of

responses is finally experienced by the reader as a more or less unified subjectivity with different valences or registers. The novel thus gives the impression of a harmonious relationship between the visceral and rational registers of secular being. The rational (exemplified by Hiro) filters and re-articulates the visceral even as the visceral (exemplified by Y.T.) charges the rational with vitality and purpose. This purpose, however, remains strongly opposed to the novel's version of religion.

One of the weaknesses of current theories of the secular, I assert, is a lack of attention to this kind of secular art, which powerfully articulates and defends a secular model of being. Connolly believes secular thought needs to acknowledge and explore visceral registers of being, when texts like *Snow Crash* clearly indicate that there are already secular arts exploring and exploiting it in complex and powerful ways. What is needed, I would argue, is more careful attention to the ways these arts have been and continue to be at work. When Connolly claims, "I am an amateur in this territory [of the visceral register]" (113), and suggests that this kind of secular naiveté is widespread, he is failing to acknowledge secular discourses, such as those in *Snow Crash*, that are just as deeply invested in the visceral register as their real or fantasized opponents. In fact, *Snow Crash* is a reminder of the ease with which the visceral register can be folded into a larger, more apparently rational project. If we are to acknowledge these multivalent secular arts in a broader and more complex way, it may be helpful to expect they are often at work in the very places they are claimed to be absent. With this possibility in mind, I suggest that Connolly's own professed innocence regarding the visceral register might itself be a subtly visceral rhetorical move. In other words, among the various narratives secular art can deploy, there may be narratives claiming that secular discourse

does not possess such arts. I suggest that to speak of or about the secular is to engage not only with pre-existing intellectual traditions (such as the tradition of secularization theory with which current thinkers continue to wrestle), but also to engage, to one degree or another, with the arts that theories of the secular are still struggling to recognize.

Concealed Longing? The Problem of Reoccupation

As I have mentioned, there is one exception to the religion/secular binary that *Snow Crash* upholds, Hiro's ex-girlfriend Juanita. A former hacker who has converted to Catholicism, Juanita infiltrates Rife's operations and gains access to the Sumerian social-engineering technology it deploys. At a key moment in Hiro's struggle against Rife, Juanita shows her former lover how to broadcast Enki's "program" in order to free Rife's followers from their mental enslavement. Critics have almost universally ignored not only Juanita's crucial role in the novel's plot, but also her alternative way of approaching religion⁶⁵. When Hiro asks Juanita why she would join Rife's organization, her initial

⁶⁵ Recent critical discussions have tended to put aside the question of *Snow Crash*'s treatment of capitalism, which dominated discussion in the 1990s (see note 53), and have focused on the novel's treatment of subjectivity under the heading of the "post-human." The prevalence of this term in discussions of cyberpunk, and its specific application to the case of *Snow Crash*, date from N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). Though Hayles insists that *Snow Crash*'s view of subjectivity is deeply relevant to the question of the post-human, she concedes that the novel's take on the subject is finally conservative, and that Stephenson defends normative capitalist consciousness as preferable to any posthuman alternatives; see 276-279. I submit that Stephenson's relevance to questions of posthumanism is limited; what Hayles identifies as posthuman in *Snow Crash* is more readily identifiable as religious. In discussing what are clearly identified as religious phenomena in the novel, Hayles tends to transpose terms in order to avoid mention of religion; see for instance her discussion of Porush (276-277). For a further discussion of the limitations of Hayles's approach, see Haney (2006) chapter 7.

reaction seems to reflect pure secular self-interest: ““Your brain has an immune system, just like your body. The more you use it—the more viruses you get exposed to—the better your immune system becomes. And I’ve got a hell of an immune system”” (429). Taken by itself, this line of reasoning seems to be little more than a combination of Hiro’s self-reflexive rationality and Y.T.’s concern for hygiene as an art of the secular self. Very quickly, however, Juanita’s reasoning becomes far more complex. In the following conversation Hiro speaks first.

“Why would anyone come [to Rife] voluntarily?”

“Hiro, don’t you realize? This is it. This is the nerve center of a religion that is at once brand new and very ancient. Being here is like following Jesus or Mohammed around, getting to observe the birth of a new faith.”

“But it’s terrible. Rife is the Antichrist.”

“Of course he is. But it’s still interesting . . . For a person interested in religion and hacking, this is the only place in the world to be.” (429)

The line of reasoning Juanita encourages Hiro to follow is not exactly that of a hostile secular subject, and her interest in Rife’s religion incorporates a sense of wonder different from Hiro’s interest in simply protecting the real world⁶⁶, and the Metaverse, from contamination by the metavirus. Admittedly, her ultimate goal is to possess the powers of Enki that Rife is monopolizing, a goal she claims to have reached when she co-opts the language of mystical Judaism⁶⁷ for the novel’s most spectacular line: ““I’m a ba’al shem.

For further discussion of Stephenson’s relevance to the question of the posthuman, see Vint (2007) chapter 6.

⁶⁶ Juanita’s interest in Rife’s religious project partly resembles the “desire to find wonder in understanding” that Farah Mendlesohn describes as typical of science fiction’s approach to religion (“Religion and Science Fiction” 269).

⁶⁷ Stephenson seems to consider at least some forms of Judaism to be more closely aligned with secular rationalism than the brand of Christianity represented by the Reverend Wayne. However, as the following discussion shows, Judaism is valued

I can hack the brainstem”” (430). Not even her desire for power, however, can conceal the fact that Juanita points the way to a view of religion more genuinely complex than any other perspective available in the novel. Stephenson does not put her ideas into dialogue with any others. He seems to want to suggest that Juanita’s view and Hiro’s could be complementary, but he can only show this by assuring readers that they will reunite as lovers after the novel’s conclusion.

The presence of Juanita raises the possibility that *Snow Crash* is more interested in spiritual experience than its initially hostile stance might lead us to believe. This interpretation is suggested by David Porush, the only critic thus far to have given the character of Juanita serious attention. His essay “Hacking the Brainstem: Postmodern Metaphysics and Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*” is exceptional in a number of ways. As his title hints, Porush valorizes metaphysics as a crucial (and, he claims, frequently disavowed) element of postmodern discourse. Although I contest the tendency of Porush’s argument to judge *Snow Crash*, and secular ideas of postmodernity more generally, as beholden to religious or metaphysical rubrics, I first wish to credit his insights concerning Juanita. In the following passage he ably articulates the way that the novel ignores the potential significance of her agenda:

Juanita has succeeded in finding the key to transcendence, finding the creative trapdoor in the mind that Snow Crash effects in a disastrous way. She uses the cybernetic mechanics of language to hack the brain, to open hailing frequencies with spirits, angels, and gods. But Hiro’s reaction to Juanita’s metaphysics is parallel to the metaphysical implications of Stephenson’s scheme: for both males, this woman’s courtship with the mystical is beside the point. (568-569)

mostly because it serves as an early instance of the kind of “informational hygiene” (230) best exemplified by secular figures like Hiro.

Although Porush may overestimate the degree of Juanita's desire for communion with "spirits, angels, and gods," he is certainly correct to note Hiro's, and by extension Stephenson's, seeming inability to take an interest in her desires. Porush goes on to assert: "I read this rejection of the metaphysical turn not as a lack of insight, but as the residual hold that one of the most potent viral ideas in our culture has on Stephenson and on his hero: a commitment to orthodox rationalism" (569). Porush's description of "orthodox rationalism" as "viral" parallels my argument in the previous section concerning "visceral" arts of the secular self, and I would agree that Stephenson's "rejection of the metaphysical turn" may be part of a structural tendency in some kinds of secular discourse. It may even be something hardwired into the visceral register of secularism, the register it uses its "orthodox rationalism" to deny.

While Porush provides a valuable alternative to the novel's own dismissive take on Juanita's metaphysical aspirations, he pursues metaphysics as a category that secular thought *must* incorporate as part of its own procedures, and indeed longs for in unconscious ways. For Porush, *Snow Crash* is indicative not only of secularity's "commitment to orthodox rationalism," but also of something more fundamental and inexorable that secularity has attempted to push to the margins, namely a desire for spiritual experience. Porush focuses his argument through a complex critique of Stephenson's treatment of Judaism, which is valorized in *Snow Crash* as an early, and highly successful, instance of a rational religion⁶⁸. Hiro discovers that "the strict, book-

⁶⁸ By treating Judaism as a prototype of what will later be expressed (in more a more complete form) in the figure of Hiro, Stephenson constructs a progress narrative in which secular forces and subjects give effective, perhaps final, expression to that which even "rational religion" can only partially grasp. I see this move as analogous to Žižek's reading of Pauline theology as a kind of "early" example of Lacanian Marxism.

based religion of the deuteronomists inoculated the Hebrews against the Asherah virus””; thus, Judaism made headway against the irrationality of the metavirus by practicing good “‘informational hygiene’” (230). Porush counters this rationalistic view of Judaism by pointing out the ways in which a focus on texts can also be a focus on metaphysics:

The most interesting and poignant precursor of cyberspace as a sacramental architecture is found in the cultural revolution marked by the destruction of the Temple of Solomon in 70 a.d. and the subsequent rise of the Talmud that that destruction made possible. We can think of this as the evolution from a sacramental architecture to a sacramental architexture (556).

Far from merely serving as a sort of disinfectant that stopped the spread of Asherah’s irrationalism, Porush argues, Judaism can be seen as a way of containing and focusing the believer’s experience of the sacred. The text of the Torah, and the surrounding apparatus of the Talmud, is not merely a set of rational procedures but is “something much more portable, but more profoundly potent” (558) than a physical structure devoted to religious exercise. Torah, and the apparatus of Talmud surrounding it, are not merely proto-secular instances of effective information systems, Porush insists; they are gateways to profound spiritual experience.

Stephenson’s lack of appreciation for the spiritual aspects of Judaism’s focus on texts becomes, for Porush, a key instance of secular denial:

The inability of *Snow Crash* to confront its own metaphysics, the spiritual transcendence it conjures only to banish, comes from the fashionable unwillingness to grant any credence to narratives of metaphysics, even while so much of postmodern culture apparently yearns for it (as the literature and pronouncements about cyberspace persistently hint). (569)

If Porush is correct concerning what he sees as a secular “fashionable unwillingness” to confront metaphysics, then there may be a great deal of spiritual meaning at stake whenever secular discourse “conjures” the presence of real or imagined religious others. Stephenson’s desire to get rational religion on the side of secularity (or, to extend the implications of Porush’s argument, Slavoj Žižek’s desire to make Christian theology reflect the truths of Lacanian Marxism) may conceal a wish to enact a reverse translation that would turn secularism into something more spiritual. One possible further implication of Porush’s argument is that the “orthodox” secular subject, at some fundamental level, is nothing more than a frustrated and self-deluded believer. Whether or not this latter implication is part of Porush’s intentions, the implied argument of the passage above is that secular thought can solve at least some of its own dilemmas, and rid itself of its hostility towards religion, by actively participating in the categories of metaphysics and spirituality. I contend that there are alternatives to Porush’s view, and in particular I wish to examine a model of secular development that explains apparent religious longings or priorities within secular thought as an effect of the way they emerge.

The model I will suggest derives from Hans Blumenberg, who develops the key concept of *reoccupation* in his work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, an extraordinarily comprehensive attempt to answer the claim that secular institutions (and by extension the subjects who inhabit those institutions) are haunted by, and obligated to, religious sources of meaning. As his English translator Robert Wallace explains, when Blumenberg first published his book in 1966, he was opposing the work of Karl Lowith, a figure who “established what seemed to amount to the illegitimacy of the modern age

as a whole, an illegitimacy that followed from his thesis that some central modern ideas ... were secularized versions of what were originally—and properly—medieval/Christian ideas” (xiv). The power of Lowith’s critique derives from his decision to approach secular discourse in terms of its *origins*, which are, necessarily, linked to religion. In his book *Meaning and History*, Lowith suggests, for instance, that the secular notion of progress derives from Christian models of history, and that “progress” as a concept is nothing more than a distorted, displaced version of Christian eschatology. Blumenberg rightly interprets Lowith as arguing “that modern historical consciousness is derived from the secularization of the Christian idea of the ‘salvation story’ and, more particularly, of providence and eschatological finitude” (27). To Lowith, secular thinking about history is most clearly understood in terms of redemptive Christian models of history—in other words, it is most clearly understood precisely in the terms that render it illegitimate and expose its supposed originality as an underhanded borrowing from religion.

This notion of a “secularized version of” something that is “properly” religious/metaphysical/spiritual is certainly at the heart of Porush’s critique of *Snow Crash* (and by extension his critique of secular “orthodox rationalism” as a whole). Porush’s view is more complex than that of Lowith, because the latter not only argues for essential religious categories of knowledge and experience but also insists on a recognizable set of unchanging religious terms or forms that are proper to them⁶⁹. Porush, by contrast, seems to believe that religious consciousness has no particular fixed forms, suggesting instead that the forms are subject to evolution in response to changing historical circumstance. Still, there is the assumption of an *essential* religious or spiritual

⁶⁹ For an example of Lowith’s assumptions concerning normative religious terms and forms, see the critique of Marx in *Meaning in History* 48-51.

or metaphysical aspiration that *Snow Crash*, in Porush's view, is attempting to conceal or distort. If this view is correct, then the novel should be interpreted as a displacement of religious belief in which various elements that are actually religious have been illegitimately transposed in an attempt to cover up their true nature. The character of Juanita, the Catholic believer, would be the focal point of this interpretation, and its goal would be to demonstrate that in various "hidden" ways *Snow Crash*'s concern with secular endeavor, for instance its focus on the categories of success and failure, is actually a displaced version of a concern with some more essentially religious category, such as revelation or salvation. When we consider whether or not this kind of argument is valid, as Blumenberg explains, "[e]verything turns on the question whether the worldly form of what was secularized is not a pseudomorph—in other words: an inauthentic manifestation—of its original reality" (18). In Porush's view, the distortion Stephenson enacts on Judaism is a proof of the novel's desire for (and perhaps its essential dependence upon) the thing it has distorted—the experience of spiritual revelation.

Blumenberg answers this critique of modernity by asking what exactly happens at those moments, either historical or epistemological, when secular thought begins to define itself within a religious context. He grants that, at such moments, there is often an *appearance* of illegitimate borrowing (or outright theft) from some aspect of religion, but he asserts that this appearance can be explained by the circumstances of emergence (46-51). The prior claims of religious thought have a strong impact on the shape an emergent discourse takes, particularly on its directions of inquiry. Much as a secular discourse may want to claim that it has definitively separated itself from any religious discourse, this "pretension of an absolute new beginning suffers from an appearance of illegitimacy on

account of the continuity that derives from its inability to shake off inherited questions” (48). In its early development, Blumenberg suggests, secular thought tends to ask questions that are “inherited” from the religious tradition preceding the new secular emergence. At the moment of emergence itself, secularity is thus shaped by pre-existing religious priorities. This approach to questions of emergence enables Blumenberg to address a wide variety of cases in which secular thought does appear, at first glance, to be a borrowed or displaced version of religion. For instance, in response to Lowith’s charge that the modern idea of progress is nothing more than an illegitimately secularized version of Christian eschatology, Blumenberg replies that modern history has enacted a *reoccupation* of traditional religious questions of redemption (that is, questions of how a fallen world will be redeemed). Hence, from this point of view “the philosophy of history is an attempt to answer a medieval question with the means available to a post-medieval age” (48-49). The notion of reoccupation can thus account for a great deal of confusion and contradiction within emergent secular discourses by treating these problems not as positive or negative developments, but simply as necessary stages of growth, stages that can only be superceded when secular thought reconsiders the questions it wishes to ask rather than simply following pre-existing religious priorities⁷⁰.

⁷⁰ In this reading of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* I differ with Colin Jager, who believes that Blumenberg posits an unchanging set of philosophical questions that are simply answered differently at different times and places. In Jager’s view, “questions of meaning ... are more or less constant ... Modernity, Blumenberg proposes, simply is the repeated act of reoccupying old questions of meaning dressed up in new languages” (*The Book of God* 217-218). This analysis misses the importance of the larger framework of Blumenberg’s argument, in which modernity is a great deal more than simply a series of new answers to old questions. It is, rather, the introduction of radically *new questions* reflecting new subjective and philosophical priorities that are so unprecedented (relative to the context of their emergence) that they cannot, at first, attain a phrasing or form appropriate to them. Thus, they borrow from pre-existing language instead.

In order to be useful for an interpretation of *Snow Crash*, Blumenberg's theory must be applied to the current context that many have called "post-secular." As I discussed in chapter 1, this is a moment when the certainties expressed in mid-century secularization theory have been strongly challenged by the historical persistence of religious forces. I suggest that *Snow Crash* attempts to reoccupy, not an earlier set of religious priorities, but a pre-existing set of *secular* expectations. The novel reflects the pressure of mid-century standards of secular legitimacy (under which religion would be either dismissed from history or confined to small private arenas) even though it confronts conditions in which these standards cannot be met. For Stephenson, as for recent theorists of the secular, it is possible to believe that the category of the secular is still viable, even if it can no longer be taken for granted as the standard by which religious categories can be judged. *Snow Crash*, I suggest, is a particularly instructive example of how secular reoccupation manifests in the current moment. In constructing the world of his novel, Stephenson clearly has a stock of intellectual and narrative resources to portray, if not exactly prove, the historical legitimacy of secular categories. He can show secular subjects at work in a world largely defined by secular social and economic forces. At the same time, he projects a future in which religion, gifted with viral survival capabilities, will emerge into the world again and again in various forms. *Snow Crash* admits, finally, that the secular subjects it valorizes are vulnerable to infection by religion, even if they are able to ward off the threat of infection most of the time. Asherah, the metavirus, can be contained but not eradicated, yet the novel seems to

Blumenberg's two leading terms for the new priorities of modernity are self-assertion and curiosity; see his discussion of the development of these categories in *Legitimacy* parts 2 and 3.

express an urge for final eradication, particularly through the visceral hostility of Y.T. At the same time, the novel tentatively explores a new and more pluralistic possibility in the figure of Juanita, who is both a fully invested follower of the Reverend Wayne and an independent subject who has mastered the discourse of Asherah for her own purposes. *Snow Crash* shows us the character of Juanita without ever telling its story from her point of view (she is allowed no free indirect discourse), clinging instead to its more traditionally secular protagonists, even though their efforts to contain the forces of religion are never fully successful.

Thus, *Snow Crash* reoccupies some of the positions and priorities of an older notion of the secular, enforcing a religion/secular binary it can never fully stabilize, even as the novel tentatively imagines an alternative that would do away with the binary altogether. What the figure of Juanita expresses, I would argue, is not a longing for spirituality or metaphysics as that which has been excluded by secular “orthodox rationalism,” but a desire for a kind of subjectivity that cannot properly be expressed in these oppositional terms at all. It seems, however, that this kind of subjectivity raises questions of agency that Stephenson is not prepared to answer. Juanita’s ability to combine religious and secular kinds of thought and practice is asserted but not portrayed, and instead Stephenson’s narration remains loyal to secular subjectivity in its rationalizing and/or hostile modes. In his “othering” of religion as a ubiquitous virus that must be subverted again and again by the cunning of the secular subject, Stephenson remains attached to a binary understanding of the relationship between the secular and the religious. At the same time, by providing his protagonists with non-secular opponents that can never be fully defeated, he grants them a sense of agency and purpose

that the late capitalist terms of the novel's world seem unable to sustain on their own. Through the myth of the hacker, *Snow Crash* attempts to transform an account of religion's threatening power into a self-reflexive, but also self-affirming, narrative of secular redemption. This redemption seems to strike a compromise between an attachment to the norms of mid-century secularization theory and an acknowledgment of the current reality of public religions. The figure of Juanita demonstrates the beginning of some new kind of subjectivity that would cease to see public religions as a matter for concern. However, the novel's difficulty in articulating this figure, and its refusal to allow her to reprogram the novel's secular priorities, is a cogent reminder that theorizing a new, more pluralistic subjectivity is a far cry from enacting this vision in fiction, much less in reality. Further, the critical and popular success of *Snow Crash* is a reminder that the novel's chief protagonists, who enforce a binary separation of the secular from the religious, remain deeply relevant expressions of secular subjectivity.

Chapter 3

Encountering Zion: The Secular Sublime in *Neuromancer*

The title of this chapter invokes the notion of a Romantic or post-Romantic sublime, an intensely subjective experience that produces a new understanding of the relationship between the self and the world. I will argue that the climax of *Neuromancer* makes use of a form of the sublime that allows for its lead protagonist to have significant and revitalizing contact with religion but ultimately, to borrow a phrase from Farah Mendlesohn, “to find wonder in understanding” (“Religion and Science Fiction” 269) rather than in religious experience. In the narrative leading to this climax, the novel is concerned first to portray, and then to mediate and displace, religious forces that play a key role in its plot. Unlike *Snow Crash*, *Neuromancer* does not represent religious forces as a threat to its secular protagonists. Rather, religion is an ally, arranging for a working-through of pressing dilemmas, specifically the dilemmas of late capitalism. The implications of religion’s helpful role are not fully explored in the novel; it remains committed to the destinies of its secular characters without investigating how those destinies have been shaped by their contact with religion. As I will show, despite the protagonist’s moment of contact, *Neuromancer* marks religion as fundamentally different from the secular world, and subordinates it to a secular perspective.

Though the climax of *Neuromancer* allows religion to play a significant role, much of the novel’s plot keeps it in the margins, foregrounding instead a story of secular endeavor in the near-future setting Gibson explored earlier in “Johnny Mnemonic.” *Neuromancer*’s chief protagonist, a cyberspace “cowboy” named Case who works as a

freelance data thief, is hired by a businessman named Armitage, who also employs a mercenary named Molly (who first appears in “Johnny Mnemonic”) and a holographic illusionist named Peter Riviera. These four characters, together with the religious figures I will discuss in the next section, work together in a series of thefts, the exact purpose of which they are not told. The plot moves the protagonists from earth to various locations in orbit, and finally to a labyrinthine orbital mansion where Case’s final hacking challenge awaits. In the course of their endeavors, Case and Molly discover that their real employer (for whom Armitage is the middleman) is Wintermute, an AI attempting to free itself from corporate control and to join with Neuromancer, a second AI from which it has been separated. Case’s endeavors to reunite Wintermute and Neuromancer are portrayed as a struggle for survival, since Wintermute threatens Case with death if he does not succeed. However, Case is also struggling, in an instinctive manner, for a more integrated relationship to himself and to his world. As I will show, this latter struggle necessitates the intervention of the novel’s religious characters, who are instrumental both in his survival and in his attaining a measure of freedom and subjective integrity.

In drawing attention to *Neuromancer*’s religious characters, and to their relationship to the secular protagonist and the world he inhabits, I will be emphasizing aspects of the novel that critics have ordinarily ignored. As discussed in chapter 1, critics have seen cyberpunk as typical of postmodernism. In their discussions of *Neuromancer* (and of Gibson, who is widely identified as the author most central to cyberpunk⁷¹), they

⁷¹ For typical assumptions of, or argument for, Gibson’s centrality, see Bukatman, *Terminal Identity* (1993) 146, Freedman (2003) 195, and Tatsumi (2006) 44.

have emphasized the features of his work that reflect postmodern aesthetic paradigms⁷², particularly its portrayals of cyberspace⁷³. Gibson invented the now-ubiquitous term “cyberspace,” and his fictional description of it as a “consensual hallucination” (*Neuromancer* 51), which occurs in a seemingly infinite three-dimensional space accessed by direct sensory participation, has become the dominant fictional and cinematic way of representing virtual experience. Postmodern elements in *Neuromancer*, and particularly its use of cyberspace, are indeed central to its meaning. As I will discuss, Case’s virtual experience is one of the novel’s primary means of exploring postmodern problems of subjectivity, and the question of postmodern subjectivity is certainly central to the text. However, attention to these issues has prompted critics to overlook ways that the novel uses realist conventions, even if it uses them to address postmodern problems.

I will be drawing particular attention to *Neuromancer*’s realist point of view, which restricts readers to Case’s experience and perspective. The centrality of Case’s point of view in the novel creates what Catherine Belsey calls a “hierarchy of voices” (64). As Belsey explains, this device “works ... by means of a privileged voice which places as subordinate all the utterances that are literally or figuratively between inverted commas” (65). In other words, a hierarchy of voices allows for a variety of different forces and values to speak in the novel while keeping some voices aligned with the

⁷² In recent years, as work on Gibson has attracted a wider variety of critical interests, his alignment with postmodernism is a default assumption for most critics, even when their interest in his work lies elsewhere; see Rapatzikou (2004) 43-44 and Holz (2006) 214-226. The primary dissenting voice with respect to Gibson’s postmodernity has been Darko Suvin; see “Gibson and Cyberpunk SF.”

⁷³ For discussions of cyberspace as central to an understanding of *Neuromancer*, see Bukatman (1993) 146-154, Hayles (1999) 35-39, and Haney (2006) 92-112.

“privileged” voice of the narrator and excluding others from such alignment. In *Neuromancer*, the only character aligned with the narrator is Case, the sole subject/recipient of free indirect discourse in the novel; though his experiences and convictions are not always validated or echoed by the narrator, they shape the novel’s focus and values more than any other factor. As I will show, Case’s point of view allows for contact with the novel’s religious characters in such a way that their values and influence can be contained or filtered. Religious characters and forces genuinely matter in *Neuromancer*, but the degree to which they matter is adjusted by the priorities and interests of the secular protagonist. The novel’s climax, as I will show, releases this control and allows for religious forces to shape the novel’s action and meaning more strongly; nevertheless, this ambiguous moment is itself contained within a point of view that limits its significance.

Zion: Creating and Containing Religion

Critics’ focus on the elements of *Neuromancer* that concern virtual reality has contributed to a lack of focus on characters who refuse to “jack in” to virtual reality and spend their lives entirely in the material world instead. These characters, who provide the secular protagonists with a base of operations when they first travel into orbit, subsequently ferry the protagonists to other orbital destinations, and provide aid at crucial moments, are the inhabitants of Zion⁷⁴, an orbital cluster located at some distance from

⁷⁴ While the term “Zion” and its opposite “Babylon” are often interpreted in the context of Judaism or Christianity, *Neuromancer*’s context for these terms is Rastafarian theology. The term “Zion” is somewhat modified in Gibson’s future setting. Zion seems

the novel's other settings. Zionites organize their society according to distinctly religious principles. In their racial makeup (they seem to be of African and/or West Indian descent), their drug preferences (marijuana), musical expression (a hybrid of reggae and electronic music called dub), and approach to spirituality (mystical and deeply personal), the Zionites are Rastafarian. They are also clearly opposed to the accelerated late-capitalist world the novel's other protagonists inhabit⁷⁵. Rather than examine *Neuromancer's* protagonists and their secular endeavors alone, I want to suggest the interpretive potential of overturning the accepted critical priorities and viewing the novel's main actions, including those that occur in cyberspace, in light of their relationship to Zion. I argue that the inhabitants of Zion are a positive, nostalgic stereotype, and are in this sense the inverse of the condemnatory stereotypes of religious believers in *Snow Crash*. This should not imply, however, that they are as easily comprehensible as Stephenson's fundamentalist freaks. Gibson goes to considerable lengths to make Zion a three-dimensional place with some degree of complexity.

to represent, not a physical location (as Ethiopia has for some Rastafarians), but the setting for a spiritual homeland. Babylon, as it is used in the novel, seems closer to the meaning it bears today; it refers both to the material spaces devoted to modern forms of economic and political power, and to the destructive ethos Rastafarians see as predominant in those spaces. For an exposition of these terms in the context of the time in which Gibson was writing *Neuromancer*, see Owens (1979) chapters 3 and 9. For more recent discussions of Rastafarian theology, see Murrell et al, ed. (1998) and Zips, ed. (2006).

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the connections between the Zionites and Rastafarianism, see Fair, who discusses what he calls the "utopian pessimism" (92-93) of Gibson's portrayal of Zion as political alternative to the rest of the novel's late capitalist hegemony. For a dissenting position that takes a more wholly pessimistic view of Zion's anticapitalist potential, see Moylan. In their readings of the novel's political potential, neither Fair nor Moylan take account of the clearly religious valence of Zion, or the frequent assertions of faith expressed by its citizens.

Gibson's representation of Zion frequently references some notion of the *organic*. Through the perception of Case, who spends a few days in Zion along with the rest of his companions on the way to the novel's climax, we learn that "Zion smell[s] of cooked vegetables, humanity, and ganja" (102). Upon closer examination, Zion's way of life reveals a more complex notion of what might qualify as organic: "... Case gradually became aware of the music that pulsed constantly through the cluster. It was called dub, a sensuous mosaic cooked up from vast libraries of digitalized pop; it was worship, Molly said, and a sense of community" (102). Gibson's representation of dub is indebted to the emergence of popular music that takes the sample as a central unit of composition, building movements and songs from pre-existing recordings, often juxtaposing passages from disparate genres and historical moments⁷⁶. Zionites derive their "worship," and to one extent or another their "sense of community," not from some pure musical expression free of the digital realm (or the realm of the commodity), but from a process of "cooking" that transforms the raw materials of "pop" into something that is meaningful in communal terms. That the raw materials are stored in "vast libraries" suggests sophisticated organization and classification of secular materials used for religious expression. This explains Gibson's choice of the word "mosaic," suggesting a musical form that carefully constructs formal wholes from individual fragments—fragments that might, in more postmodern musical forms, be employed for pastiche. It is interesting to

⁷⁶ One of the genres upon which Gibson draws is no doubt the actual dub being produced in Jamaica in the two decades preceding the publication of *Neuromancer*. At that time, dub had not yet attained the global popularity it currently enjoys, and its compositional raw materials were still largely, if not entirely, reggae recordings. By portraying dub as a form that uses a variety of "pop" sources, and not just those derived from reggae, Gibson correctly predicts the general direction dub composition has taken in the 25 years since *Neuromancer*'s publication. For a discussion of the evolution of dub, see Veal (2007).

note that Gibson's description of Zion's dub seems to be an organic, living version of what Jameson defines as postmodern pastiche: "the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (*Postmodernism* 18). Zion's "vast libraries" are not unlike the "imaginary museum" Jameson describes. However, Gibson seems to assert that the religious characters in *Neuromancer* are able to do more than simply copy "dead styles"; they can, instead, use these styles (lifeless in themselves, perhaps) as building blocks for a living, growing, non-derivative culture.

Other aspects of Gibson's picture of Zion convey a similar sense of organic wholeness derived from heterogeneous materials, along with a sense of fluid, open relationships between individuals and their community. Gibson describes Case's first view of Zion thus: "Seen from the bubble of the taxi, Zion's makeshift hull reminded Case of the patchwork tenements of Istanbul, the irregular, discolored plates laser-scrawled with Rastafarian symbols and the initials of welders" (101). The image of a hull, the most crucial element of any structure that exists in the vacuum of space, evokes the concept of communal *integrity*, of that which allows for a productive separation of inside from outside. The description of the hull serves as a deliberate contrast to a passage that occurs a page earlier as Case sits in a shuttle on a launching pad in Paris, waiting to begin his journey into orbit: "Case turned his head and tried to make out the outline of the old Orly terminals, but the shuttle pad was screened by graceful blast deflectors of wet concrete. The one nearest the window bore an Arabic slogan in red spraybomb" (100). This is one of many places where Gibson conveys the accelerated fragmentation of his world by deliberately placing a sign of cultural dissent (and/or

decay) atop or alongside some new, technology-intensive artifact. The image of the blast deflector marked by Arabic graffiti is fraught with implicit social and political tension (official, technical function challenged or disrupted by an expression of dissent) in a way that is the exact opposite of the relationship between the physical integrity of Zion's hull and the handmade markings of the welders who maintain it. Their initials, a sign of pride in their individual labors, serve as the guarantee of communal integrity rather than as some threat to it, and alter the symbolic valence of the hull's "irregular" appearance, suggesting not haphazard and uncertain structure but "mosaic" strength.

Gibson's portrayal of Zion does not create many meaningful differences among its individual inhabitants (certainly not as regards gender—it does not portray any women at all), but it does affirm the category of individual experience as a meaningful one for Zionites. At the same time, this validation comes about through the transmission of experience to others, as illustrated in the following passage:

Case didn't understand the Zionites.

Aerol, with no particular provocation, related the tale of the baby who had burst from his forehead and scampered into a forest of hydroponic ganja. "Ver' small baby, mon, long' you finga." He rubbed his palm across an unscarred expanse of forehead and smiled.

"It's the ganja," Molly said, when Case told her the story. "They don't make much of a difference between states, you know? Aerol tells you it happened, well, it happened to *him*. It's not like bullshit, more like poetry. Get it?"

Case nodded dubiously. The Zionites always touched you when they were talking, hands on your shoulder. He didn't like that. (104)

Aerol shares his story "with no particular provocation," suggesting that nothing is more natural for a Zionite than the oral transmission of personal experience. It seems that the point of this storytelling is not to establish external facts but to express internal and

communal truths, a purpose underscored by habitual bodily contact. Of particular interest in this passage is the way the point of view situates Case and, through the use of free indirect discourse, the reader, to generate a kind of tension that is largely absent from scenes in the “ordinary” reality outside Zion. The protagonist’s dislike of physical touch is, quite distinctly, *his* problem and does not reflect any particular authorial judgment on Zion. In fact, there may well be an implicit judgment rendered against Case himself. This judgment is also, by extension, a judgment of the secular reader who is both invited to identify with Case (through the deployment of the second person “you”) and is subtly indicted for that very identification. There is at least a momentary invitation to consider ways of being that are not fraught with tension between mind and body, between one body and another, or between the self and its environment, as Case’s existence tends to be. However, the text does not follow up this momentary invitation; it simply moves on to the next plot development, staying with Case’s point of view. The effect of this moment is paradoxical. Case misses, or at least misunderstands, the significance of Zion, and readers are momentarily encouraged to note the insufficiency of his understanding. At the same time, his point of view *is* sufficient for the narrative’s needs; there is no need for it to be supplemented by other points of view (such as that of the Zionites themselves) in order for the novel to accomplish its ends. Thus, Case remains narratively sufficient in ways the Zionites are not permitted to be, even as their presence indicates the limitations of his perspective.

Gibson underscores the fact that the lives of the Zionites forswear access to the realm of the virtual; they commit themselves entirely to bodily existence instead. During his stay in Zion, Case attempts to share his most personal and precious experience, the

experience of jacking into cyberspace, with Aerol, and the results express the difference that separates their senses of being.

“Hey Aerol,” Case called, an hour later, as he prepared for a practice run in the freefall corridor. “Come here, man. Wanna show you this thing.” He held out the trodes.

Aerol executed a slow motion tumble. His bare feet struck the steel wall and he caught a girder with his free hand.

...

He took his hand, put it on, and Case adjusted the trodes. He closed his eyes. Case hit the power stud. Aerol shuddered. Case jacked him back out. “What did you see, man?”

“Babylon,” Aerol said, sadly, handing him the trodes and kicking off down the corridor. (104-105)

The Rastafarian theology in which Aerol believes forbids an investment in the late-capitalist “Babylon” that structures and drives cyberspace, but through the corporeal detail of the shudder, Gibson underscores the physical and instinctive nature of his revulsion. Zion’s theology is implicitly body-centered, and in this sense is the exact opposite of Case’s contempt for the flesh, which he repeatedly calls “the meat.” At the novel’s beginning, Case has been caught stealing from his employers, who punish him by damaging his central nervous system in such a way that he cannot access cyberspace. Gibson expresses the effect on Case through ironic deployment of the language of Christian theology: “For Case, who’d lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he’d frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh” (6). In the scene cited above, by offering Aerol a chance to jack in, Case is presumably attempting to show him the liberating potential of separating mental experience from physical sensation, but it is precisely this separation that Zionites

perceive not as liberating, but as wholly restrictive. The orbital location of Zion, part of which has some gravity, much of which does not, allows Gibson to show its inhabitants floating in effortless, graceful motion, as if to emphasize symbolically that their very commitment to a life lived in the body has its own meta-physical potential.

Aerol's rejection of cyberspace can also be seen as a refusal to acquire a potentially debilitating addiction. Much of the social and sexual interaction in *Neuromancer* involves drug use, and the novel draws specific parallels between Case's drug habits and his need to "jack in." During the early portion of the novel when Case is unable to access cyberspace because of the damage to his nervous system, his experience is exactly that of an addict in need of a fix: "[H]e'd see the matrix in his sleep, bright lattices of logic unfolding across that colorless void . . . he'd cry for it, cry in his sleep, and wake alone in the dark, curled in his capsule in some coffin hotel, trying to reach the console that wasn't there" (4-5). Later, when his new employer Armitage (backed by the AI Wintermute) arranges for his nervous system to be repaired and supplies him with new hardware for jacking in, his excitement has a palpably erotic dimension; Molly catches Case in the act of "'stroking'" his new computer and describes his action as "'pornographic'" (47). Gibson's word choice here is typically precise; Case expresses his emotional longing for the bodiless experience of cyberspace in terms of a commodified sexuality that involves repetition and possibly addiction. He is made uncomfortable by casual physical contact with the Zionites, and presumably with most other humans, and instead expresses his tactile impulses by touching the computer that can free him from his body altogether. Haunting the background here is another question of addiction having to do with a culture of structured alternate realities accessed by way

of physical touch and associated with compulsive desire, namely video games (game controllers of the 1980s were, significantly, phallic in shape and were called joysticks). Thus, the “Babylon” that Case embraces and Aerol rejects lacks an integrated mind/body relationship, creating instead a paradoxical and potentially self-destructive desire that cannot be fulfilled. Case’s own use of drugs enables him to see physical and social reality “as a field of data . . . you could throw yourself into a highspeed drift and skid, totally engaged but set apart from it all” (17). It is this urge to be “set apart from it all,” even while “you” are “totally engaged,” that is challenged by the Zionites, whom Gibson portrays as achieving both collective experience *and* individuation without much conflict between the two categories.

The assurance, and seeming rightness, of Zion’s refusal to jack into “Babylon,” together with the manifest strengths Gibson grants this community, might ordinarily raise the question of conversion⁷⁷. In this case, however, a set of forces is at work in the novel’s structure of assumptions that seems to steer us away from simply asking: If, as the novel repeatedly seems to suggest, a life in Zion is preferable to any choice available in “Babylon,” why is there never any possibility that Case might become a Zionite himself? This possibility is not at all unthinkable at the level of plot. In fact, Case actively wonders about other kinds of lives he might lead. Watching a group of Japanese corporate workers during their carefully regulated leisure time, he wonders “what it

⁷⁷ Although, as Mendlesohn points out, science fiction novels of the 1980s were often opposed to the religious forces they portrayed (“Religion and Science Fiction” 273), by the middle of the decade, significant examples of the genre began to incorporate religious conversion as a possible, and not altogether undesirable, destiny for their characters. See for instance the frequency of conversion narratives in Orson Scott Card’s *Ender* novels (1985, 1986, 1991, 1996) and Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion* novels (1989, 1990, 1996, 1997).

would be like, working all your life for one zaibatsu. Company housing, company hymn, company funeral” (37). Further, the novel is careful to raise the possibility of adult religious conversion by making one of Zion’s leaders a native of Los Angeles who does not ““talk the patois”” (108) and who seems to have led some sort of secular existence before coming to Zion. Nevertheless, the novel never shows Case wondering what it would be like to stay in Zion—nor is he ever invited to do so. The novel hints at a potential problem of racial difference (all Zionites seem to be non-white), but does not actually explain why Case does not consider joining Zion. What is clear, however, is that the decision to join Zion would be very much an either-or choice. To live as a Zionite would be to separate oneself from the rest of the novel’s world, and this would mean being seen by the narrator (and the reader) without ever occupying the position of the observer. Gibson grants Zionites extraordinary capacities—of wholeness, individuation, and purpose—that no other characters in the novel possess, but those powers are articulated and appreciated by a voice that speaks of and about Zion from outside. In the novel as a narrative structure, Zion does not have the power to tell its own story from its own point of view.

The impossibility of crossing over, as it were, to the experience of Zion as seen from its own point of view derives partly from the fact that Gibson’s gestures of *description* also work as gestures of *containment*. Zion’s orbital location (particularly the focus on its hull) work to establish the idea of a separation between it and everything else. The origins of Zion are described thus: “Zion had been founded by five workers who’d refused to return [to Earth], who’d turned their backs . . . and started building. They’d suffered calcium loss and heart shrinkage before rotational gravity was

established in the colony's central torus" (101); these are physical transformations that bar the way to any permanent return to a high-gravity environment. Thus, voluntary refusal to return leads to the material, permanent impossibility of return. Zion's music, which absorbs popular influence without any reciprocation or reabsorption (that is, no makers of dub seem to be marketing their music outside of Zion), likewise works to suggest the way in which this particular culture influences no other; the absorption is always one-way, and relates only to "libraries" that store the past of secular culture, not to a dialogue in the present. Finally, the Zionites' refusal to enter cyberspace, so as to avoid contamination by secular values, underscores the impossibility of importing Zionite religion into the context of cyberspace. This suggests that Case's experience of hacking, though it may contain elements of transcendence, cannot be combined with religious practice as such, or at least not with the novel's primary example of religion. Thus, Zion's tacit and open refusals to have more than limited contact with "Babylon" also function to underscore what appears to be an irreconcilable difference between the secular and the religious. In this way, Gibson's Zionites are the counterpart of the "freaks" of *Snow Crash*. If the latter are summoned by Stephenson in order to define secular subjectivity by giving the protagonists something to resist, the Zionites perform a parallel function of differentiation through what seems to be a voluntary and irreversible *withdrawal* from the realm of secular endeavor.

Zion's commitment to organic, communal principles that are recognizable as versions of contemporary religious subjectivity, together with the fact that these principles are lived out in a contained orbital environment sealed off from extensive contact with the rest of humanity, arranges for Zion to appear to announce itself as an

anachronism. This anachronistic status is expressed partly through the Zionites' commitment to a different notion of, and relationship to, the category of time. Zionites frequently frustrate the secular protagonists by their indifference to schedules, clocks, and deadlines. When a Zionite named Maelcum is flying Case and Molly to Freeside, an orbital vacation spot containing the mansion where the novel's climax occurs, Molly demands an exact docking time and asks "'Don't you guys ever think in hours?'" Maelcum responds, "'Sister, time, it be time, ya know wha mean? [A Rasta] . . . at control, mon, an' I an' I come a Freeside when I an' I come . . .'" (110). This different perception of time becomes not simply a cultural difference between the secular protagonists and the religious believers who give them aid, but functions as a metaphor that creates a difference *in terms of temporality*. The very slowness of Maelcum's approach, at the literal level of plot, to a physical location associated with "Babylon" is part of a narrative strategy that expresses difference through formal control. In his article "Sentimental Futurism: Cybernetics and Art in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*," Istvan Csicsery-Ronay notes that the novel's action scenes (both real and virtual) deploy a futurist aesthetic that emphasizes velocity and suddenness of encounter. When we "see" Case hacking into forbidden digital realms, "[t]he context comes into view at the moment it is penetrated by the action, and not a moment before" (234). Csicsery-Ronay, unlike most other critics of *Neuromancer*, does in fact give attention to Zion and its inhabitants, but fails to note that Gibson's descriptions of them produce *exactly the opposite effect* of his secular action scenes. The secular context with which Zion interacts is defined long *before* the moment of contact, and in terms that downplay the possibility that this contact could be transformative.

It is to some extent understandable that critics have failed to give any attention to the Zionites; the very subtlety of Gibson's representational strategies prevents their being noticed as strategies in the first place. This subtlety is apparent in the following passage, which brings together the material and temporal features of Zion that I have been describing, and also the narrative strategies by which these features are represented. This passage appears just after Molly's complaint about Maelcum's sense of time, and describes, in Gibson's typically minute, sensuous detail, the space tug in which Case and Molly are being carried to Freeside.

Marcus Garvey had been thrown together around an enormous old Russian air scrubber, a rectangular thing daubed with Rastafarian symbols, Lions of Zion and Black Star Liners, the reds and greens and yellows overlaying wordy decals in Cyrillic script. Someone had sprayed Maelcum's pilot gear a hot tropical pink, scraping most of the overspray off the screens and readouts with a razor blade. The gaskets around the airlock in the bow were festooned with semirigid globs and streamers of translucent caulk, like clumsy strands of imitation seaweed. [Case] glanced past Maelcum's shoulder to the central screen and saw a docking display: the tug's path was a line of red dots, Freeside a segmented green circle. He watched the line extend itself, generating a new dot. (111)

Two impulses are detectable in this passage: an impulse to grant Zion its own particular and convincing identity, and an impulse to show its temporal, technological, and cultural distance from Case and Molly's world. The "air scrubber" represents, on the one hand, the absorption of an older, less viable model of collectivity (Soviet communism) that Rastafarianism has outlived, and on the other hand a rather clumsy recycling of older, less efficient technology (presumably there are newer, smaller devices for air renewal on many other space ships). The tug's interior expresses a collective political history, one that bespeaks a commitment to a separatist future (since the memory of Marcus Garvey is still very much alive) but also bears reminders of past failures to achieve sovereignty

equal to that of the institutions of “Babylon” (the Black Star Liners). Technology has been physically and metaphorically submerged in a Zionite aesthetic (implicitly a collective aesthetic, executed by “someone”) without apparent detriment to its function, but it is somewhat cruder than the novel’s overall technological standards. Showing through the hot pink surrounding the docking display is a digital allegory of the relationship between Zion and the “Babylon” represented by Freeside—the former approaching the latter in careful, measurable fashion. In this passage, the point of view emphasizes Zion’s difference without drawing attention to the function of the individual details that create this difference; it seems merely *given*, dissolved into the minutiae of texture.

The narrative strategy whereby *Neuromancer* represents Zion can be further understood by considering Talal Asad’s discussion of secular modes of exclusion in Europe. Though the question of an Islamic presence in Europe is often considered in terms of religious conflict (between Christianity and Islam), Asad asserts that the exclusion of Muslims is not a matter of religious difference. It is, rather, a secular form of differentiation whereby that which is “Muslim” in religious terms is defined as outside of, and foreign to, that which is “European” in cultural and political terms (*Formations* 159-180). In Asad’s view, “Muslims are clearly present in a secular Europe and yet in an important sense absent from it” (159). The fact that Muslims are “present” in Europe is, of course, the source of the controversy Asad wants to trace. However, in his view, the controversy actually arises from the difference between the material fact of Muslim presence and the ideological fact that Europeans resist seeing Muslims as actually a part of what constitutes Europe. In fact, Asad argues that even those who urge tolerance

towards Muslims in Europe do so on the basis of their difference from (and lack of genuine belonging to) “Europe” as such: “It is precisely because Muslims are external to the essence of Europe that ‘coexistence’ can be imagined between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (165). Asad sees the current spectrum of European political opinion on the question of Islam as agreeing on the basic issue of Muslim difference: “[F]or liberals no less than for the extreme right, the narrative of Europe points to the idea of an unchangeable essence, and the argument between them concerns the kind of ‘toleration’ that essence calls for” (165). Liberal European “toleration” of Muslims, Asad argues, is precisely a toleration of otherness, of that which, at some level, is assumed to be fundamentally outside the “essence” of Europe. Thus, Asad asserts that the problems faced by Muslims in Europe are not only problems of political and economic inequality but also problems of *representation*: “In ... modern space ... is it possible for Muslims ... to be represented as themselves?” (180). Asad’s question helps us to question the narrative tactics of *Neuromancer*. While the novel treats Zion with a measure of respect, even of appreciation, these sentiments are expressed in the context of Zion’s fundamental difference from the rest of the novel, from the characters who inhabit it, and from the lead protagonist most closely aligned with the novel’s point of view. Zion is never quite represented as itself in *Neuromancer*; it is instead represented in terms of its difference from the novel’s secular norm. However, since Gibson wants to question the sufficiency of the world he establishes as the norm, the Zionites, in their difference, are not simply marked as excluded “others”; rather, they take on a more paradoxical role I will explore in the sections that follow.

Unstable Distinctions: The Challenges of Secular Subjectivity

I have suggested the ways that the Zionites are implicitly contrasted with *Neuromancer*'s secular protagonists. As the novel progresses, the contrast becomes the basis of an alliance that pits Case and Molly, together with the Zionites in supporting roles, against Armitage and Peter Riviera, and also against the Tessier-Ashpool clan, a powerful family that owns both Wintermute and Neuromancer and is attempting to keep them apart. This later set of character alliances and oppositions is illustrated in the following figure:

organic/communal [Zionites] SECONDARY PROTAGONISTS	progressive/individualistic [Case and Molly] PRIMARY PROTAGONISTS
aristocratic/narcissistic [Tessier-Ashpool clan] PRIMARY ANTAGONISTS	fragmented/perverse [Armitage/Corto and Peter Riviera] SECONDARY ANTAGONISTS

It should be remembered that there is little invitation in *Neuromancer* to take the bird's eye view that the figure provides. The upper right corner is the vantage point from which other characters in the novel are seen. Both the vertical and the horizontal axes determine the meaning of each position in the figure, and each boundary in the figure should be seen in terms of both ethics and culture. The vertical axis is temporal; it situates the characters by way of their orientation to historical progression and change. To the right are characters associated with the future, and to the left are characters oriented towards

some “older” ethos that is resistant to change. Those on the right are individuals, while those on the left are collective groups. Since both protagonists and antagonists can be resistant to change, the distinction between individual and collective identity is not itself valued positively or negatively. However, the distinction made by the vertical axis indicates that in *Neuromancer*’s system of value, the very notion of group identification relates to the past. The right-hand side of the figure, by contrast, is inhabited only by individuals, and the novel’s portrayals of these characters trouble its depiction of secular subjectivity. As noted in the figure, the horizontal axis divides protagonists from antagonists. However, it is important to note that the demarcation on the left, which separates the anti-capitalist energy of Zion from the corporate domination of Tessier-Ashpool, is far more stable than the line separating Case and Molly from Armitage and Riviera. The two pairs start out as part of the same alliance and later become enemies, but this is not what makes the distinction between them tenuous. It is, rather, the fact that the novel’s secular individuals all face a problem of differentiation or individuation; the boundaries of their subjectivity often threaten to break down. What we see of Case and Molly’s secular, individualist counterparts, Armitage and Peter Riviera, suggests that they represent two unproductive, dead-end ways to develop the self in postmodernity.

In the case of Armitage, the dead end is fragmentation; Armitage is less an actual person than a frightening assemblage of personality tics and programmed habits. Wintermute, we discover, has essentially manufactured him, using as raw material a solider, named Corto, who is suffering from post-traumatic stress. “Wintermute could build a kind of personality into a shell,” Case muses. “How subtle a form could manipulation take?” (121). The manipulation, though subtle, results in a product that is

both unconvincing and unstable. Armitage's smile "mean[s] as much as the twitch of some insect's antenna" (93), and when Wintermute's conditioning is no longer able to sustain even an illusion of selfhood, Armitage begins reliving his wartime traumas and then kills himself. In the following passage Case contemplates the face of Armitage/Corto just before the suicide:

Wintermute had built something called Armitage into a catatonic fortress named Corto. Had convinced Corto that Armitage was the real thing, and Armitage had walked, talked, schemed, bartered data for capital, fronted for Wintermute ... And now Armitage was gone, blown away by the wind's of Corto's madness ... Armitage's face had been masklike, impassive, but Corto's was the true schizoid mask, illness etched deep in involuntary muscle, distorting the expensive surgery. (188)

The problem Wintermute's remaking of Corto poses is one of conditioned routine, of selfhood defined simply as sophisticated automation, and Gibson approaches this question with complexity. On one level, the fact that Wintermute's programming is unable to conceal Corto's suffering can be seen as an affirmation of the very category of the human self, even if it can only be affirmed by the strength of the traumas (figured here as natural forces) that have damaged it. At a deeper level, however, it is clear that what lies beneath Wintermute's programming is in not an original, organic self, but simply another "involuntary" construct, a mask beneath a mask, presumably manufactured by the military institution that put Corto in harm's way. During his breakdown, Armitage/Corto babbles compulsively about the military campaign that destroyed him, and his complaint is simply that he was betrayed, not that there was something wrong or limiting about his military conditioning to begin with. Conditioning, the novel suggests, is an irreducible part of what constitutes subjects, though it can also

be the force that destroys them, or reduces them to mere automatons⁷⁸. The issue of the self as automaton is relevant for all of *Neuromancer*'s characters, including Case; he also talks, schemes, barter data for capital and so forth. In creating Corto, Gibson contrasts Case with something more deeply automated and inhuman, even if the difference is only one of layer or degree. Part of what resolves the threat to subjectivity that Gibson creates is simply the reflection made possible by the protagonist's point of view. Case is able to observe Armitage/Corto's breakdown, and to create a context in which it can be reflected upon. Case is able to speculate about "how subtle" conditioning of subjects can become, and the fact that he is able to engage in such speculation helps to establish his difference from Armitage/Corto, who is unable to articulate what has been done to him. Thus, while the latter's breakdown is symbol of the power of secular institutions to destroy the subjects they condition, Case's reflections on this symbol secure at least a margin of agency for him.

This factor of perspective is also relevant to the portrayal of Peter Riviera. If Armitage illustrates the problem of fragmented subjectivity, the holographic illusionist illustrates the problem of perversity. Molly explains to Case that he is "a kind of compulsive Judas. Can't get off unless he knows he's betraying the object of desire" (92). Riviera begins affairs with women and then turns them over to the authorities on trumped-up charges of some kind; they are subsequently tortured and killed. Gibson is particularly insightful when he embodies this perversity in a person who can also generate illusions; Riviera's ethical betrayals become parallel to his representational betrayals, which are often used to kill others. Around the time of Armitage's suicide, it

⁷⁸ For a discussion of the ambiguous role of trauma in the constitution of subjectivity in Gibson, see Holz 110-119.

becomes apparent that Riviera is more interested in killing Case and Molly than in helping them to complete their mission. In a gesture that might be warning or provocation, he constructs holographic parodies of them both:

Molly's breasts were too large, visible through tight black mesh beneath a heavy leather jacket. Her waist was impossibly narrow. Silvered lenses covered half her face. She held an absurdly elaborate weapon of some kind, a pistol shape nearly lost beneath a flanged overlay of scope sights, silencers, flash hiders. Her legs were spread, pelvis canted forward, her mouth fixed in a leer of idiotic cruelty ... [In the figure of Case], it was as if Riviera ... had been unable to find anything worthy of parody. The figure that slouched there was a fair approximation of the one he glimpsed daily in mirrors. Thin, high-shouldered, a forgettable face beneath short dark hair. He needed a shave, but then he usually did. (201-202)

When Case and Molly encounter these images of themselves, they are aware that the maker of these images will try to kill them; the threat of death is thus linked to an implicit threat to identity. Critics have noted Gibson's tendency to use existing fictional stereotypes in creating his characters⁷⁹. The passage above seems to indicate Gibson's view of the problem such borrowing produces. Specifically, Gibson addresses the question of how to construct and stabilize characters when the available materials for making them are themselves stereotypes; there is always the possibility that a sincere attempt at characterization will, perversely, betray itself and become its own parody⁸⁰. The fact that Case's hologram looks more or less like himself suggests Gibson's anxiety

⁷⁹ For a discussion of the sources from which Gibson borrows (particularly those of the western and of noir), see Suvin, "On Gibson and Cyberpunk SF," McHale 247-250, and Proietti.

⁸⁰ The problem of parody or self-parody is a familiar one for postmodern fiction, and not all postmodern writers express this kind of anxiety about the stability or authenticity of their characterizations. The fact that Gibson *does* express this kind of anxiety may well be related to the priorities of the genre of science fiction that influence his work, which would discourage self-consciously derivative borrowing in the construction of character. For more discussion of science fiction's aesthetic priorities, see note 39.

about the stereotypical nature of the cyberspace cowboy as protagonist. The hyper-parodic hologram of Molly, meanwhile, might be a rather more guilty insistence that the “real” Molly is a viable fictional character (as opposed to a stereotypical male fantasy—a particular problem since Molly instigates a not-very convincing sexual affair with Case). Gibson blunts the edge of this self-critical moment by showing that Riviera’s perverse tendencies are the result of trauma. In addition to his renditions of Case and Molly, Riviera also builds a hologram that reveals the origins of his own perversity: a feral post-nuclear childhood spent cannibalizing dead human bodies. Case and Molly’s normative perspective on this trauma provides some help in maintaining the possibility of a viable secular protagonist.

This pattern, by which the protagonists’ reflections on the challenges of late capitalism at least partially diminish the severity of those challenges, is also crucial for an understanding of the Tessier-Ashpool clan, the residents of the orbital mansion that Case and Molly invade at the novel’s climax. Both the mansion, called the Villa Straylight, and its inhabitants are figured as a sort of apotheosis of late capitalism’s most parasitic impulses. 3Jane, one of the clan’s members, explains to Case and Molly that an earlier clan leader intended to create an altogether new form of consciousness, partly human and partly machine, that would eliminate individuality altogether. 3Jane explains that her predecessor “viewed the evolution of the forebrain as a sort of sidestep” (209). In her new form of clan selfhood, “[o]nly in certain heightened modes would an individual—a clan member—suffer the more painful aspects of self-awareness” (209-210). This new form of organization has not come about, and instead the clan has avoided individuation by falling into collective narcissism. This is manifested partly through the theme of

incest (3Jane's father occasionally has sex with mentally damaged clones of his own daughters) but largely through Gibson's portrayal of the Villa Straylight. Case reflects: "Zion was a closed system, capable of recycling for years without the introduction of external materials ... The Villa Straylight produced nothing at all" (217). What Straylight does is absorb both raw materials and culture, accumulating the latter in haphazard fashion without successful integration. It is "[a] place grown in on itself" (172), and its rooms, each different from the next in style, seem to resemble highly unsuccessful exercises in postmodern interior design. Both Case and Molly are repulsed by Straylight and its inhabitants, whose inability to express productive connection or creativity prompts a natural antagonism Gibson feels little need to explain. When she encounters 3Jane's father with the freshly-murdered corpse of one of his "daughters," Molly kills him without hesitation or commentary. This murder, which is implicitly authorized by the characterizations that precede it, underscores the novel's condemnation of secular forces when they serve the ends of conformity and stagnation.

And what of the protagonists themselves, whose point of view is an attempt to ameliorate the difficulties Gibson is confronting? Case and Molly are his attempt to illustrate the fruitful way for individuals to evolve in late capitalism. They bear some elements of what Donna Haraway calls the cyborg and N. Katherine Hayles calls the post-human. They thrive on body modifications (such as the razor implants under Molly's nails) and altered, meta-physical states (such as Case's experiences in cyberspace), but they retain some sense of integrated self, in however understated a form it may be manifested. Admittedly, both Case and Molly can be seen as constructs, amalgams of stereotypes and behavioral tics. Case attributes the "flatness and lack of

feeling” that characterizes Armitage, and most corporate workers, to “a gradual and willing accommodation to the machine, the system, the parent organism” (196). This would seem to set Case apart because, like other cyberpunk protagonists, he is a freelance figure, never fully invested in any system. With rigorous self-reflexivity, however, Gibson immediately points out that lack of affect is also “the root of street cool ... the knowing posture that implied connection, invisible lines up to hidden levels of influence” (196), an admission that casts Case in a less independent light. Further, like Riviera and the Tessier-Ashpools, Case is himself a murderer, and Molly openly confesses that she has a sadistic streak. ““You play that subliminal shit around me,”” she warns Peter, ““I’ll hurt you real bad. I can do it without damaging you at all. I *like* that”” (100). Part of what seems to confer virtue on these two characters is vocation; their actions, ethical or otherwise, proceed from their chosen line of work. On one occasion Molly observes to Case: ““Anybody any good at what they do, that’s what they are, right? You gotta jack, I gotta tussle”” (50). This terse analysis of the question of vocation is deliberately ambiguous, equally suggestive of a kind of independent subjectivity that absorbs the self in work, or of a dependence on the system that provides legitimate (if not always legal) opportunities for hacking, or for violence.

Part of the way Gibson keeps his protagonists viable as protagonists is to tie vocation to the category of art. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay argues that “[a]lmost every character in *Neuromancer* is an artist of some kind, almost every object a technological artifact that is also a work of art” (227). This seems particularly true of Case and Molly because their chosen professions seem to provide for them a larger connection to the world, a connection that produces, if nothing else, a set of meanings. Case’s primary

reason for hacking is simply the activity itself, which seems to transcend ordinary distinctions between play and work. Indirectly, however, Case practices an aesthetic of cartography, mapping the world by skillfully maneuvering through cyberspace, making sense of the “bright lattices of logic unfolding across the colorless void” (4-5). Molly’s work as a mercenary seems to yield a set of values that are more directly social; she lives by a sort of criminal’s code and works out her relationship to the world through a system of alliances and antagonisms, often expressed indirectly through conversations “about the season’s fashions, about sports, about ... political scandal,” or expressed “with no more than a nod” (47). Gibson’s noir heritage is clear in his characterization of Molly, whose commitment to some system of honor among thieves constitutes, at the very least, a pattern of *meaning* over and against the perverse negation or self-destructive narcissism of her enemies. To borrow Csicsery-Ronay’s language, both Case’s and Molly’s work seem to be “attempts to imagine the redemption of a hostile alien continuum of humanity’s own making” (224). What makes an individual in *Neuromancer* a protagonist is that they contribute something, however indirectly, to mitigating the collapse of meanings created by late capitalism. However, the contributions are indeed indirect, and they do not constitute a systematic critique but only, at best, a tacit resistance. Case and Molly’s secular arts allow for a degree of agency and for the possibility of meaningful labor, but they cannot correct the wrongs of the “hostile alien continuum” created by the novel’s secular institutions.

The Secular Sublime

As *Neuromancer* approaches its climax, Gibson reveals another, more ambitious horizon of critique, asserting something more than short-term evasion and pattern-making, and it is here that the alliance of Case and Molly with the Zionites becomes crucial. As I have already discussed at length, the Zionites mount highly effective resistance to the problems Case and Molly resist in a dimly instinctive and partial way, but at the cost of a radical separation that simply turns its back on “Babylon.” The climax brings Zionite Maelcum, the pilot of the *Marcus Garvey*, into the Villa Straylight along with Case. In terms of plot, their mission is to rescue Molly, held captive by Riviera, and to hack into the Tessier-Ashpool mainframe in order to unite Wintermute and Neuromancer. Symbolically, Maelcum’s willingness to aid Case by entering Straylight raises the possibility of Zion facing its enemy more directly, and also the possibility that Zion’s religious energy and the secular energy of Case and Molly might somehow be combined. It is Case’s loyalty to Molly that convinces Maelcum to join with him in her rescue, but behind this immediate motivation looms a larger, if only potential, revelation. In an earlier portion of the novel, one of Zion’s leaders tells Molly that she resembles a figure from a Zionite “‘religion story.’” He goes on to tell Molly, in an apparently prophetic reference to her invasion of Straylight: “[Y]ou bring a scourge on Babylon, sister, on its darkest heart” (108). Another of Zion’s leaders interprets Molly’s role in more apocalyptic terms, suggesting that she “‘might serve as a tool of Final Days’” (109). Gibson provides few interpretive cues in the scene itself and allows Zion’s seemingly nebulous theology to linger in the background.

In the foreground, *Neuromancer*'s climax pushes Case into territory fraught with challenges both metaphysical and epistemological. Much of the challenge of *Neuromancer*, either for the critic or for the more casual reader, lies in the density and difficulty of the novel's final sections. Even a critic skeptical of claims made for the novel's experimental qualities must concede that these sections are innovative in their use of settings, point of view, and time. In terms of setting, Gibson creates an ongoing series of sharp juxtapositions. First, he presents a mix of real and virtual environments, between and among which Case moves as he nears the final act of hacking that will allow the AI Wintermute to join with its estranged sibling, Neuromancer. Second, both the real and the virtual spaces are portrayed in such a way as to contrast precise visual detail with an overall sense of spatial disorientation. The physical settings include *Marcus Garvey* and another space vessel, and also the Villa Straylight itself. These environments allow for the action to move in and out of varying degrees of gravity, causing both characters and their point of view to "float" in ways that keep readers from knowing precisely *where* they are, even as they are told exactly *what* they are seeing. This problem of spatial coordination is made more severe by the labyrinthine qualities of Straylight itself. The same sort of disorientation applies to the virtual environments, which are described in exhaustive detail but are, ultimately, a non-space with no relationship to any other. The point of view in this section is likewise disorienting. Using a sort of sensory transmitter, Case is able not only to jack into cyberspace but also to connect with Molly's senses, seeing what she sees and feeling what she feels. Gibson uses this device sparingly early in the novel, and only when Case and Molly are far from each other spatially, so that Case's access to Molly works like a fairly stable, highly limited third-person view of her

actions. Later, however, the device is used much more frequently, creating a sort of narrative feedback loop. The reader first reads about Case watching Molly passing through portions of Straylight, and then reads about Case passing through those same portions a second time as he follows her trail. These repetitions are made more disorienting by the deliberately slow movement of time; the novel takes nearly one hundred pages to describe about six hours of narrative events. In some sections that take place in virtual reality, there is an additional level of time distortion, since what seems like days in some forms of VR can be mere minutes of ordinary clock time.

It is in these VR sections that Gibson begins to bring the various conflicts he has constructed into sharp, simultaneous focus. As Case progresses through Straylight, pausing to access cyberspace and/or Molly's point of view, his attempts are frequently hijacked by the two entities he is trying to unite, Wintermute and Neuromancer. Wintermute is the driving force for unification, while Neuromancer seems at least partially to resist it. Hence, Neuromancer sometimes disguises itself as Wintermute in order to issue false directions or otherwise nudge Case toward a wrong decision. The problem of one artificial intelligence disguising itself as another is made more difficult by the fact that neither can appear to Case in some "true" form, but only by way of figures from Case's own past, partners or enemies, living or dead. Wintermute explains that this way of communicating is easier for Case, and asks him the following loaded rhetorical question: "'You want I should come to you in the matrix like a burning bush?'" (164). It is unclear whether this is a subtle hint that Wintermute has the power to overwhelm human subjectivity with pseudo-divine power, or simply a self-deprecating joke that suggests no such power exists. Wintermute suggests the latter reading by warning Case

against the influence of its counterpart, *Neuromancer*, observing, ““One burning bush looks pretty much like another”” (168). This turns out to be more true than Wintermute’s joking tone suggests; as Case travels through *Straylight* on his way to rescue Molly, *Neuromancer* manages to lure him into a virtual world from which there is seemingly no escape before he can realize that he has been deceived. In a section lasting several pages, Case wanders through a closed environment with a simulation of his dead lover, Linda Lee. Even as he is fully aware that his body, trapped inside *Straylight*, is technically dead as long as his immersion in the VR setting lasts, Case is nevertheless powerless to leave.

In this section, trapped corporeally at the “darkest heart” of late capitalism’s machinations, and trapped mentally in a virtual construct, Gibson phrases the particulars of the challenge of late capitalism with typical rigor and care. *Neuromancer*, the architect of the virtual world in which Case is trapped, is able to replicate human sensory experience down to the most infinitesimal details (which provides Gibson the opportunity convincingly to depict the virtual setting, a lonely, debris-strewn beach that most readers of the novel will be able to remember vividly). While fully aware that he is moving through a construct, Case is nonetheless taken by these details, and even more by the construct of his dead lover, with whom he has sex in a particularly disorienting passage that pushes Gibson’s consideration of virtual reality to its limits:

There was a strength that ran in her, something he’d known ... and held ... been held by it, held for a while away from time and death, from the relentless Street that hunted them all. It was a place he’d known before; not everyone could take him there, and somehow he’d always managed to forget it. Something he’d found and lost so many times. It belonged, he knew—he remembered—as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read. (231-232)

The direct longing expressed in this passage is undercut by the fact that all this is happening in Case's mind while his actual body lies lifeless somewhere in Straylight, and the "Linda" who can lead him towards intimacy and towards the body's wisdom is a sophisticated piece of software. Hence, the seemingly forceful valorization of the body, usually denigrated by cowboys, can only work at the price of a temporary forgetting, or at least bracketing, of the cruel facts of the Street, what Jameson might call simply "the whole world-system of a present-day multinational capitalism" (37), which has symbolically hunted Case and, finally, trapped him in a lie. The body's mode of perception is "strong," but it is also "blind," so much so that its inhabitant cannot automatically tell the difference between real and virtual inputs. When Neuromancer appears to Case, it insists that in fact "[t]o live [in virtual reality] is to live. There is no difference" (249). Case's imprisonment in virtual space is thus a representation of Jameson's assertion that "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which 'culture' has become a veritable 'second nature'" (ix). What Gibson suggests, in particular, is that one can only cling to culture as a substitute for nature if one forgets all the ways culture is now an artifice, tied to the very system against which it seems to provide a shield. To his credit, Gibson consistently refuses this kind of amnesia; he returns again and again to problems of subjectivity and community in terms of their relationship to postmodern social and economic transformations. It is necessary, then, that Case awaken from virtual reality and return to a more genuine, if harsh, reality.

In his escape from the virtual reality Neuromancer has built, Case seems finally to exercise a more radical agency than Gibson allows any of his secular characters

elsewhere. Specifically, he is able to focus the hatred and aggression that has haunted him throughout the book in a specifically critical act of awakening, willing himself to return to the complexities of corporeal life. Crucially, this awakening is made possible through the aid of the Zionite Maelcum. While Case's body lies dead, Maelcum, under Wintermute's direction, administers two forms of aid: drugs and music, specifically Zion's beat-driven dub. It is the latter that seems particularly crucial in awakening Case, for it disrupts his perception of Neuromancer's virtual environment, revealing its artificiality:

His vision crawled with ghost hieroglyphs, translucent lines of symbols arranging themselves against the neutral backdrop of the bunker wall. He looked at the backs of his hands, saw faint neon molecules crawling beneath the skin, ordered by the unknowable code. He raised his right hand and moved it experimentally. It left a faint, fading trail of strobed afterimages. (233)

...

A fresh wave of symbols swept across his vision, one line at a time. (236)

Viewers of film and television virtual-reality narratives, particularly the *Matrix* films, will recognize in these passages the source of the now-stereotypical moment of revelation, in which an apparently "real" cinematic space is shown to be computer-generated. Material details cease to convince, their surface broken up by digital "artifacts," as they are termed in the realm of video production. The body itself is shown to be artificial, a mere simulacrum of actual flesh. It is important to note that Case's awakening partakes of the two opposed narrative strategies discussed earlier. First, there is a sense of *gradual* movement typical of Gibson's descriptions of Zion. Sleeping on his virtual beach, accompanied by his virtual Linda, Case begins to hear music, not realizing for some time that it is Maelcum's dub, pulsing through headphones into his own actual,

physical ears. At the same time, there is the sense of violent *rupture* Csicsery-Ronay describes as virtual surface is abraded by the powerful touch of reality. Csicsery-Ronay argues that it is the particularly physical, organic quality of dub that helps to revive Case “by returning him to memory of his own heartbeat” (238). The awakening is certainly some successful collusion of religious and secular energies; Case’s individualistic will to hack into the structure of things is momentarily working in harness with Zion’s faith in a reality more substantial than postmodern Babylon. To phrase Case’s awakening in terms of cooperation between the secular and the religious is accurate in terms of content. In terms of form, however, it is more accurate to say that the secular benefits from the presence of the religious without an understanding of how the two interact, and without a clear grasp of exactly what religion is contributing in the first place. When Case awakens, our sense of what his actions mean is influenced by the fact that we remain within his point of view. Although Maelcum administers the drug, and the Zionite form of life-giving power (dub), to Case’s dying body, we only learn this information after the fact. We are very much trapped within the virtual world with Case, and we do not see Maelcum’s actions. Thus, our revelations parallel Case’s; we, too, “wake up” to the sound of music, watch the virtual world reveal its artificiality, and gradually walk away, “following the music” (236) back to reality, where a plot explanation awaits us. We can integrate the full religious implications of Case’s awakening into our understanding of the novel only by tearing ourselves away from the point of view that, like the novel’s myriad physical details, is constructed as given.

This narrative effect is evident in an earlier exchange, in which Maelcum, previously opposed to entering Straylight, agrees to help Case rescue Molly.

Maelcum's smile spread across his face like light breaking ... His gloved hand slapped a panel and the bass-heavy rocksteady of Zion dub came pulsing from the tug's speakers. "Maelcum not runnin' no ..."

...
Case stared. "I don't understand you guys at all," he said.

"Don' 'stan' you, mon" the Zionite said, nodding to the beat, "but we must move by Jah love, each one."

Case jacked in and flipped for the matrix. (186)

This passage makes use of what Belsey terms a "hierarchy of voices" that permits ideological difference on the page, but controls the difference by "plac[ing] as subordinate all the utterances that are literally or figuratively between inverted commas" (65). In this case, it is Maelcum's religious utterance that is being subordinated; Case ignores it and jacks in, and the reader, by extension, does the same. Maelcum is not mocked, nor is there any question of debate; Case does not respond to his remark, and the narrative, by following him into his next trip into cyberspace, simply changes the subject. This narrative strategy is not one of absolute exclusion or censorship. Maelcum speaks for himself, expressing in his own words his religiously informed understanding of his relationship with Case. However, the statement remains a monologue. For it to become a dialogue, there would have to be some response from the protagonist, or from the narrator, that could begin to explore a more pluralistic understanding of the characters' relationships to one another. In fact, when Maelcum says that he does not understand Case, but nevertheless is attempting to see him as part of the sacred scheme of things, this is possibly a pluralistic gesture on his part. Case, however, is not able to overcome his sense of difference from the Zionites and reciprocate; Maelcum's gesture is simply one more thing about his companion that he does not understand.

This sense of the Zionites as powerful but finally unknown agents is crucial for an understanding of *Neuromancer*'s use of the sublime in the awakening scene. Frederic Jameson, in *Postmodernism*, has identified artistic productions that express what he calls "a postmodern or technological sublime, whose power or authenticity is documented by the success of such works in evoking a whole new postmodern space in emergence around us" (37). In the same discussion, Jameson puts forward Gibson, specifically, as the chief literary architect of the postmodern sublime (38), a claim that *Neuromancer*'s climax would seem to justify. In the narrative of Case's awakening, Gibson seems concerned to "evoke ... postmodern space" by leading us through, and then *out of*, a thoroughly virtual space. Significantly, Gibson acknowledges the difficulty of making the distinction (between real and virtual) that allows for this narrative; the return to physical reality is troubled and uncertain. Lisa Swanstrom acknowledges this uncertainty in her examination of the sublime in *Neuromancer*. She claims the awakening scene expresses a crisis of subjectivity that is temporarily overcome by Case's awakening, but leaves behind it an anxiety about "Case's inability to distinguish the constructed Linda Lee from the real Linda Lee, as well as his inability to distinguish his constructed self from his real self, or indeed, from his self and the environments he inhabits" (24). This, in turn, raises serious questions about the viability of "a single, unified subject" (24). In both Jameson's general consideration of Gibson and Swanstrom's more specific discussion, the sublime both evokes and mediates the subject's troubled relationship to itself and to the world.

What Swanstrom ignores, however, is that Case's ability to make the distinction between real and virtual (with whatever degree of uncertainty or difficulty) is only

possible at all because of Maelcum's intervention, and because of Zion's music. The energy Maelcum brings to the awakening scene is the energy of *difference*. Dub provides a sense of organic patterning and ordering that is not a significant part of Case's own subjectivity or understanding, and it enables him to make a distinction that would otherwise elude him. In the context of Case's virtual prison, Zion's dub is that which resists becoming a virtual copy of itself and therefore cannot be successfully duplicated or erased by Neuromancer, the prison's creator. Dub retains its identity, and thus (by some process the novel does not explain) disrupts the virtual illusion. It seems that Case awakens because he recognizes the difference between the sound of dub and the feeling of virtual reality, recognizes it *as* a difference, one that restores him to a world where it is still possible to distinguish between things and their representations. When Case awakens, his vision of the dissolving virtual reality carries over into his first few moments of wakefulness, so that "Maelcum's features [are] overlayed with bands of translucent hieroglyphs" (*Neuromancer* 237). Swannstrom sees these leftover bits of virtual reality as "residual signs of the sublime moment" (24), but they also veil the religious energy that makes Case's awakening possible. At the moment Case opens his eyes, Maelcum's presence is the screen onto which his sublime realization is projected, and this realization, made possible by Maelcum, literally obscures Case's view of Maelcum himself. Thus, Case's awakening simultaneously accomplishes two representational aims. First, it confirms the power of religion as a force that can aid the secular subject in defining its identity, and in creating a sustainable relationship between the self and the world. Second, it underscores the difference between the subject being aided and the religious force that provides help; the latter remains distinct from the

secular subject, and its difference is the condition of its power. To borrow Asad's terminology, it is precisely because Zion is external to Case's world that one of its representatives is able to reach out to him and provide what he cannot supply himself. Thus Gibson is able to create a post-secular scenario in which secular subjectivity is not the sole possibility but is still the norm. Thus, the secular subject can be aided, but not transformed, by the presence of religion.

Reoccupation and the Passing of Religion

In attempting to bring more attention to the role of Zion, I am not suggesting that *Neuromancer's* representation of religion can be improved by more actively appreciating what religion contributes. I suspect that the tactic of re-reading fiction or film in order to valorize previously ignored or disliked characters (a tactic that has had great power, for instance, in feminist criticism) cannot be successfully applied to representations of religion in secular texts (though it might be possible to identify both broad political trends and specific injustices that seem authorized, if not actively enabled, by secular assumptions). I have, instead, sought to point to a gap between the identity of the Zionites, in terms of their characterization and their roles in the novel's plot, and their apparent function in the novel's overall system of meaning. Whether or not there is injustice per se in granting religious believers what amounts to sidekick roles in relation to the novel's central point of view (though the racial and cultural implications certainly bear more careful scrutiny), it is crucial that Gibson takes such pains first to construct a religion, and a powerful role for it to fill, and then to control, and at least partially to

disavow, the significance of that role. As Asad reminds us, secular discussion of religion can paradoxically bring attention to religion in such a way that this focus is also a kind of displacement. *Neuromancer* actively imagines a future in which the secular self must be aware of the presence and power of religion, but this awareness is also the sense of a difference that the novel suggests is often irreconcilable.

Apart from *Neuromancer*'s climax, the tension between the impulse of awareness and the impulse of displacement is less noticeable because the latter impulse is usually much stronger than the former. This pattern is visible in an earlier scene in which Case and Molly meet the elders of Zion and hear their instructions and prophecies concerning Molly's role in the narrative. Their interest in Molly, it turns out, derives from contact with Wintermute, who spoke to the elders and "'played [them] a mighty dub'" (108). It is not clear from the passage whether the elders realize that Wintermute is an AI, rather than a divine entity. Molly attempts to explain that Wintermute is manipulative and, having its own reasons for wanting the aid of the Zionites, "'probably just tapped [their] banks and cooked up whatever it was it thought [they]'d like to [hear]'" (108). The elders ignore Molly's explanation, either because they do not understand it or because Wintermute's exact status is insignificant to them. The scene is strongly reminiscent of fictional and cinematic stories of "primitive" characters who misidentify technological forces as divine ones, confirming their own status as anachronistic relics who can only adapt to change by giving it an outdated name. At the same time there is a genuine sense of authority in Zion's elders, leaving us uncertain as to exactly how much the Zionites are going to be subordinated in the novel's hierarchy of voices. The overall effect of the scene is to suggest that while the elders of Zion are free to perceive Wintermute as a

spiritual entity if they choose to do so, the normative point of view is the one held by Case and Molly, who know that Wintermute simply acted the part of a spirit.

In *Neuromancer*'s conclusion, Case (after rescuing Molly) undertakes his final and most difficult hack and, in a supreme exercise of skill, succeeds in uniting Wintermute and Neuromancer without direct aid from religious forces or any others. It is unclear at the novel's conclusion whether the new entity produced, which is now free to wander in cyberspace, will have any real effect on the larger reality it inhabits. The entity visits Case and suggests that little or nothing will change, remarking: "Things aren't different. Things are things" (259). In *Neuromancer*'s two sequels, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, AIs continue to play authorial roles, though some of them take on the names, and perhaps at least partially the identities, of Loa, Haitian spirits. The spiritual overtones these names and identities provide, however, do not create the same kind of secular/religious opposition visible in *Neuromancer*. Gibson has not, in his later work, made the relationship of religion to the secular an intersubjective matter, as it so clearly is in *Neuromancer*, nor has he permitted the tensions of the relationship between the religious and the secular to take such a prominent place in his narratives⁸¹. The conclusions of his narratives tend to separate the various characters the plot has brought together without necessarily allowing the energies each represents to enter the same space⁸². In these later novels, there are few moments that achieve the poetic density

⁸¹ For an example of this kind of separation of secular and religious energies, see the discussion between secular protagonist Bobby Newmark and Haitian *vodou* practitioner Lucas in *Count Zero* 76-78 and 113-114.

⁸² In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, for example, Gibson attempts to achieve a sense of simultaneity in the novel's climax by cutting rapidly among real and virtual settings, making use of a number of different points of view. Finally, however, Gibson simply

achieved in the passage below, at the moment Wintermute and Neuromancer join together.

Waking to a voice that was music, the platinum terminal piping melodically, endlessly, speaking of numbered Swiss accounts, of payment to be made to Zion via a Bahamian orbital bank, of passports and passages ...

...

And the voice sang on, piping him back into the dark, but it was his own darkness, pulse and blood, the one where he'd always slept, behind his eyes and no other's.

And he woke again, thinking he dreamed, to a wide white smile framed with gold incisors, Aerol strapping him into a g-web in *Babylon Rocker*.

And then the long pulse of Zion dub. (254)

This passage pays attention to both material and spiritual destinies. Gibson tells us, more or less simultaneously, both that all the protagonists get paid and that the chief protagonist has achieved some new measure of self-integration. Gracing the scene is Zion's dub (and, as in the awakening scene, the face of the religious believer), adding some flavor of the spiritual to the proceedings without any overt intrusion. Gibson, together with Bruce Sterling, authored *The Difference Engine*, a "steampunk" novel that takes place in an alternate Victorian history, and no doubt he is aware of the intrinsically nostalgic, anachronistic valence of the neat sense of closure we see in the passage above⁸³—a closure still present, but more uncertain in tone or oblique in presentation, in later works. Perhaps it is the concrete, social presence of religion itself, identified by the novel as a site of anachronism, that authorizes the degree of closure *Neuromancer* achieves.

asserts the connections among these narrative threads rather than demonstrating them; see pp. 284-287.

⁸³ For a discussion of the Victorian valence of Gibson, and particularly of *The Difference Engine*, see Clayton chapter 4.

In the previous chapter I argued, using the concepts of Hans Blumenberg, that *Snow Crash*'s use of the fundamentalist freak is a reoccupation of an older secular model that demands the death or decimation of religion. In *Neuromancer*, the use of a positive, nostalgic image of religion is also a reoccupation of an older secular model, in this case that of modernist culture and aesthetics. In his discussion of postmodern pastiche, Jameson asserts that "with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style—what is as unique and unmistakable as your own fingerprints, as incomparable as your own body ... the producers of culture have nowhere to turn to but the past ..." (*Postmodernism* 17-18). In *Neuromancer*, the problems that emerge when "the high-modernist ideology of style" has vanished are literalized⁸⁴; Case becomes unable to distinguish his physical body from its virtual simulacrum. This dilemma, and the related dilemmas of postmodern subjectivity discussed earlier, seem to call forth the need for some earlier, more organic energy not defined by its relationship to postmodernity. Despite Gibson's skillful efforts of characterization, the Zionites (as characters in a work of print fiction) are no more organic than anything else in the novel; it is simply that the values attached to them are labeled as whole and organic, impossible to be traded in or mistaken for something else. In rejecting "Babylon," the Zionites refuse participation in the entanglements with which Case, and his author, must struggle so energetically; this refusal is what allows for an exceptional moment of intervention in the moment of Case's awakening. As figures supposedly exempt from the problems with which Case struggles, the Zionites are simultaneously objects of longing (for the genuine values they possess) and of condescension (for their innocent, mystified remove from postmodern dilemmas).

⁸⁴ For a discussion of science fiction's tendency to literalize its metaphors, and of the implications of this tendency vis-à-vis modernism, see Roberts 14-16.

If the paradox of *Snow Crash* is that religion must be analyzed and controlled as a material phenomenon like any other precisely because of its freakish difference, the paradox of *Neuromancer* is that religion can help secularity accomplish its ends precisely because it is no longer directly in contact with the problems secularity must address.

This question of religion as an aid to successful secular subjectivity explains why Gibson's images of religion are overwhelmingly positive. In some early moments in the novel, a flirtation with Stephenson's methods can be detected. Some minor players in the novel's early action engage in various kinds of secular pranksterism (for instance, committing an act of informational terrorism and then placing the blame on a group called the Sons of Christ the King). On one particular occasion, readers get a passing glimpse of a hostile view of religion:

A pair of predatory-looking Christian Scientists were edging toward a trio of young office techs who wore idealized holographic vaginas on their wrists, wet pink glittering under the harsh lighting. The techs licked their perfect lips nervously and eyed the Christian Scientists from beneath lowered metallic lids. The girls looked like tall, exotic grazing animals, swaying gracefully and unconsciously with the movement of the train, their high heels like polished hooves against the gray metal of the car's floor. Before they could stampede, take flight from the missionaries, the train reached Case's station. (75)

The language of predator and prey makes clear that the Christian Scientists are the primary objects of scorn. At the same time, Case's hostility towards corporate control might suggest that the prey in this scenario, the "office techs," have deliberately chosen a less meaningful path that will doubtless make them more vulnerable to certain kinds of religious predators. At any rate, this scene feels like a glimpse into another novel entirely, one in which it is possible to generate some support for secular forces by showing how much worse religious ones are. However, when Case is later trapped in

virtual reality and the secular subject is in jeopardy, religion becomes not a yet-more-deadly foe, but an ally. The novel works both to create this alliance and to restrict its meaning. After a near-death blackout in a virtual reality created Wintermute, Case awakens to find Maelcum staring at him. ““You dealin’ wi’ th’ darkness, mon,”” Maelcum warns him. Case cynically responds, ““Only game in town, it looks like”” (175), and then jacks back in. This offhand, cynical response suggests that Case accepts the limits of the secular institutions in which he works because there are no alternatives. Fortunately for Case in later scenes, there is another game in town, namely dealing with Zion. However, Case’s relationship to Zion does not transform his dealings in the realm of cyberspace; the relationship only restores the possibility of his agency as a secular subject.

Just as *Marcus Garvey* has been constructed around an older Soviet technology, and has thus absorbed it and put it to new uses, so Gibson, by containing the older energy of the Zionites (more precisely, containing it by figuring it as older), is able to harness religious energy for secular purposes. Of equal importance, as I have suggested, is the containment provided by the novel’s point of view. This containment, however, does not completely control the way *Neuromancer* manifests its metaphysical aspirations, which appear in moments scattered sparsely but noticeably throughout Case’s story. In one such moment, we see Case jacking in for the first time after his nervous system is repaired—jacking in, in fact, for the first time in the history of fiction:

He closed his eyes.
 Found the ridged face of the power stud.
 And in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling in from
 the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from

random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information.

Please, he prayed, *now*—

A gray disk, the color of Chiba sky.

Now—

Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray.

Expanding—

And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard expanding to infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of the Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach.

And somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face. (52)

Despite more than two decades' worth of advances in interface technology, Gibson's stylistic touches ring true; anyone who has ever spent time staring at a screensaver will recognize the combination of geometric precision and protean complexity evoked in the phrase "fluid neon origami trick." What is more surprising is that the entrance into cyberspace is accompanied by a "fragmented mandala," suggestive of a religious energy in the process of disruption and/or transformation. Most significant is the urgent prayer that is emphasized by repetition of the word "*now*" but then left behind in the velocity of Gibson's prose (and presumably forgotten by the protagonist the moment it is answered in the affirmative). This strategy of sudden but unsustained evocation of religion or spirituality is visible in *Neuromancer*'s opening scene; as Case sits in a bar, there is a momentary lull in conversation, and someone remarks that "[a]n angel passed" (4). This moment encapsulates the secular strategy of *Neuromancer*—to remark on, even draw attention to, the presence of the religious, but also to figure moments of presence as *passing* moments that are not integrated into the novel's secular norms. *Neuromancer* reflects a post-secular awareness that religion has not vanished from the world and has

not become powerless or irrelevant. At the same time, the novel cannot consistently fold religious forces into its central narrative. The extraordinary powers Zion holds—powers that redeem the secular subject at its moment of greatest need—are only sustainable if religion remains outside the novel's secular norms.

Chapter 4

Exits, Entrances and Alternate Paths: Cyberpunk Cinema

As discussed in chapter 1, cyberpunk fiction emerged as an identifiable, and highly successful and influential, subgenre of science fiction (hereafter referred to as SF) in the late 1970s and early 1980s and has continued, in one form or another, to be a visible part of the landscape of print SF. In cinema, however, cyberpunk has had only an intermittent presence; about 15 years separate the early films I will be discussing (*Blade Runner* and *Videodrome*) from the later ones (*eXistenZ* and the *Matrix* films). Part of the reason for this gap, I suggest, is that cyberpunk emerged at the same time as a decisive shift in American popular cinema, a shift signaled in the late 1970s by the emergence of blockbuster films that reversed Hollywood's declining fortunes. These films were distinguished by their power to generate broad appeal through a kind of "universal" mythology, tapping into common fears (*Jaws*, 1975) and common aspirations (*Rocky*, 1976) in a way that had seemed difficult for Hollywood in the preceding decade. In this era of the "New Hollywood," as it is typically termed⁸⁵, a large percentage of the highest-grossing products have been science fiction films. As Christine Cornea notes, science fiction's "tradition of wondrous visual and special effects ... in many ways [make] it ideal for a global marketplace" (113). In terms of American cinema's global impact, science fiction has been more influential than any other genre (though it has recently been

⁸⁵ Some usages of this term restrict it to a relatively brief period lasting from the late 1960s to the early 1980s; see Hehr 7. I use the term to refer more broadly to the blockbuster era that began in the late 1970s and, arguably, is still ongoing. For a recent account that deploys the term in this fashion, see Schatz.

surpassed by fantasy film, another genre capable of easily translatable narrative strategies⁸⁶).

The success of SF film as a whole, however, has only recently translated into success for films that bear the influence of cyberpunk. For much of the 1980s and 1990s, the linking of science fiction to popular, even global, mythology, and to the desire for appealing narratives that sold well at the box office, prompted print SF and cinematic SF to diverge much more sharply than they generally did before the late 1970s⁸⁷. While 1980s print SF, including cyberpunk, explored a variety of sociopolitical concerns in challenging ways, SF film became optimistic and affirming in its attitudes toward the American present. In recent years, SF cinema has moved closer to the more critical energy of (at least some) print SF as film audiences seem more willing to view complex, socially provocative films that do more than simply ecstatically embrace the present. This difference can be illustrated by comparing the euphoric optimism of the first trilogy of *Star Wars* films (1977, 1980, 1983) against the political pessimism of the second

⁸⁶ The prominence of fantasy film has been especially pronounced in the new millennium; since 2000, the genre of fantasy accounts for nine of the ten top-grossing films worldwide. By contrast, seven out of the ten top-grossing films of the 1990s were science fiction films. See Box Office Mojo, "All-Time Box Office: Worldwide Grosses."

⁸⁷ The most well-known instance of a close relationship between SF film and fiction in the pre-1980s era is 1968's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Clarke, the author of the novel, and Kubrick, the director of the film, worked simultaneously on their materials and influenced each other's final products; see Gilbert. The similarities between SF film and fiction in the 1960s and 1970s are more widely visible in the similar accounts given of this era in print (see Landon, *Science Fiction After 1900* chapter 4) and film (see Cornea chapter 3). It should also be noticed that unlike the cinema of the preceding decades, SF film of the 1980s was rarely based on SF literature, and the few examples of films that do have a basis in previous literature were generally unsuccessful at the box office (particularly Lynch's adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune*). As it became more and more independent of the conventions of its print counterpart, SF film of the 1980s took its influences more widely from a variety of popular materials; see Cornea 112-114.

trilogy (1999, 2002, 2005). As part of this recent shift, the style and ideological tenor of cyberpunk have become more important to film, particularly in the massively successful *Matrix* franchise, written and directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski, beginning with *The Matrix* in 1999. Before the *Matrix* films, the few films marked by cyberpunk influence were usually critically panned and financially unsuccessful. The most well-known example of this phenomenon is *Blade Runner* (1982), a film that only gained a wide audience several years after its first release. Notoriously difficult, both in its production and its marketing, and an initial loss at the box office, *Blade Runner* suggested that even if some critics of cyberpunk were correct in noting that it tended to capitulate to the system it tried to critique⁸⁸, even the attempt at critique was out of step with the tastes of filmgoers.

The gradual success of *Blade Runner* in video formats, and eventually in box office re-release, and its subsequent canonization as an important work of cinema⁸⁹, suggests that the spirit of critique typical of cyberpunk now “sells” much more strongly than it did two decades ago. Further, the enormous response to the *Matrix* films, on the part of audiences and critics, signals that science fiction film is now sometimes expected to prompt interpretation rather than uncritical enjoyment. The Open Court Press series called “Popular Culture and Philosophy” has devoted not one but two volumes to philosophical readings of the *Matrix* films, and there are, by my count, at least six other

⁸⁸ See note 39.

⁸⁹ At the time of this writing, the canonization of *Blade Runner* continues, as a new “final cut” supervised by Ridley Scott is being screened in limited release, with new home video versions to follow.

such popular volumes on the market⁹⁰. It should be noted, however, that only a portion of the writing in these volumes is directly related to questions that concern cyberpunk fiction. In place of cyberpunk's own focus on the socioeconomic features of late capitalism, popular criticism of the *Matrix* films cover a wide range of technological, social, and philosophical issues. This range, I will suggest, is certainly justified by the films themselves, which begin with a rather narrow focus on cyberpunk motifs and themes and then move beyond them in a number of directions. I will show that in the course of this expansion, the *Matrix* films also develop much different forms of narration that are closer to what William Connolly calls "deep pluralism" than the works of Stephenson and Gibson. In *Blade Runner*, I will argue, it is possible to see a development that seems to be almost the opposite of the *Matrix* films' expansion of scope. The film begins with a number of potential concerns derived from its source material and then seems to narrow itself towards the realm of what will, by the mid-1980s, be easily identifiable as cyberpunk (a movement intensified in modifications made for the film's later "director's cut"). Thus, the title of my chapter speaks of exits and entrances. In a brief survey of the *Matrix* films, I will show what happens as the films exit the realm of cyberpunk; in so doing I will also observe an unraveling of the kind of secular narrative I have been exploring in previous chapters as it intertwines with other types of narratives that operate differently. In my discussion of *Blade Runner*, I will attempt to demonstrate how the energy of cyberpunk is tied to a particular way of

⁹⁰ Most of the essays in these volumes embrace the *Matrix* films as worthwhile occasions for political, religious, or philosophical debate. For a more skeptical approach to these aspects of *The Matrix*, see Clover 13-15.

representing religion that will already be familiar from my discussions of Stephenson and Gibson.

The title of this chapter also refers to “alternate paths,” and these will be represented by *Videodrome* (1982) and *eXistenZ* (1999), two cyberpunk films written and directed by David Cronenberg. Perhaps not coincidentally, the former was released within a year of *Blade Runner*, and the latter within a few weeks of *The Matrix*. In both films, Cronenberg examines cyberpunk themes in a manner that challenges the secular ideologies typical of the other texts I have been discussing. While Stephenson and Gibson are concerned to keep that which they designate “religious” separate from their protagonists (and the central values they represent), Cronenberg underscores the fact that secular forces are always infected by religious impulses. The general logic of infection that has been central to much of his work⁹¹ is, in the two films I will examine, a way to expose the myth of a “pure” secularity with a far more rigorous, critical view of secular ideology. This newly impure and newly critical perspective may, ironically, point the way towards a powerful and vigorous secularity that more popular fictional and cinematic cyberpunk seems unable to sustain.

Hackers and Believers: The Deep Pluralism of the *Matrix* Franchise

The cyberpunk affiliations of *The Matrix*—or rather, since the film shows us a world where nothing is as it seems, what *appear* to be its cyberpunk affiliations—are announced by the opening setting, a nameless urban center that features gleaming

⁹¹ Cronenberg has noted his interest in themes related to the body in general, and to infection in particular, on a number of occasions; see his remarks in Rodley, Ed. 127-128.

corporate skyscrapers and a drug-fueled, decadent underground of criminal or semi-criminal “biz.” Both settings should be familiar to readers of William Gibson, as should the gritty, low-rent streets, seemingly taken from a noir film, that function as visual and metaphorical bridges between the other two environments. Readers of Gibson will also note analogues to his meticulous accumulation of material details. The film’s crisp digitally-graded images provide a wealth of visually distracting surface: the chipped, unfinished walls of the Heart ‘O the City Hotel, the sheen of latex and leather clothing worn by goth-industrial junkies, the precise geometric planes of foam created by the actions of workers cleaning the windows of a corporate building. Staring out these windows in one early scene is Thomas Anderson, a young cubicle drone who works for a computer company with the instantly familiar and instantly forgettable name Metacortex. Anderson’s other identity is his online alias, Neo, a hacker who deals in the world of “biz” and is wanted by the government. Within a few minutes of the window scene, Anderson/Neo is apprehended by government agents and sent ““tumbling down the rabbit hole,”” to use the phrasing of his guide/mentor Morpheus, as he confronts a set of now-familiar cyberpunk problematics, particularly the distinction between the real and the virtual, and the problem of corporate control.

As Neo’s descent down the rabbit hole progresses, however, the film rapidly begins to exceed the bounds of cyberpunk in a variety of ways. In fact, the entire Gibson-vintage setting of the film’s opening is exposed as a *virtual* setting in which the protagonist, like most other humans, has been living since his birth. In an awakening scene much different from the one I have analyzed in *Neuromancer*, Neo finds himself outside of this virtual illusion (designated “the Matrix”), in his own body, which is

encased in a sort of permanent, mechanical womb. As his actual, corporeal eyes open and take in his surroundings, the camera executes a vertical panning shot that shows towers made of hundreds, then thousands and tens of thousands of these devices, each containing a living human plugged into the Matrix and unaware that his or her life is virtual rather than material. Neo's awakening and escape from the Matrix is made possible by the residents of Zion (a clear reference to Gibson), a multi-ethnic collective of humans who are fighting against "the machines," a vast assortment of robots and artificial intelligences that have become the dominant species on Earth. The plot explanation for the Matrix, which perhaps is more effective as a metaphor than it is as a logical explanation, is that the machines use human bodies as a power source, plugging their brains into the Matrix in order to keep them docile and unaware of their corporeal "coppertop" status as living batteries for the machines. Zion's residents fight the machines in the physical world, through occasional skirmishes and later in a pitched battle, and also by jacking into the Matrix themselves, where they fight against artificial intelligences called Agents and recruit new allies, like Neo. From the first panning shot of human bodies plugged into virtual reality to later revelations of Zion itself, the films continue to pull back from the realm of cyberpunk, placing it in increasingly larger contexts that are not themselves determined by the rules of cyberpunk, either thematically or aesthetically. This movement is best illustrated by a montage in which Morpheus explains the rise of the machines and the current functioning of the Matrix. In place of a cyberpunk aesthetic that focuses on surface and contrast, often through sharp juxtapositions of material, cultural detail, the montage relies far more on a traditional

science fiction aesthetic of *scale*, working from individual details to a larger, overarching view of events.

This aesthetic of scale effectively places cyberpunk itself in a larger context, and over the course of the three theatrical releases, and the anthology of short films released on video as *The Animatrix*, this larger context demonstrates cyberpunk's narrative limitations. In their settings, the films remind viewers of how much of human life cannot be contained, or expressed, in virtual space, or in the decayed urban environments of Gibson's vast urban sprawl. Zion itself, the actual physical human city, contains visual evidence of various forms of economy and labor, mechanical and agricultural, that predate late capitalism and continue to operate vigorously within and alongside it. Viewers will note, for instance, the difference between how Zion's residents are dressed when they are jacked into the Matrix as their virtual selves (leather, latex, finely woven textiles and stylish sunglasses) and how they dress when they are in their actual bodies in the real world (wool and cotton garments, torn and mended, each bearing the signs of manual labor). While in the virtual realm, Zionites can equip themselves with an endless array of gadgets and weapons, all of which are downloaded to them by way of the same hacking technology that projects their digital selves. Actual material Zionite technology, however, is less plentiful and reliable. Zion's vehicles are patchwork creations, covered with signs of use and repair, not unlike the hull of Zion in *Neuromancer*—except that while Gibson usually keeps his Zion carefully contained, in the world of the Wachowskis it is the Matrix, not Zion, that is closed and contained, cut off from meaningful, conscious contact with material reality except for the occasional Zionite incursion. Instead of mapping the narrative as a whole from the point of view of the virtual realm (as Gibson

tends to do), the films suggests that the virtual realm itself is best understood from outside it, a suggestion that at least implicitly critiques the narrative and thematic limits of cyberpunk.

This implicit critique of the limitations of cyberpunk is made increasingly apparent by the number of SF genres that are folded into the narrative. Zion is reminiscent of the settings of many post-apocalyptic science fiction films, films where a straggling group of survivors bands together under the banner of some spiritual or quasi-spiritual belief system (in this case, the destiny of the human race over and against that of the machines). Later portions of the film allude to still other types of science fiction, both print and film: pulp military adventure, robot stories descended from Asimov, and metaphysical quest narratives of both the Golden Age and the New Wave. As they progress, the films stage an increasingly complex series of debates concerning the meaning of human/machine relations; some characters urge reconciliation, others military action, and still others some unspecified messianic transformation. The characters engaged in this debate manifest a variety of generic impulses from a range of science fiction texts, so that the debate is implicitly a debate among SF genres. Where, the viewer is prompted to ask, does the truth of these films finally manifest itself? In the transcendent rationalism of the hacker Neo, dedicated to the principle of freedom, who becomes a sort of virtual superman, able to manipulate the rules of the Matrix? In the AI named Agent Smith, dedicated to the principle of purpose, with whom Neo fights a struggle to the death in the final film's climax? In Morpheus, the leader-prophet who believes that Neo's destiny is to end the war against the machines? In a new generation of artificial intelligences that seem capable of family groupings, and of love? In the

Oracle, the artificial intelligence who acts as Neo's highly ambiguous spiritual advisor? Or in the Architect, the Oracle's nemesis, an artificial intelligence responsible for the maintenance of the Matrix, who informs Neo that he is merely a part of a larger scheme to control humanity through predestined acts of rebellion? The sheer variety of voices claiming to have answers to the human/machine conflict allows for some generic dispersion, so that the films can be read according to the rules of a number of different kinds of SF narrative⁹².

This variety of voices, however, does not prevent cyberpunk thematics from remaining particularly central to the films, and they are tied to parallel problems concerning the status of religion. If the film has a central question that links its various realms of value, it is the question of the relationship between humans and the systems (including machines) that they create. Cyberpunk typically phrases this question in an *oppositional* way; the machine realm, i.e. the late capitalist system of transaction and commodification, is an evil to be evaded and resisted (even if the evasion is temporary and the resistance turns out to be tied to the system itself). This oppositional attitude most clearly manifests itself in the hacker Neo, whose tendency is always to choose a path of rebellion, and in Morpheus, who, not unlike Gibson's Zionites, casts a spiritual light over Neo's endeavors to hack the Matrix. Morpheus sees Neo as "The One," a chosen, fated figure whose ability to manipulate the Matrix will eventually liberate

⁹² One of the most significant recent attempts to define SF comes from Damien Broderick, who claims that SF is characterized by its use of "a collectively constituted generic 'mega-text'" (155) made up of a variety of motifs and narrative types. This definition is a shift away from earlier definitions that focused more exclusively on form and social context (see note 42) towards a definition that relies on an awareness of pre-existing narrative conventions. The *Matrix* films provide a clear example of SF as defined by Broderick, since they express their meanings by way of an interaction among familiar generic SF elements.

humanity from the domination of machines. This will require a liberation of consciousness, specifically a renewed critical awareness of the human/machine relationship that will enable more productive resistance to machines. Here too, Neo and Morpheus sustain oppositional, either/or attitudes. In a crucial scene that precedes the awakening of Neo, Morpheus offers him the choice of two pills, blue or red; the latter will allow Neo to forget his doubts and go on with his virtual existence, while the former will cause his physical body to be ejected from the Matrix and into physical reality. The very nature of the choice makes clear the cyberpunk logic of inside/outside. One can either be an office tech, a corporate drone, a suit, fully integrated into the system, or a marginal, oppositional agent, aware of the system and attempting, in however desperate a fashion, to resist it. In the course of their activities in the Matrix, Zionites frequently kill ordinary humans, who are, until awakened, components of the system and thus acceptable losses in the larger war against the machines.

Although this way of phrasing the human/machine conflict is clearly influenced by cyberpunk, the films complicate this dualism by finally suggesting the legitimacy of several different social, political, and spiritual stances. There is, first, the Oracle, an artificial intelligence dedicated to principles of change and variety but not necessarily to a simple notion of spiritual or intellectual liberation. In her first encounter with Neo, the Oracle tells him that he is not “The One,” but simply an ordinary human. Neo conceals this dispiriting news from Morpheus, and then later risks his life to rescue Morpheus because he feels obligated by his mentor’s belief in him, even if it is false. In the course of this rescue, Neo begins to manifest capabilities that prove he *is* The One; the Oracle’s pronouncement was a provocation to help Neo act on his own, irrespective of any larger

destiny. Still later, it is revealed that the emergence of “The One” is actually a planned event, orchestrated by the Architect as simply another form of control—so that, paradoxically, the Oracle’s initial discouraging pronouncement contains a seed of truth. Neo responds to these concealments and manipulations with punk resentment, while Morpheus experiences what looks like a loss of faith. Both these reactions prompt revision of the human/machine relationship, and they are further complicated as the film reveals that the Oracle is not the only citizen of the machine realm with complex motivations and apparent sympathy for humans. At the beginning of the third film of the trilogy, *The Matrix Revolutions*, Neo encounters what seems to be a nuclear family of artificial intelligences, a mother, father, and daughter, who seem genuinely to love one another. This revelation reinforces various inferences from *The Animatrix*, a series of animated short films that accompany the main series, that preclude any easy division between the organic goodness of human life and the artificial deadness of machines.

As regards Neo and Morpheus, the power of the film’s critique of cyberpunk comes from the way that *both* the secular individualist rebel *and* his Zionite guide/helper are simultaneously critiqued. Neo’s sense of his ability to determine his own fate through opposition to the machines is swallowed up in a larger realization that he must sacrifice himself, in somewhat Christological fashion, to end the human/machine conflict. Thus, rational punk individualism gives way to a more systemic view of how change can be achieved, a view that incorporates at least some element of spirituality, if not a coherent theology in the ordinary sense of the word. At the very same time, however, Morpheus’s sense of Neo’s spiritual destiny is debunked in favor of a more materialist sense of historical progression; he is forced to see that what he initially thought of as spiritual

revelation is simply another link in a chain of logical developments. The film's conclusion is neither as messianic as Morpheus might wish, nor as rationalist as Neo would prefer, but instead presents a complex emerging world with a number of overlapping discourses. The controlling machinations of the Architect (and the megalomaniacal Agent Smith) are defeated by multiplicity, specifically by cooperation among other forces that initially seem opposed. Thanks to his willingness to be sacrificed, Neo is able to strike a bargain with the rulers of the machine world that will end violent struggle between humans and machines and create more fluid boundaries between the corporeal world and the Matrix. The ending of the final film in the series suggests that Neo, the exemplar of anti-machine rebellion, has himself become a cyborg entity, and quite possibly a citizen of the machine world. This realignment is not portrayed as a betrayal; we do not feel as we would if Case were to choose permanent existence in cyberspace, or life as a corporate drone, over his physical life at the fringes of the system. Instead, Neo's sacrifice feels more like a new development that leaves behind the oppositional terms of cyberpunk altogether.

The "mixed" reality of the trilogy's conclusion bears few resemblances to the kind of secularism discussed in chapter 1. In place of a narrowly secular subject defined in relation to a religious other, there is a future filled with an array of believers and non-believers in varying degrees of sympathy or antagonism to each other, and to the conditions of a variety of real and virtual spaces. The living humans at the end of the film are neither straightforward followers of a single faith, as Morpheus is in the first film, nor are they willing slaves of the Matrix with no aspirations for change. In the final film, *The Matrix Revolutions*, the traditional science fiction aesthetic of scale discussed earlier

turns into a multi-perspectival aesthetic that suggests the way each character position in the film can legitimately be considered a point of view; none is complete without all the others, and all bear signs of overlap and mutual influence. The film thus offers a world that answers to William Connolly's description of "a world of deep, multidimensional plurality," one that allows for an "ethos of engagement across multidimensional lines of difference and collaboration" (*Why I Am Not a Secularist* 186). This kind of engagement is suggested by the dialogue of all the films. Both human and machine characters speak in a rhythmic, call-and-response way, as if each plays a role in a system with far more nodes, and far more complex connections among them, than that of the cyberpunk novels discussed in earlier chapters.

In moving beyond the less multidimensional ethos that organizes the work of Gibson and Stephenson, the *Matrix* films also dispense with a linear sense of history (so crucial to the assumptions of mid-century secularization theory) and offer instead a sense of multiple, overlapping histories, no one of which finally organizes the rest. The films' events invite viewers to consider a number of different temporal perspectives, from the messianic and apocalyptic view of Morpheus to the more rationalized view of the Architect. Unlike the temporal experimentation of recent non-SF film, where events are told "out of order" but can readily be reassembled in cause-and-effect order by assiduous viewers⁹³, the Wachowskis' montages encourage a synchronic view of events that is difficult to translate back into linear terms. In his recent book *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, Vincent Pecora concludes:

⁹³ See, for instance, Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2001) or Alejandro González Iñárritu's *21 Grams* (2003).

What I would like to imagine ... is a version of secular cultural criticism newly engaged by the tensions and inconsistencies in the secularization story ... [W]hat is important ... is that the static and totalizing concept of secularism—connoting an already achieved and reliably reproducible intellectual standpoint—be supplanted with a dynamic understanding of secularization, that is, with a process that has remained, at least up to the present, in some ambiguous relationship with religious tradition, neither translation and transformation, nor radical overturning and forgetting. (208)

The *Matrix* films move deliberately towards exactly this kind of “dynamic understanding,” in which tracing affinities and alliances among various kinds of belief is at least as important as erecting barriers, and in which official histories of secular development are put into active dialogue with other narratives that can complicate and/or enhance them.

This work of connection and complication, I suggest, is the reason for the sheer *variety* of interpretive response to the films. In his contribution to the first *Matrix and Philosophy* volume, Slavoj Žižek observes that *The Matrix* is “one of those films which function as a kind of Rorschach test ... setting in motion the universalized process of recognition, like the proverbial painting of God which seems always to stare directly at you, from wherever you look at it—practically every orientation seems to recognize itself in it” (241). Žižek is suggesting that the films allow viewers narcissistically to warp the text to their own way of thinking, and in so doing he is clearly also suggesting that these films are but one more example of the kind of abstract, world market-ready American blockbuster that emerged in the late 70s. If we place the films in the context of cyberpunk, and contrast their sense of the secular with what I have observed in Stephenson and Gibson, it becomes clear that Žižek’s reading is too cynical. Rather than see the enormous variety of interpretations (including Christian, Neo-Platonic, Marxist,

and Existential, to name only a few) as evidence of a kind of bad universality, it is more accurate to see the films as a meeting place where various interpretive systems can engage in dialogue and debate. The films undo the work of character opposition common to cyberpunk, which does not encourage active dialogue between religion and the secular (as when Case and Molly simply ignore Zionite expressions of religious belief). Thus, they create conditions in which various forms of belief simultaneously confront each other without any one of them finally regulating or containing the others. These films encourage a variety of secular and non-secular interpretations because they insist that there must *be* a debate, however fraught and uncertain, and that the debate must be conducted on a shifting terrain.

The commercial and cultural fate of the *Matrix* films suggests changes in the post-secular landscape, changes that are possible but far from guaranteed. On the one hand, the popularity of the films, among believers and non-believers alike, suggests that the newly critical attitude of film audiences has created a willingness to engage in more detailed and lengthy dialogue about the relationship between the religious and the secular. On the other hand, it has become apparent that the later films, particularly *Revolutions*, have not had nearly the popularity of the first. Part of the explanation for this pattern may be that the uncertain territory the films explore is still unfamiliar and disorienting to viewers who are more used to films offering fewer points of entry into questions of knowledge and belief. However, the relative drop-off in popularity is probably also attributable to a decline in the quality of the films' cinematic expression. It is difficult to avoid the idea that the Wachowskis themselves begin to have trouble developing narrative strategies that can adequately represent the deep pluralism they are

pursuing. The liturgical, call-and-response dialogue begins to exert less and less force in *Revolutions* as it is swallowed up in increasingly bombastic special effects, and Neo's transformation into a physical and metaphysical hybrid is shown in rather hackneyed visual terms. This cinematic failure, which prevents the film from adequately showing us what it is trying to tell us, can be seen as a failure fully to surpass the current limits of what Connolly would call the arts of the secular self—and thus it underscores the power of those limits even as it attempts to go beyond them⁹⁴.

Fallen Angels: *Blade Runner* and the Birth of The Cyberpunk Subject

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, while the Matrix films can be seen as an exit from the world of cyberpunk, *Blade Runner* can be seen as an early approach to it. The cyberpunk motifs expressed in *Blade Runner*⁹⁵ can best be understood by contrasting the film with its source material, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968). The novel describes a world in which religious experience is not only a social force but also an *actual* force that can alter material reality and human perception. In the post-apocalyptic world the novel describes, humans on Earth and on struggling colonies elsewhere have attached themselves to a single religion called

⁹⁴ The Wachowski brothers have continued to pursue the multidimensional ethos of the Matrix films in their recent project *V for Vendetta* (2005, directed by James McTeague). The film features a radically multi-temporal montage that assembles footage from all points in the film (including those not yet shown) in an attempt to convey a synchronic view of the film's events. For earlier examples that presage this kind of multi-temporal montage, see Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) and Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* (1995).

⁹⁵ It should be noted that the title *Blade Runner* is taken from William Burroughs's *Blade Runner: A Movie* (1979), a proposed film adaptation of the Alan Nourse novel *The Bladerunner* (1974). Ridley Scott purchased the rights to both titles in order to use the phrase "blade runner" for the title of his film, but no other direct influence, either from Burroughs or Nourse, is evident in the script; see Sammon 53-54.

Mercerism. The religion encourages respect for the sacredness of animal life (the ravages of nuclear fallout having made animals quite rare) and a vague code of interpersonal ethics. It also involves “fusing” with the religion’s figurehead, Wilbur Mercer, and it is here that the startling force of the religion is revealed. Believers accomplish fusion by way of an “empathy box” (each human dwelling has one, like any other essential appliance) that allows users to enter Mercer’s experience in a fully sensory way. Users can even acquire physical injuries if they are fused while Mercer becomes injured. Mercer himself is an archetypal figure of sacrifice, endlessly climbing through a wasted landscape and then falling back into a “tomb world” before beginning his climb again. Late in the novel Mercerism is exposed as a sham. The climb and fall, it turns out, were filmed years ago using a cheap soundstage and a washed-up actor, and the experience seems real because the faith of users makes it real (the psycho-biological physics of this collective reality are never explained). Despite having been debunked, however, Mercerism continues to function as a religion, and to exert power in the novel’s world. The figure of Mercer even appears, in seemingly miraculous fashion, to some of the characters, and these appearances are figured not as hallucinations, but as concrete, actual experiences. Readers of the novel are not encouraged to take a position outside or above religious belief, but are instead submerged in it, denied a secularized or rationalized view of the faith the novel’s characters follow.

The first sign of *Blade Runner*’s move towards cyberpunk’s binary opposition of the religious and the secular is its elimination of this key aspect of *Androids*. The film’s script, written primarily by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples, downplays the sacredness of animals; viewers of the film who have not read the novel will assume that

although real animals are rare in this world, they have not yet been elevated to any sort of metaphysical status. In Dick's novel, by contrast, certain animals are especially hallowed because they are dear to Mercer, and even artificial animals (bought by humans too poor to afford organic ones) seem to possess a certain aura in their owners' eyes. In the film, not all humans own or wish to own animals, and the artificial animal bazaar we are shown in one scene is simply a crowded, busy place of commerce like any other. At one point in *Androids*, the protagonist Rick Deckard is offered a real owl (actually fake, he discovers later) as a bribe. In the parallel scene in *Blade Runner*, the owl is simply a decoration, briefly noticed by the camera and the characters and then ignored. In terms of religion, *Blade Runner* dispenses with Mercerism altogether. A few new religious elements are inserted into the film (the significance of which I will discuss), but for the most part there is never any question of belief in the sacred. In one street scene, Deckard, who is hunting an android, shoves past a few Hari Krishnas, and the effect is one of radical incongruity (provoking laughter in an audience with whom I saw the film at a midnight showing in the 1990s). In terms of religion's social role, *Blade Runner* is thus typical of the cyberpunk fiction that follows it through the rest of the 1980s; secular ways of being are socially predominant in the setting, and for the narrative as such, a secular point of view is the norm.

Setting aside Mercerism, the film focuses on another element of Dick's text, namely the conflict between humans and androids. Both novel and film place their action at a moment when android technology has become so advanced that it is very difficult to tell the difference between "real" and "artificial" persons. The meaning of this moment, however, differs greatly from the novel to the film. In *Androids*, one of the key

distinctions between humans and androids is that the latter are built in such a way that they are unable to fuse with Mercer. This inability, together with that fact that most androids display a flatness of affect reminiscent of autism, allows humans to claim superiority to their creations on the basis of a greater capacity for empathy. This claim to superiority allows humans to kill androids without pity when they rebel against the human-ordained order of things, an irony Dick is careful to underscore by contrasting humans' indifference to the death of androids with their obsessive attachment to pets (even artificial ones). Dick draws attention to this hypocrisy first and foremost as a way of highlighting the question of otherness. Having destroyed their world and their future (interplanetary colonization in the novel seems like a temporary delay of an inevitable species-death), humans can only invest themselves with value and create a connection to their fellow humans and to spiritual ideals by contrast to some being of lesser value, the android, which exists in order to be excluded from human communion. Dick is careful to note that androids actually are different from humans in a variety of ways, but the difference itself is less significant than the way humans use it to construct categories of inclusion and exclusion. Above all, however, the status of androids in Dick's novel retains a metaphysical valence. When the protagonist, Rick Deckard, struggles with newfound pangs of conscience about his job as a bounty hunter who kills escaped androids, his crisis is very specifically a spiritual one. Interestingly, Deckard's personal encounter with the figure of Mercer does little to resolve this crisis; Mercer instructs him to continue with his work of killing androids, prompting what seems to be an even deeper despair. If Mercerism does not have the answer to the question of the Other, Dick nevertheless privileges religious discourse as a way of asking the question.

Blade Runner, by contrast, takes an approach similar to that taken by Gibson and Stephenson; rather than arguing with this or that version of religion, the film simply eliminates the terms that would make debate possible. The film's protagonist has the same name, the same job, and the same crisis as the novel's, but the Deckard of the film approaches his crisis in much different circumstances. In *Blade Runner*, there is much less emphasis on any actual difference between humans and androids (called Replicants); the latter are distinguished not by lack of affect but only by a childlike immaturity in their behavior. As in *Androids*, they are hunted if they rebel, specifically by returning to Earth, where no androids are allowed. Unlike the novel, however, the film places relatively little emphasis on the social function of Replicants. Other than Deckard's cynical boss, who casually refers to Replicants as "skin jobs," there is little evidence of how humans imagine themselves in relation to androids⁹⁶. More rebellious androids, we discover, think of their status as a kind of slavery, so presumably there is a great deal of persecution happening offscreen (and offworld, since Replicants are not supposed to live on Earth). This persecution is presumably part of what prompts Deckard's growing sympathy for the androids he hunts, but the film offers no systemic analysis of injustice as a matter of interpersonal ethics.

What the film shows us, instead—and here it extends and perhaps even improves upon its source material—is the oppressive power of *institutions* to limit both human and android development. Part of this oppression comes across in the film's representation of its urban setting, a dark, grimy 21st century Los Angeles where the division between rich and poor has become unimaginably vast. The film's minutely detailed sets depict an

⁹⁶ Some discussion of human prejudice provided by the voice-over of the original release is eliminated in the director's cut.

infrastructure in permanent decline, overcrowded and overused in places where it still functions and almost totally abandoned in places where it does not. As Scott Bukatman observes in his book *Blade Runner*, there is “no nature” in the film (11); outdoor scenes are dark and frequently rainy, as if contemporary LA’s haze has mutated into permanent cloud cover (a possibility suggested by the fact that many people walking the streets are wearing gas masks). More importantly, there is also no public life as such, no gathering place for humans to encounter one another in some kind of mutual recognition (the one meeting place we are shown, a bar/cabaret, is an environment of pure consumption with a decadent, *fin de siècle* ambiance). Street spaces bristle with evidence of institutional authority, including police cars, roadblocks, elaborate parking meters threatening harsh punishment to vandals, and street crossing lights accompanied by loud, robotic voices that endlessly repeat the directions “*Cross Now*” or “*Don’t Walk*.” Many of these signs of institutional authority are in turn marked by countless layers of graffiti, but the marks remain anonymous, and something about the multitude of them suggests less an evidence of subversion than the sheer futility of lashing out against the system. In the streets of *Blade Runner*, desire for recognition or public interaction and the institutional impetus for order and obedience have seemingly cancelled each other out.

This sense of the urban environment as oppressive is tied to the film’s larger target of critique, the multinational (indeed multiplanetary) corporation. The film’s suspicion of corporate power emerges more strongly over the course of multiple viewings, which are likely to have especially strong influence on how viewers interpret the famous opening shots. We see a bird’s eye view of LA as the camera crawls slowly over a dark, hazy landscape of industrial structures and skyscrapers. In the distance we

can make out much taller buildings, shaped rather like ziggurats, which turn out to be the headquarters of the Tyrell Corporation, the leading manufacturer of androids. The sun is visible from the top of these structures (we never see it in other settings), emphasizing the buildings' association with privilege. The buildings' height and massive bulk strike a note of domination. In Dick's novel, the leading maker of androids is the Rosen Corporation. Nothing is said about its corporate architecture, and its head, Eldon Rosen, is a clever manipulator but by no means a mastermind or a megalomaniac. The Deckard of the novel locks horns with Rosen, who is worried about the power of the police to interfere with the manufacture of his next batch of sophisticated androids. The Deckard of *Blade Runner* meets the head of the Tyrell Corporation with more indifference than hostility, seemingly unaware of the scope of his power, which is revealed as the scene unfolds. Eldon Tyrell possesses an autocratic demeanor, suggesting a man who is impatient at the stupidity of lesser minds and is also accustomed to having his orders followed. A sort of fastidious gentleman tyrant, he is clearly aware of himself both as a *person* of considerable intellectual charisma and, in an almost monarchical sense, a *representative* of vast institutional might⁹⁷. In a rather one-sided discussion with Deckard, Tyrell explains that he has been experimenting with androids that possess false memories and believe that they are human. The moment Deckard begins to realize the implications of what Tyrell is saying, the camera cuts away from the conversation to a wide shot of the cityscape. Deckard's police vehicle flies toward the camera and out of the frame, leaving the Tyrell buildings, glowing in a rather sinister fashion, as the

⁹⁷ The threat of corporate figures like Tyrell becomes central to Gibson's novels, particularly *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, both of which speculate frequently about the seemingly super-human status of corporate representatives. This topic is also prominent in the cyberpunk novels of Richard Morgan, particularly *Altered Carbon*.

dominant element of the shot. Using a typically science-fictional aesthetic of scale, this cut moves from Deckard's personal encounter with a representative of corporate forces to a stark visual reminder of the scope of those forces. Deckard's police vehicle is dwarfed by the size of the structures it seems to be fleeing, so that what appeared to be a conversation between equals now begins to seem like an encounter between lord and vassal.

This sense of the magnitude of corporate power is fully borne out in the film's exploration of human and android subjectivity. In Dick's novel, the human subject is an entity composed of at least three overlapping categories, political, economic, and religious. What it means to exist, and to make choices, is defined by all three of these institutions, which at certain points are clearly in competition with each other. *Blade Runner*, as previously noted, shows us virtually no religion at all and suggests in various ways that the state is at the beck and call of the corporation. As Judith Kerman notes, "the police seem to function not only as paramilitary but as a kind of industrial accident damage control for the big corporations" (18). It is against the backdrop of corporate control that we can best understand the film's characterization of Replicants. In Dick's novel, rebellious androids are simply attempting to live out their existences, avoiding capture and/or execution if possible. *Blade Runner*'s Replicants are rather more ambitious. Aware of their pre-programmed short lifespan (four years), they come to Earth to get their lives extended, committing a number of murders along the way. In pursuit of this goal, the lead Replicant, Roy, manages to infiltrate the palatial apartments of Eldon Tyrell (located near the top of his corporate structure) and confront him face to face. "It's not an easy thing to meet your maker," Roy remarks, but quickly proceeds to

demand more life. Tyrell explains that this is medically impossible and attempts to placate Roy with such threadbare maxims as ““The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long,”” encouraging him to ““revel in [his] time.”” Understandably unsatisfied, Roy kills Tyrell, crushing his skull between his hands. International cuts of the film also show Roy thrusting his thumbs into Tyrell’s eye sockets. This gesture makes the violence at once more visceral and more clearly symbolic, since it robs Tyrell of one of the key powers of modern institutions, the gaze (a topic raised in the film’s opening sequence; when the Tyrell buildings come into focus, the film cuts away to two extreme close-ups of a human eye in which the cityscape is reflected). Even without this added footage, the scene is an act of rebellion with clear symbolic resonance. By killing the film’s key representative of corporate might, Roy is clearly striking at the system Tyrell represents, denying its right to power over life and death.

In addition to being the primary representative of anti-corporate rebellion, Roy is also the key to *Blade Runner*’s way of figuring religious and secular elements. His remark about “meet[ing] your maker” is one of a number of direct and indirect references to religious discourse that cluster around the Replicants in general and Roy in particular. Tyrell refers to Roy as ““the prodigal son,”” a rather forgiving take on his status as a murderer that also backhandedly suggests Tyrell’s divine status as Roy’s creator. Moments later, just before he kills Tyrell, Roy admits that he has ““done questionable things,”” presumably alluding to the murder of humans, but goes on to say that he has done ““nothing the god of biomechanics wouldn’t let [Tyrell] in heaven for.”” It is not clear that Roy actually believes humans possess souls and have access to an afterlife; rather, the remark is a symbolic prelude to the act of rebellion Roy is about to commit.

By suggesting Tyrell himself is in need of salvation, Roy challenges his divine status (a challenge Roy then backs by killing him). At the same time, he alludes to the fact that humans, unlike himself, are a kind of elect, not prodigals or outcasts, a point underscored by the scene's use of animal imagery. Just before his death, Tyrell completes a game of chess he has apparently been playing for some time with one of his workers (whom he treats with fatherly condescension). Tyrell's pieces are primarily humanoid figures while the matching chessboard owned by his worker (seen in previous scenes) uses pieces shaped like animals, a difference that underscores Tyrell's more masterful role in the relationship. The worker, waiting in an elevator and communicating with Tyrell by intercom, wins the game using a brilliant gambit, and then gains entry to Tyrell's apartment. It is actually Roy, of course, whispering at the worker's elbow, who is the mastermind of the chess gambit and of the scheme to gain entry; Tyrell loses the game and then loses his life. This suggests a reversal of the traditional Judeo-Christian hierarchy in which humans are nearest to the divine with animals below them. When Roy kills Tyrell, an artificial owl (presumably the same one ignored in the earlier scene discussed above) is shown in close-up, apparently watching Tyrell's death with indifference, emphasizing the triumph of creature over creator.

The question of where Replicants, and specifically Roy, should be situated in the film's hierarchy is most pressingly posed in an earlier scene when Roy suggests that he is a fallen angel in the Christian, or at least the Miltonic, sense. In a line that has probably been the subject of more interpretive interest than any other in the film, Roy misquotes William Blake's *America* thus: "'Fiery the angels fell/ Deep thunder rolled around their shores/ Burning with the fires of Orc.'" The original lines, from plate 11 of *America*, are:

“Fiery the angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll’d/ Around their shores: indignant burning with the fires of Orc” (1-2). The “angels” in Blake are the spirits of various geographical spots in the American colonies. Inspired by Orc, a figure of antiauthoritarian rebellion in Blake’s cosmology, they are rising up against England’s tyranny in preparation for the revolution of 1776. Roy’s misquote retains the spirit of rebellion and even enhances it by changing the rising angels into falling angels, which references his literal journey into Earth’s atmosphere and also, quite obviously, his rebellion against his creator. The mention of fallen angels re-emphasizes the intertext of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the original epic of creature vs. creator with which Blake himself was so thoroughly and rebelliously engaged. If we allow this line to resonate through the later scene in which Roy literally kills his creator, it is easy to see another creature/creator intertext, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a novel that looks back to Milton and also looks forward to the genre of science fiction it helped to found⁹⁸. Through this web of references, *Blade Runner* is developing a narrative strategy of indirect borrowing from religious discourses in the service of a secular story of anti-corporate rebellion. As in my analysis of the Zionites in *Neuromancer*, the point is not that such borrowing is illegitimate, or that there is some sort of discursive fee secular texts must pay for it. What is crucial, I suggest, is that the texts themselves are at such pains both to bring in and to contain the energy they designate as “religious,” *as if there is* a fee to be paid or an obligation to be avoided. Hence, the Christian narrative of rebellion against God is simultaneously evoked and mediated by the figure of anti-Christian rebel Blake (and

⁹⁸ For a discussion of *Paradise Lost* as a proto-example of science fiction, and of its influence on *Frankenstein*, see Roberts (2000, 1st ed.) 55-57.

perhaps also by the figure of Mary Shelley) in a gesture that resembles Gibson's secular strategies of containment.

The sense of indirection in the film's use of Blake is made clearer in the story of how the transposed lines from *America* came to be in the script. In *Future Noir*, a meticulous account of the making of *Blade Runner*, Paul F. Sammon explains that the line arose from a conversation between directly Ridley Scott and screenwriter David Peoples. In a scene that was eventually dropped from the film, Peoples had used a line from Shelley's *Ozymandias*. This, Peoples explains, prompted Scott to bring up the figure of Blake in connection with Roy:

“Now, Ridley is a culturally alert guy. He said, ‘That’s good. There ought to be a reference to Blake, too. Let’s give that to [Roy].’ But I’m not a Blake fan—in fact I’ve never read him before. So I dutifully went out and purchased a bit of Blake, came across that ‘America’ poem, rewrote it a bit, and gave the lines to Roy as a piece of dialogue.” (134)

Peoples himself is probably a more “culturally alert guy” than his offhand remarks suggest, since his rewriting of Blake clearly references Milton. What is important about this account is the way that the line designating Roy as a fallen angel is described as having emerged from a kind of instinct. There is a sense that “there ought to be a reference to Blake,” and then “a bit” of rewriting that happens to make the lines from Blake resonate with the intertext of Milton and ultimately with Christian scripture itself. The same instinct seems to have animated the screenplay's other writer, Hampton Fancher, who discusses the closing of the scene where Roy kills Tyrell. The closing, which takes place in an elevator, consists of two shots: a point-of-view shot of the elevator's glass ceiling, and then a close-up of Roy, first looking up at the sky (visible

because the top of the Tyrell building is above the city's permanent cover of smog) and then down with a bemused, brooding expression. Roy is leaving the scene of his crime by the same means he entered, and is apparently contemplating what he has just done.

Sammon records these remarks from Fancher about the meaning of the two shots:

“That’s also the only shot in the whole movie where you see stars. And they’re moving away from him, as if he’s some kind of fallen angel” (178). For the film’s creators, at least, there is a consistent assumption, both conscious and unconscious, that the aspects of this character that mark him as an anti-corporate rebel also mark him as a Blakean figure of ultimate rebellion.

As I have attempted to show, *Blade Runner* turns a story about exclusion and otherness, in which religion plays a constitutive role, into a story about institutional alienation and oppression, in which religion provides a stock of images and allusions by which to shape a counter-narrative of rebellion. Admittedly *Blade Runner*’s climax raises some of the issues of android-as-other that are central to Dick’s novel by pitting Deckard and Roy against each other. The scene begins when Roy discovers the dead body of his Replicant lover Pris, whom Deckard has just killed, and then begins to mock Deckard when he fires on Roy and misses. “Not very sporting to fire on an unarmed opponent,” he calls. “I thought you were supposed to be good. Aren’t you the *good* man?” The second “good” gets special emphasis, bringing into simultaneous focus a question of superiority (whether a human is better than a Replicant) and a question of ethics (whether it is acceptable to kill Replicants as if they are subhuman). Hence, this remark turns the film toward the social/ethical questions of self and other that are central to Dick’s novel. However, as the scene unfolds, those questions begin to resonate in a

direction that will be familiar to readers of cyberpunk. Deckard is rendered helpless near the end of the scene, and Roy saves his life before dying himself. A long, slow-motion close-up of Roy's bowed head suggests martyrdom, even sainthood, and underscores the fact that Deckard and Roy should have been allies rather than enemies. The most pressing reason for their alliance, however, is not that it is unethical for sentient beings to exclude one another, but rather that they have the same enemy, the corporation that manufactured Roy and that ultimately controls Deckard's life. The recut of the film pushes its meaning even more strongly in this direction by revealing what is only barely suggested in the original version, namely that Deckard is a Replicant himself, and is thus in exactly the same position as Roy.

If the *Matrix* films show cyberpunk secularism turning into deep pluralism, *Blade Runner*, the founding work of cyberpunk film, shows almost the opposite. Despite a pessimism verging on paranoia which animates Dick's novel, and most of his other work, there is still a sense that human agency and subjectivity are meaningful categories in themselves, and that anything that expresses this meaningfulness, including religion, should be a full part of the human experience a novelist portrays. In the late capitalist world of *Blade Runner*, human agency and subjectivity are on the verge of total cancellation, and the primary way to act meaningfully is to rebel (directly, as Roy does, or indirectly, as Deckard does when he and his Replicant lover Rachel go on the run at the end of the film). What is crucial for my interpretation is that rebellion is cast in religious terms that the film must leave semi-articulated, rather than fully expressed, because in this way they can more effectively function as secular signifiers. *Blade Runner's* references to Blake and to Milton are much cruder strategies than those Gibson

will later develop for *Neuromancer*, and for this reason the film expresses a sense that there is another, stronger narrative paradigm that must be borrowed in order for the film to express its themes adequately. It is therefore not surprising that the Christian narrative *Blade Runner* raids is itself about an attempt to wrest power from a higher authority. Paradoxically, even as the film is attempting to disengage itself from religion as a living force and deal with it only as a stock of allusions, it confers privileged status upon it.

The Secular Without an Other: The Cyberpunk Films of David Cronenberg

In the course of this dissertation I have attempted to emphasize how strongly some secular arts depend on point of view for their effects. What is achieved in one way by *Neuromancer*, and in a different way by *Snow Crash*, is a point of view from which religion is a settled question, separated both materially and temporally from the normative subject from whose point of view religion is being viewed. The apparently “settled” nature of religion’s place is exactly what the novels must continually trouble and rework; nevertheless, the perspective from which things *appear* settled is vital. In closing this chapter I wish to look briefly at two cyberpunk films strongly distinguished from the other cinematic and fictional texts I have been considering, distinguished in particular by a much different point of view, both in general and as regards religion in particular.

Cronenberg’s films have long been distinguished by the peculiar relationship between their visual content and their point of view. The content is frequently visceral and unsettling while the point of view remains cool and dispassionate. A case in point is

a scene in *Videodrome* where the film's protagonist, sleazy TV producer Max Renn, grows a vagina-like stomach slit, or at least thinks he does because of a video signal transmitted to his brain. While Max probes his new orifice with a handgun, the camera looks on with studied disinterest, as if this is an educational video on handgun safety instead of a neo-noir, proto-cyberpunk techno-horror-thriller. Having seen the entire film, one can easily return to this scene and imagine a calm, polite voiceover saying: "If you should suddenly grow a stomach slit, avoid inserting guns or other weapons into it until you have determined which shadowy revolutionary group is attempting to control you . . ." At times, the camera's contemplative stance can look like simple incompetence on the part of the cinematographer, but a glance through Cronenberg's early work reveals otherwise. Such films as *The Brood* (1979) and *Scanners* (1981) display competent camera work that uses typical formal devices to create fear or suspense. Cronenberg's interest in such devices has waxed and waned over the course of his career, but the trend has been to forego the heavy-handed close-ups, zooms, odd angles and various conceal/reveal devices of horror and suspense film⁹⁹. What is left in their absence is a sense of direct contemplation that could be interpreted as wonder, as critical interest, or, more cynically, as indifference.

Whether or not the camera itself is indifferent, the effect of *Videodrome* is to invite viewers to meditate on, rather than react to, the various traumatic and controversial

⁹⁹ As Cronenberg's longtime cinematographer Peter Suschitzky notes in his commentary for the DVD release of *eXistenZ*, "Generally [Cronenberg's] feeling is that the visual side of his films, that is, the photography and the sets, should be very well grounded in reality. In the past, once or twice I have suggested that it might be interesting to do something quite extreme with the production design or with the photography, and his reply has always been that the rest of the movie is going to be so strange that ...visually, the world in which the characters seem to live ... should look real."

things the film shows. This way of seeing lends a *factual* quality to that which appears before the lens. In the slit scene, medium close-ups on the face and stomach of Max Renn (and the convincing latex prosthetics of special effects artist Rick Baker), are combined with a number of wider shots that place viewers squarely in Max's physical surroundings: the clutter that litters a coffee table, the mismatched throw pillows on a sofa, shelves of knick-knacks, wall decorations. These objects have the same function as those apparently insignificant objects in print fiction discussed by Barthes in his essay "The Reality Effect"; the objects "finally say nothing but this: '*we are the real*'" (148). *Videodrome* also uses the objects in Max's apartment in more typically symbolic ways (as when Max unconsciously smears pizza sauce on black and white porn stills, foreshadowing both his later dissatisfaction with their video equivalent as too "soft," and his attraction to the wall-to-wall rape and murder featured in a show called Videodrome), but this kind of symbolism is in the background. Front and center is the stable cinematic frame viewers typically expect to find in place around a concrete, mundane reality.

Videodrome is only very indirectly concerned with religion, but its point of view allows the religious elements in the film to be present in a way that differs from the kinds of representations I discussed in Gibson's and Stephenson's work. Admittedly, the difference is not apparent at every point; some plot elements use stereotypes quite similar to those in *Snow Crash*. *Videodrome*'s plot concerns Max Renn's involvement in a conflict signified by the term Videodrome, which seems to be both a new form of technology and an opposed pair of factions fighting over its meaning and uses. The technology itself is transmitted by TV signals, and prompts viewers to begin to hallucinate so vividly that their hallucinations become inseparable from reality. Max is

first exposed to the Videodrome signal by a video technician who works at his TV station; the technician shows him what appears to be a new TV program that consists of nothing but acts of torture, rape and murder. This technician is revealed to be a member of one of the two factions. This faction resembles various stereotypical images of the American “religious right,” and wants to use Videodrome as a form of ideological control. The technician reveals his true identity, and his mission, in the following speech.

“North America’s getting soft, [Max], and the rest of the world is getting tough. Very, very tough. We’re entering savage new times, and we’re going to have to be pure, and direct, and strong if we’re going to survive them. Now you and this cesspool you call a television station, and your people who wallow around in it, and your viewers who watch you do it, are rotting us away from the inside. We intend to stop that rot.”

The language here is a stereotypically “Puritan” language of moral cleansing that advocates control of the realm of fantasy as a means for controlling the realm of reality (all in the service of chauvinist pride and strength). The plan for stopping moral rot, however, is not to shut Max’s television station down but rather to use it to transmit the Videodrome signal. Exposed viewers (immoral persons who like to watch sex and violence) will become insane (and, the film suggests, suicidal), and a few of them, like Max, can be recruited as easily programmable soldiers for the cause. Thus, the morally rotten members of society can be used to do the dirty work that would soil the hands of their morally superior controllers. Viewers of liberal or leftist persuasions may choose to associate the perverse logic of this agenda with that of a media outlet like the Fox network, purveyor of sex and violence, traditionalist values and warlike patriotism.

Cronenberg himself, however, is not content merely to skewer one segment of the political spectrum. In an interview for the critical anthology *The Shape of Rage*, he has

stated, “I don’t make much distinction between extremes of right and left” (189). This statement seems borne out by the sheer plot confusion of *Videodrome*, which provides only the minimal information necessary to determine that there are two factions fighting over this technology, and that they do in fact have different ideologies. What is important, I suggest, is that the second faction, the one that might be identified as “left” or “liberal,” is just as strongly identified with religious energies as its opponent. The leader of this faction is Brian O’Blivion, a “media prophet,” as the film describes him, clearly modeled on real-life media theorist Marshall MacLuhan (a fact Cronenberg himself has confirmed a number of times¹⁰⁰). O’Blivion’s plans for Videodrome are rather more nebulous than those of his opponents, but he seems to want to use it as a means of self-development. In one scene, O’Blivion is appearing on a TV talk show, not in person but by way of a TV transmission, when he makes the following remark:

“The television screen has become the retina of the mind’s eye. That’s why I refuse to appear on television, except *on* television. Of course O’Blivion is not the name I was born with. That’s my television name. Soon all of us will have special names, names designed to cause the cathode ray tube to resonate.”

These words, proceeding from a literal “talking head” in a monitor (with actual humans in chairs on either side to heighten the absurdity), are likely to provoke as much laughter as contemplation. The object of satirical mockery is clearly the figure of the cultural theorist, who is speaking above the heads, as it were, of his audience even as he himself is thoroughly absorbed into the phenomenon he is trying to critique, twice framed by a television monitor. His remarks seem only tangentially connected to the topic under

¹⁰⁰ For Cronenberg’s most recent thoughts on the importance of MacLuhan, see his commentary for the recent DVD re-release of *Videodrome*.

discussion on the talk show, which is the effect of televised sex and violence on viewers. ““My father has not engaged in conversation for at least twenty years,”” his daughter Bianca tells Max later. ““The monologue is his preferred form of discourse.”” In fact, as we learn later in the film, the monologue has become O’Blivion’s only possible form of discourse; his physical body has died and he exists only as an extensive collection of videotapes. O’Blivion’s life’s work seems to have been an attempt to understand the significance of television as a new social phenomenon, but that work has literally been assimilated by its object of study.

The religious associations of O’Blivion’s work are made clear as the film unfolds. Although her father is physically dead, Bianca carries on his work at the Cathode Ray Mission, whose purpose, as she explains, is to aid ““derelicts”” whose homelessness and poverty she calls ““a disease forced on them by their lack of access to the cathode ray tube.”” The solution the Cathode Ray Mission presents is to ““patch them back into the world’s mixing board””—by bringing them in off the street to sit down and watch television. The Cathode Ray Mission’s logo is the sacred heart of Catholic iconography, and its overall ambience is that of the Salvation Army. Within its walls, kindly-looking nurses seat homeless persons in small cubicles and provide them with meals. Then, the ““derelicts”” sit staring at television screens showing ordinary programs (not, as one might expect, video lectures by Brian O’Blivion). Bianca observes all this from an office above the Mission’s main floor. The office is crammed with religious relics, primarily Catholic, including saint icons, a reredos tapestry, a stained glass window featuring Saint George, a paschal candle, a sculpture of the archangel Michael, and images of the stations of the Cross. These objects are presented in the same ordinary, offhand manner as the objects

in Max's apartment. An adjacent library storing videotapes of Bianca's father is distinctly churchlike, with arched stained-glass windows. Like O'Blivion's appearance on television (on television), Cronenberg's portrayal of the Cathode Ray Mission is satirical and comic, and it makes at least two specific points. First, the scene argues that cultural theory is as much about connection as it is about critique, and that the business of producing criticism about television is intimately patched in to the business of producing television. Max Renn underscores this point when he looks out Bianca's window at the TV viewers below and tells her, "I love the view." Second, the scene argues that the work of cultural theory is not easy to distinguish from religious systems of meaning. Cronenberg suggests this second point visually more than he proves it discursively, but it is still clear that the work of the "media prophet" is infected by religion just as surely as it is infected by media. This infection also influences Max himself; Bianca "reprograms" him to assassinate the leaders of the rival faction, and the film withholds final judgment on which of these two factions (if either) can be considered a desirable winner.

In the context of Cronenberg's work, the word "infection" is not meant to have a negative connotation, as the film's neutral, contemplative point of view suggests. Cronenberg is far more interested in observing the dynamics and implications of cultural change than in rendering final judgment on them¹⁰¹. In film, this was an especially unusual attitude to take towards the phenomenon of television in the 1970s and early 1980s. Those years produced a number of films concerned with the effect of television

¹⁰¹ In arguing this point I differ with William Beard, whose encyclopedic treatment of Cronenberg's work (most recently updated in 2006) argues that it is strongly pessimistic, obsessed with narratives of cultural and subjective breakdown. Cronenberg himself has repeatedly argued that his films are more neutral concerning the often traumatic transformations they present; see for instance his commentary on his early film *Shivers* (the first of his films to prompt critiques like Beard's) in *The Shape of Rage* 179.

and/or video on culture, and their tone was generally pessimistic, if not paranoid. Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976), the best example of its kind, energetically valorizes cinema as threatened by television, and sees the latter as nothing more than a sterile site of commodification and corruption. *Network* offers us a rounded and complex view of its characters, a view that cannot be provided (the film implies) by the television medium in which the characters themselves work. The business of producing TV shows is compromised and compromising; it dehumanizes its workers in a way that, presumably, making the film *Network* would not. By contrast, *Videodrome* is critical of the effects of television and video without ever passing final judgment on their capabilities. It values television for its ability to transform more than it fears its ability to destroy. The film's flat, rather affectless camera work and lighting are similar to those of television itself far more than they are similar to other films of the time, so that *Videodrome* participates in the phenomenon it is describing instead of attempting to rise above it; this is cinema fully infected by television. The film's conclusion shows Max Renn engaged in an act of suicide that might be viewed either as a bitter end or as an act of successful transcendence into a new virtual consciousness. The religious implications of this transcendence are allowed to resonate with equal ambiguity, much as they might in the work of Philip K. Dick; a character who may or may not be a spiritual guide informs Max that "death is not the end" and that his suicide will grant him "new flesh" and a "total transformation" of his being. This "total transformation," if it is indeed a possibility, involves a promiscuous mixing of secular and religious energies (those of the secular realm of desire associated with televised violence and pornography and those of Christian redemption)

that dispenses with the religion/secular binary still prevalent among theorists of the secular.

The influence of Dick is more obvious in Cronenberg's later cyberpunk film, *eXistenZ*, a film infected not by television but by the culture of video games. Most of the events in *eXistenZ* take place inside an interactive multiplayer virtual reality game, which consists partly of scripted elements and partly of "free" moments in which players with sufficient cunning, charisma, or will can exert a measure of control over the game's events. The "plot" of the game is a typically Cronenbergian (and typically cyberpunk) plot about a video game designer being hunted by a variety of rival forces. In the context of this discussion, what is interesting about the film's view of gaming culture is the quasi-religious or quasi-sacred aura that surrounds games and game designers. When the "protagonist" of the game's plot, video game designer Allegra Geller, meets one of her fans, he falls on the ground at her feet in worshipful adoration. Later he describes the apparently transcendent experiences he has had playing Allegra's game ArtGod (slogan: "Thou, the player of the game, art God"). The film opens with a video game pre-release group test that takes place in a churchlike space, and the prospective players greet Allegra as if she is a minor deity. The film apparently sees video games the way David Porush, whom I discussed in chapter 2, sees cyberspace, namely as a "sacramental architecture" (556) that contains and focuses religious longing and energy. For Cronenberg, this is neither a reason to embrace gaming culture nor a reason, necessarily, to have contempt for it, but simply a social fact that must be taken seriously.

The question of religion as a reality of social life takes an unexpected turn in the film's final minutes, which take place (as far as we know) back in the ordinary physical

world. Again, we see a churchlike space with video game test subjects, all of whom we recognize as players in the game we have just observed, and who are now reflecting on the game they have just played. As the scene winds down, Allegra, now no longer a video game designer but her true self, and Ted, her sidekick in the game, reveal themselves to be “Realist” terrorists who have come to the session to kill a real game designer as a punishment for “the most effective deforming of reality.” Having shot the designer, they turn towards their fellow test subjects and scream anti-corporate slogans that may be political and/or religious (“Death to Yevgeny Nourish [the designer]! Death to PilgrImage [the design company]!”) before walking away. Cronenberg ends the film with the suggestion that this may simply be the continuation of the game, but it seems likely that this is untrue, and that we are back in reality as we know it. This reality, however, is clearly a reality infected by the video game culture Allegra and Ted are attempting to fight, and even their own actions in killing the designer seem programmed, scripted, and mechanical. It is not difficult to see this ending as a critique of religious fanaticism, which, Cronenberg suggests, emerges not out of deep, conscious commitment to a cause but out of a conditioned routine¹⁰². What is unusual about this critique, however, is that it necessarily implicates video game culture as well, so that the relationship between the secular world of scripted “play” and the religious world of fanatical belief is one of mutual infection, with neither discourse being able to claim separation from, or superiority to, the other.

¹⁰² In his commentary for the DVD release of *eXistenZ*, Cronenberg notes that when creating a story of an artist being assassinated by terrorists, he was influenced by the real life case of the Islamic *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie. For further discussion of this connection, see Beard 442-443.

The viewer of *Videodrome* or *eXistenZ* must examine a new and unusual cyberpunk territory, and what awaits there is a challenge far more difficult than that of *Neuromancer* or *Snow Crash*, namely the challenge of secular, postmodern life without an image of religion as reference point. Even though his glances at religion are sidelong, Cronenberg gives it enough attention that his viewers can see a glimpse of a standpoint from which things designated “religious” are no longer being *used* for some secular purpose (usually by containment in a certain point of view), but are simply *present* as elements of social and political discourse. For Cronenberg, most secular traumas come from within rather than from some monstrous Other, and religion is neither a reliable ally nor a reliable enemy. Bodies develop in unexpected ways, power becomes frighteningly irresistible and disturbingly subtle, social, economic and political systems become cruelly destructive, and there is no clear Other to blame or to provide aid. The visual representations of these traumas are often horrifying, and even vocal supporters of Cronenberg often claim that they find his films hard to stomach. Perhaps it is not coincidental that a film director who can view religious phenomena in concrete terms is also committed to seeing secular phenomena as traumatically other to themselves.

The films of Cronenberg, like those of the Wachowskis, move beyond the “post-secular” narrative strategies I have discussed as central to cyberpunk fiction. These strategies, I have argued, acknowledge that the traditional assumptions of secularization theory are no longer viable, yet they attempt to maintain a distinction between the religious and the secular in modified form. The secular subject remains central in cyberpunk fiction, and images of religion serve as ways to test and confirm the limits and powers of secular subjectivity. The *Matrix* films and the work of Cronenberg suggest

different, more challenging post-secular possibilities, offering more dynamic and pluralistic relations among religious and secular forces and challenging the coherence and sufficiency of the secular subject. At present, however, this newer kind of narrative has not displaced narratives that emphasize the secular subject at the expense of religion. The fact that such narratives have not lost their relevance suggests that the paradigms common to cyberpunk illuminate the way secular subjects conceive of themselves, and of their relationship to the religious forces they continue to confront. Further, the cultural relevance of cyberpunk suggests that it continues to function as a way to express and reinforce secular subjectivity; in other words, cyberpunk remains a significant art of the secular self.

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Education

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Occupations and Positions

1996-2000	Teaching Assistantships, Rutgers University
2001-2003	Part-Time Lecturer, English, Rutgers University
2004-2007	Visiting Instructor, Union College

Publications

"Faith in Cyberpunk," revise and resubmit at *PMLA*

"Annie Dillard," forthcoming in *Wadsworth Anthology of American Literature*.
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