Cyber against *punk*: Greg Bear's *Queen of Angels* as metamorphosed cyberpunk

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Abstract

Recent American science fiction (which commercially dominates world science fiction) incorporates two schools of thought, 'cyberpunk' and 'hard SF', which may be read to embody, respectively, radical/liberal and patriotic/conservative propaganda. This article, after attempting to define aspects of these schools, examines Queen of Angels *by Greg Bear (who before producing that text had been a proponent of hard SF). This text is shown to have strong elements of cyberpunk (possibly, to judge by one critical review, appealing to a cyberpunk audience) but to have transformed and inverted the radical and liberal themes of cyberpunk into conservative themes. The text thus illuminates philosophical and technical differences between the schools. It is suggested that the imagery of cyberpunk, and perhaps that of science fiction in general, is liable to such reversals of ideological significance.*

1.   Cyberpunk background

Science fiction has long divided itself into competing schools pursuing different ideas which compete with each other in the marketplace. One such school which evolved towards the end of the 1970s eventually came to call itself cyberpunk. To define cyberpunk is difficult, even for a cyberpunk writer and editor like Bruce Sterling, whose "Preface" (Sterling, 1986:vii-xiv) seems mired in detail. Cyberpunk writers had certain common pursuits; information-related technologies such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology were to cyberpunk what space travel had been to earlier writers. The genre embodied a subversive, liberal/left/ anarchist political orientation which embraced drug use and liberal political causes like Central American wars (Laidlaw, 1986) and the power of multi-nationals (Shiner, 1984).

Cyberpunk texts are generally set in a recognisably near future, allowing direct social comment. The movement is strongly influenced by the American counter-culture and appears suspicious of the international political establishment. From the early 1980s, such writers as Gibson, Rucker, Sterling, Shiner and Laidlaw formed a group creating a common mythology set in a common twenty-first century – a sometimes self-indulgent clique; as Orson Scott Card acidly observed, "...the worst thing about cyberpunk was the shallowness of those who imitated it" (Card, 1992b:541).

The novelty of cyberpunk lay in its emphasis on social change. (The works of Alvin Toffler, such as *The Third Wave* (1981) which emphasises technological influences on social change, seem to have been influential.) Most 1950s science fiction – still revered in the 1990s, with Card claiming Isaac Asimov to have been the greatest American prose stylist (Card, 1992b:552) – preferred to present futures based largely on the present; even Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1975) has the survivors of a nuclear war gradually recreate a version of contemporary society! Only rarely were unconventional societies imagined; Pohl and Korn-bluth's *The Space Merchants* (1979), where vast corporations have taken over the world, is presented in a satiric mode which allows the reader to doubt the story's plausibility.

Some cyberpunk texts are satirical (such as Laidlaw's *Dad's Nuke* – 1986) but cyberpunk visions of radical social change, driven by technology and wealth are usually presented seriously. Cyberpunk's dystopian vision may have been driven by the plight of the American radical/liberal intelligentsia in the 1980s, who had voted for Carter only to see their ideals betrayed, and then faced the Reagan landslide with shock.[1] Certainly it deals with individuals excluded from power. Devices like artificial intelligence and biotechnology alter society for the worse,

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1   This extreme claim needs more justification than can be provided here. As early as 1976 the liberal sociologist I.L. Horowitz was observing liberal pessimism on the increase: "Universal boosterism has yielded to particularist cynicism" (Horowitz, 1977:427). By 1984, Noam Chomsky, bewailing what he perceived as America's subtle thought control, could write that "... a frightened and insecure populace ... is susceptible to jingoist fanaticism. This was shown dramatically by the popular response to the Grenada invasion. The United States is again 'standing tall', Reagan proclaimed ..." (in Peck, 1987:133). Americans who disliked Reagan, seemed to be facing an unstoppable, destructive force; in 1983-1984, with "50 per cent of [Theodore Lowi's] respondents disapproving of [Reagan's] anti-recession policies, 69 percent disapproving of his policies on the alleviation of poverty, and 70 percent disapproving of his handling of the budget deficit ... [d]espite the worst recession since the 1930s, Ronald Reagan was given a second term" (David Morgan, 1990:81).

though they also fascinate the writers – a little like science fiction's treatment of nuclear power in the 1950s.

Cyberpunk concerns people maintaining their values or trying to have a good time in the face of a hostile and overwhelmingly powerful establishment, but there is no revolutionary message; as Huntington (1991:65) observes, "[T]he world of *Neuromancer* [and of most cyberpunk] is missing surface class dynamics". Cyberpunk writers often model style and treatment on the works of detective writers like Raymond Chandler (with whom Gibson was compared in the jacket blurb for *Count Zero* – 1990), whose detectives are solitary men of integrity in a threatening, corrupt world.

2. The ones who walk away from cyberpunk

By the end of the 1980s many cyberpunk writers were moving into other fields.[2] Meanwhile, cyberpunk imagery had spread far beyond science fiction. It had become a repetitive theme in fantasy cinema via *Terminator* and its clones; its icons recurred time and again in graphic novels and teenage comics and in popular perceptions of computers. This omnipresence did not reflect acceptance of cyberpunk's socio-political tenets. Many of these texts embodied traditionalist, patriarchal images. Sey observes that "SF ... has long dealt with the kinds of changes technology might bring to bear on the body" (Sey, 1992b:15), but such dealings are often naive and anti-critical celebrations of human technological power.

Much 1980s science fiction lauded conservative themes and values. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle wrote stories about successful wars against aliens (*The Mote in God's Eye* (1983) and *Footfall* (1985)) which probably related to the contemporary intensification of the Cold War. Card rose to fame with *Ender's Game* (1992a), another tale of triumphant war against aliens by an Americanised Earth (though Card's later works negate his jingoistic aspects). As Suvin notes: "SF can be used as ... a vehicle for ... *politics as salvation* ... this ... has shone stronger on the American Right than on its Left" (Suvin, 1988:212).

This 'hard science fiction' seemed to respond to Reaganism quite positively. Either it encouraged Reaganite views or it drew strength from American militaristic propaganda to pursue its concern with power and space ("Space has very great military potential", enthused Pournelle (1981:121); "We've started to build

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2   Marc Laidlaw (1992:126-145) approaching surrealism ("Great Breakthroughs in Darkness" in *New Worlds 2*), and William Gibson pursuing depressive realism ("Skinner's Room" in *Best New SF 6*).

a shield over us in space", declared Stine (1984:155).). As cyberpunk grew more prominent this group occasionally attacked its ideas: "Nobody built consciousness-level [computer] systems any more ... if you built them to be more intelligent than genius humans they went noncomp ... ordinary computers could do more ... It was a dead-end technology, like direct interfacing between human neural systems and computers" (Pournelle & Stirling, 1989:150); this last sentence is a throwaway dismissal of Gibson's 'cyberspace'.

Greg Bear, a minor writer of the 1970s who worked extensively in fantasy, also worked in hard SF. (Sterling lumps Bear's fantasy *Petra* with cyberpunk (Sterling, 1986:105), though this seems unjustified.) In 1986 Bear won prominence with *Eon*, a text about the arrival of aliens, of an infinitely large hyperspace habitat from humanity's future, and of (incidentally) World War III. America wins; the far-future humans acknowledge the American Constitution. Bear's characters here are middle-class and firmly committed to American values and superiority. In a sequel, *Eternity* (1989), the evil, warlike aliens turn out to be sensible and subject to reasonable argument; the universe is rational. There is no artificial intelligence, despite a civilisation based on computer power. These two texts, focused on big technology, with two-dimensional characters and easy answers, are classic hard science fiction. Bear's works ignore the themes or gadgets of cyberpunk.

Yet in his next major novel, *Queen of Angels* (1991), Bear unveils a complex near future (including *nanotechnology*, a concept distantly related to William Gibson's *monoclonal antibodies*) in which artificial intelligence is developing. The story focuses on the motives of a criminal, and on conflict between the First and Third World. Human space travel is not mentioned, and the text is crafted in a modernist format, while one of the central characters is a detective. Bear appears to have crossed over from hard science fiction to cyberpunk; the book strongly impressed the leftish British reviewer David Longford (Longford, 1992: 250-252). On this account *Queen of Angels* deserves close study.

3. Overview of *Queen of Angels*

Queen of Angels is set in 2048, which is both the binary millennium 100000000000 (allowing Bear to draw parallels with past millennial movements and suggest that utopia may be approaching) and an inverted reference to 1984. The major themes are the evolution of an expert system to genuine intelligence, and the explanation of the motives behind a mass murder. Like the cyberpunk novels of Gibson and Rucker (and unlike *Eon* and *Eternity* which are told from an omniscient perspective), *Queen* is told through several viewpoints – those of a

public defender (policewoman), a poetaster, a psychologist, and the interstellar probe AXIS.

Bear's policewoman heroine, Mary Choy, has had her body 'transformed'; she is simultaneously black, Caucasian and Asian. She is a compassionate (albeit tough) figure in a world where almost everyone is 'therapied', psychologically conditioned to be incapable of committing crimes. She is also the nearest thing to a working-class individual that Bear had thus far used for a main character.

Her task is to find the killer Goldsmith, who has disappeared. While she journeys to the dictatorship of Hispaniola in search of him, Goldsmith is actually still in LA, undergoing mental exploration by a 21st-century psychologist. In the background, Richard Fettle, a friend of Goldsmith's, wrestles with his conscience and his limited talent. In the distance, seemingly unconnected to the rest, the interstellar space probe AXIS arrives in the Centauri system and evolves towards consciousness.

All these viewpoints interplay, although not closely; each has his/her own story, unlike a Gibson text where, simplistically, everything comes together in the last chapter. *Queen of Angels* is a view of the disordered fringes of society, but from the stable centre – unlike the common cyberpunk perspective. The following sections will examine aspects of the text which appear to incorporate elements drawn from cyberpunk, and will interpret each in an effort to see whether Bear's treatment is consistent with cyberpunk's apparent themes and techniques.

4. Police, state power and pragmatics in 2048 Los Angeles

Superficially Choy might seem an appropriate cyberpunk heroine (such as Gibson's Molly/Sally) but as a policewoman she is part of the ruling system, unlike any major cyberpunk character (and likewise unlike the private detective genre to which cyberpunk owes many stylistic and thematic traits). This allows Bear to avoid the romanticisation to which cyberpunk and detective stories are prone.

However, Mary is not a realistic policewoman; there is no corruption or any of the problems which American police forces actually face (problems exemplified by Gibson's contemptuously hostile Turing Police, or Rucker's kleptocratic Gimmie, or indeed by the impression of the LAPD created in the 1992 Los Angeles riots). Though Choy is a decent policewoman, she sympathises with the 'Selector' moral terrorist movement even though she struggles against them. The ambiguity of Choy's moral stance may signify that Bear (like contemporary American politicians) had trouble sustaining an absolute moral stance in the face of a threat to his society.

In this American future, most people have been 'therapied' to render them incapable of misbehaviour. Bear seems to see 'therapy' as an utopian solution to social unrest. The population has lost their free will, but we see no resistance apart from graffiti. Such techniques obviously invite political abuse, but Bear contrasts 'therapy' with the 'hellclamp', a torture device used to punish felons in Hispaniola, and by the Selector terrorists. Obviously 'therapy' is better than the hellclamp; Bear seems to leap from this to saying that it is therefore all right. (Choy's initial sympathy for Selectors may imply that Bear wants to make the reader choose between brainwashing or vigilante terrorism.) It surely follows that the government is working for the best.

Bad government in America is represented by President Raphkind, a popular President who won South American wars and hellclamped criminals, manipulating the Supreme Court to serve him. This surely recalls Richard Nixon (who escalated the Vietnam War, introduced the draconian Safe Streets anti-crime act and packed the Supreme Court to serve him). Bear's Raphkind commits suicide, purging America of evil; however, Choy must constantly guard against the residues of Raphkind's 'dirty East'. (Bear is here exploiting a tendency in American politics, first used by the Nebraskan politician, William Jennings Bryan, and later adopted by the Nixon and Reagan Administrations, of blaming American ills on an Eastern elite.) This technique allows the central character (and, by implication, the reader) to shirk responsibility for the evils inherent in Bear's society.

Cyberpunk writers see the world as flawed by the human evil expressed through technical power, a power often centralised but non-governmental (as in multinational corporations). This draws on the much-admired work of Philip K. Dick (though such libertarian notions surface in Heinlein, for instance in *Stranger in a Strange Land* 1978). Cyberpunk can see no good to power; distrust of present government translates easily into a dystopian future.

In *Queen of Angels*, on the contrary, Utopia has come to America; everyone seems rich and happy. There are still problems – notably the Selectors but the Selectors can be controlled and therapied. America had faced evil in the form of President Raphkind, but he is dead and seemingly his evil with him. Given the totalitarian potential of 'therapy', Bear's essential trust in human goodness and constitutionality is either pathetic or – in the context of his glorification of the police – alarming.

5. The amazing invisible underclass

The society of this future USA is divided into an upper class living in the *combs* (vast blocks of flats resembling Gibson's *arcologies*), and everybody else, whose

situation is ignored. Technical expertise determines status (as in so much middle-class SF, but sharply unlike cyberpunk, whose heroes and heroines are often skilled members of an underclass), and thus Mary Choy is effectively upper class. (Apparently the deserving get status; the undeserving do not.) Bear illustrates the lifestyles of very different people – but only wealthy ones; there are no down-and-outs or cripples (except emotional ones).

There is no working class. Nanotechnology, billions of microscopic, self-repli-cating factories, makes anything from pistols to buildings. Robots called *arbei-ters* do all the service work. Bear gives no clear idea of what everyone does if they do not have a government job.

This superficially resembles the future imagined by cyberpunk writers; Gibson imagines the unemployed middle-class and working class living empty lives in "Barrytown" or "Dog Solitude" (*Count Zero* (1990) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1989)); Rucker has his *pheezers* (senile baby-boomers) living miserably exiled in overcrowded Florida (*Software* s.a.); Sterling's Americans in *Islands in the Net* (1988) are lucky to have work, unlike the bulk of the population vegetating on the federal single-cell protein dole. Such images warn the reader not to assume that all is well with society.

However, Bear seems uninterested in encouraging critical perspectives. He seems unaware that there is anything wrong with joblessness or thought control; his characters do not even know that the underclass is alive. This seems to suggest that his concern is not with the peripheries of society (as cyberpunk is) but with the stable core of a community, including conservative forces like the police. Bear's technical imagery draws on similar anticipations about the future to those which cyberpunk relies on, but he seems to approach that future with a very different agenda. This agenda is displayed not only through glorifying Choy (representative of the powerful) but also through denigrating Goldsmith (the nearest thing to a representative of the disempowered).

6. Abolishing the romantic hero

Emmanuel Goldsmith is a black romantic poet dabbling in radical politics. In Bear's Utopian 2048 a black can still perceive himself to be a social outcast – but is this a real perception? We see nothing of black American society in 2048, but Mary Choy has had her skin turned black, which seems to hint that in 2048 black is at least cosmetically beautiful. Goldsmith's mind is not reliable; it is tainted by images of "Sir" (a combination of his rapist father and his admired friend, the ruler of Hispaniola, Colonel Sir John Yardley.)

An outsider, Goldsmith is very like a central character in a cyberpunk text; he is bold, gifted and flawed, but his problems are not linked to social issues as in cyberpunk. Goldsmith's black consciousness ideals seem to be driven by his having been abused as a child, and as being part of his motive for random murder. In other words, political deviancy in Goldsmith (perhaps in general) becomes a social threat, to be explained in psychological rather than political terms. (If deviancy is essentially sickness, thought control is justified.)

Goldsmith is also a poet (his victims are members of his poetry circle). His poetry stems largely from his alienated situation. We see little of Goldsmith's creative capacity, but to some extent his friend, Richard Fettle, may stand in for him. Fettle is unattractive – we only see him creating mediocre poetry or exploiting and betraying his lover; he is ruthlessly selfish and cowardly. Judging by his images of Fettle and Goldsmith, Bear has little use for alienated poets. (Another conservative hard SF writer, Card, explicitly loathes the outsider-figure: "An artist who is alienated from his society *has* no reason to live" (Card, 1992b:541).) It may be that Bear is making a deliberate assault on the Byronic roots of the romantic hero.

Goldsmith (whose name incidentally recalls Emmanuel Goldstein, mythic villain of *1984*, surely implying both a symbolic role and his status as villain, as well as all the complexities of the multiple American readings of *1984*) is apparently more a symbol than a character. But a symbol of what? Is Goldsmith's radicalism a sign of evil? Goldsmith destroys everything around him; he murders his friends and betrays his brother, yet in the end this is all supposedly due to his having been abused as a child; his 'outsider' role is simply his fantasy. His brother, equally abused, is guiltless, free from black consciousness and nobly positive.

Has Goldsmith, then, chosen his role, as a conservative would argue, or is he a victim of circumstances? Bear manages to have it both ways. Once Goldsmith's personal problems are identified, he is not cured, but handed over to Selectors who torture him into suicide. Even if evil is a sickness, it deserves punishment. While acknowledging that society and psychological illness may drive crime and misbehaviour, Bear (through Choy and the Selectors) seems to say that everything is the criminal's own fault, and can only be expiated by him. (Whatever the individual morality of this, it appears once again a means of evading any reason or need to change the social background to the crime.)

7. Aliens and others: Hispaniola and the post-Cold War Third World

Choy pursues Goldsmith's trail to Hispaniola (united Haiti and Santo Domingo). Hispaniola's ruler, Colonel Sir John Yardley, is a combination of a variety of American villains. (Bear says that "I've tried to portray [his characters] as people, not exemplars" (Bear, 1989:384) but it is hard to take this claim seriously.) He is a military dictator opposed to the United States (and hence a threat like Colonel Gaddaffi), he is a British aristocrat (and perhaps, therefore, effete; Choy is disgusted by Yardley's luxurious existence, though this seems insignificant beside the combs of Los Angeles). Yardley is a figure out of the past, his name recalls the pirates who once raided from old Hispaniola, who poses an alternative to Bear's America, and its vision, which Bear clearly rejects.

Yardley is also a white man ruling a quasi-African nation (Africa has been destroyed by famine and disease). He is hence a colonialist, (enabling Bear to draw on American revolutionary ideology) and comes from the Third World (a potential threat to the Pax Americana). Goldsmith, the naive and foolish poet and supporter of Yardley, identifies Hispaniola with his black consciousness (which Bear also seems to find dubious). Hispaniola had survived by terrorism (supplying the Selectors with hellclamps) and by providing mercenaries to the late and discredited President Raphkind (hence Hispaniola is associated with Bear's 'dirty East'), using the money to develop a mining industry. In 2048, all this painfully-purchased productive capacity has become worthless with the advent of nano-technology. Hispaniola is falling apart; civil war looms, as a conservative American would expect of the unstable Third World.

Yardley then disobeys and denounces America, becoming an overt threat to American democratic values. The way in which Yardley's romantic despotism captivated Goldsmith implies that it poses a danger for all America. Hispaniola and Yardley help the reader focus on the threat of the outsider. All this surely, at least in part, depicts the post-Cold War Third World as seen from the United States.

A cyberpunk writer might have made a tragic hero of Yardley (he is indeed probably modelled on Sterling's heroic Colonel Lawrence in *Islands in the Net*) but the Hispaniolan civil war merely provides a background to Bear's text; Bear, through Choy, shows no sympathy for Hispaniola or Yardley. Having seen that Hispaniola tortures its criminals with hellclamps she feels justified in condemning them absolutely, just as Goldsmith is condemned – providing a focus of external evil again justifies ignoring the evils in oneself, as with Choy's tacit approval of Selectors.

Islands in the Net has many parallels to *Queen of Angels*, as when an American visitor becomes a hostage in corrupt Grenada. Sterling's heroine sympathises (against her better political judgement) with the Grenadans and their lost cause. While Sterling does not really admire his disreputable Grenada, he sympathises with its desire for independence and its struggle against 'Babylon'. Sterling arouses the reader's sympathy by graphically describing the corpses killed in a right-wing terrorist assault on the island. In contrast, Bear cuts rapidly away from the Hispaniolan civil war; Choy, perfectly displaying the contemporary American detachment from Third World misery, is rescued by an American helicopter. Sterling wants the reader to feel as the Grenadans feel; Bear combines tourism with anthropology; his scholarly overview of voodoo as an alien religion contrasts sharply with Gibson's sympathetic use of voodoo symbols in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive.*

Sterling probably chose Grenada because his audience knew that it had recently suffered American invasion; it is unlikely that Bear was recalling the American invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965, or prefiguring the likely forthcoming American invasion of Haiti. Bear presents none of the consciousness of American imperialism which Sterling puts into the mouths of the Grenadans; Yardley's xenophobia seems irrational in Bear's eyes, his problems are presented as irrelevant images of Third World instability, the cause for which need not be identified. Bear's lack of interest in the origin of social problems in Hispaniola parallels his blaming everything bad in the United States on the 'dirty East' as opposed to clean, moral California.

8. Bear's revisions of cyberpunk archetypes: the country and the computer

Martin Burke, psychologist, uses 'nanotechnology' to insert his viewpoint into a patient's brain and perceive the patient's mind symbolically, a system called the 'Country'. Burke appears as single-minded as Choy, concerned more with the promise of the Country than with humanity or medical ethics. Bear thus allows little insight into Burke, who appears unimportant, the Country is presented as an impressive surreal world.

The concept of entering someone else's mind for therapy is not new; Robert F. Young had written a short story on a very similar theme ("Perchance to Dream", Young, 1977). However, it is here associated with controllable technology; one must plug into the person's brain. This process resembles the technology of 'cyberspace' in Gibson's works, a world where people fight their battles with information. Bear's Country is more directly a battle of mental images produced by world-views.

> A railed parapet beyond the door overlooked the pit.
>
> | "God", Carol said. "It's not just garbage. It's bodies. More bones."
>
> Martin again saw piles of shattered crockery faces rather than bones. He had never observed anything like this in a Country; on the edge of nightmare, these signs seemed to point to some internal warfare, internal genocide. (Bear, 1991:291.)

The task in the Country is to read the symbols correctly, symbols which are produced by their author, the creator/owner of the Country, in this case Goldsmith. (This, of course, is also the task of the reader of *Queen of Angels*, whose author is Bear.) Bear seems to have taken the symbolic significance of cyberspace (the one area where individual 'hackers' can contend with the corporate world) and turned it into something exclusive (anyone can enter cyberspace, but only a few psychologists enter the Country). The Country is not a force for social liberation, like cyberspace, but a force of individual manipulation.

Goldsmith has been kidnapped by a parent of one of his victims, who wants to know Goldsmith's motives and pays Burke to go into Goldsmith's Country. This proves to be dangerous; Goldsmith's corrupted psyche infects Burke through the Country, giving Burke a terrifying sense that the evil of Goldsmith is now in him. (Burke already feels guilty because his Country research was performed at the behest of the evil President Raphkind.)

The Country provides a way to absolutely individualise evil; Goldsmith's bad side (the demonic Sir) has taken control of his psyche and destroyed everything good in him. Goldsmith thus appears perfectly evil, perfectly deserving destruction. (There seems to be a prevalent American conservative idea that wrongness in society may be innate. Evans (a 1970s American conservative intellectual) advises that "[t]he ... notion of [criminal] 'rehabilitation' ... must be abandoned" (Evans, 1975:401).) Presidents Reagan and Bush launched their 'war on drugs' while referring to 'epidemics of crime', seemingly believing that they could spread like disease. Horowitz notes how the FBI chief, J. Edgar Hoover, was obsessed with the corrupting power of Communism and homosexuality – intriguing, since Hoover was himself homosexual. The Country may be a window onto Bear's conservative view of the human spirit.

Even if the problems of the world are innate, they can be avoided. The space-probe AXIS illustrates a transcendental view of science making contact with alien life. This proves not to be intelligent life, but, symmetrically, the AXIS probe itself is slowly becoming self-conscious. (As in virtually all cyberpunk texts, machine intelligence does not happen under direct human control but evolves

more or less by accident.) In linking the evolution of artificial intelligence with the first probe to the stars, Bear associates it with an issue which a hard science fiction writer would deem unquestionably good. Flight to the stars is seen by most technocratic science fiction writers (particularly Bear's mentor, Clarke) as a way to preserve the human race as well as to show its superiority.

Bear may have found it important to associate artificial intelligence with positive connotations, for the evidence suggests that Bear initially found the concept hard to accept. Artificial intelligences are absent from *Eon* and *Eternity*. In cyberpunk (which was developing while Bear was writing) artificial intelligence threatens private human power – which may explain why Bear initially distrusted them. In the end of *Queen of Angels*, the evolution of artificial intelligence is presented in triumphant terms – a successful struggle against loneliness, and thus implicitly, an achievement made by a machine which is far from omnipotent. "I lack experience and understanding ..." (Bear, 1991:383) says the Earth-based computer, Jill. Cyberpunk writers emphasised the subversive character of their machines by having them come to consciousness in a struggle against their makers; Bear's machine evolution is robbed of its threatening nature by being appropriated as part of the progress of humankind, open to human influence and, in terms of the structure of its discourse as contrasted with that of the rest of the text, basically innocent.

9.   Modernism/postmodernism and the 'sense of wonder'

Much of *Queen of Angels* takes a stream-of-consciousness form – his fractured style is probably modelled on Bloom's soliloquies in *Ulysses*. This may be an attempt to show that he is trying something more ambitious than the conventional simple realist science fiction text, although it has other implications too, notably a modernist confidence that the world can be explicated through text.

> Christmas Eve. She had forgotten. Brief picture: a three metre farm tree in suburban Irvine gaudy with tinsel and blown art glass, a bright hologram star twinkling and beaming at the top, casting light through the high ceil-inged family room, brother Lee running his electric car at her while she tried to hit his plastic shoulder harness with a grainy spot of red light from her pistol. Even then pd masculine mentality. (Bear, 1991:113.)

This consistent telegraphic style, so unlike the conventionalised realist narrative of most science fiction texts, includes neologisms which Bear uses to distinguish his near-future world from ours – neologisms such as *jiltz* (a raid) and *dytch* (a calming meditation). In cyberpunk texts (generally written in a seemingly realistic style), strange words usually introduce new concepts, and odd events and

situations are made ordinary to preserve narrative coolness. What is the differ-ence?

Parrinder distinguishes two forms of reportage about the fantastic; "a rhetoric of emotive gestures" (Parrinder, 1980:108), (which reflects the "sense of wonder" of Sam Moskowitz and probably approaches the aims of Bear in *Queen of Angels*), or "an air of prosaic verisimilitude" (Parrinder, 1980:110), which is far more like the cyberpunk mode. Prosaic verisimilitude is more likely to encourage the read-er to situate a passage in his or her experienced world – when something appears which is utterly unfamiliar, it thus arouses a critical response which is important in a literature aiming at social criticism like cyberpunk. To serve as a warning for the present, cyberpunk cannot to be too obviously estranged in social terms; there is a huge difference between saying 'What if there were a new form of transformation?' and saying 'Look at the pretty red space-ship!'.

The 'emotive gestures' implied in Bear's defamiliarisation techniques hide rather than reveal. Placing odd events against a background where even the language is unfamiliar is to make comparisons with the reader's experienced world more difficult. Bear is evidently following the tradition of a 'sense of wonder'; his fractured style seems likewise aimed to mystify, to make exciting rather than strange, even while his technology (based on contemporary concepts) serves to make bizarre concepts unremarkable.

Bear's overt choice of a style associated with modernism becomes significant when read in the light of Jameson's remark that "cyberpunk [is] henceforth, for many of us, the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (Jameson, 1991:419). Jameson's caution may be attributed to his having been criticised (notably by Hutcheon – 1988) for conflating the cultural phenomenon of postmodernism with the socio-economic phenomenon of late capitalism. Cyberpunk is certainly associated with the disempowered fringes of corporate, 'late capitalist' societies, and criticises such societies, while *Queen of Angels* essentially celebrates the strong core of such societies.

Cyberpunk texts are almost invariably presented from varying viewpoints, featur-ing central characters whose questions are rarely answered and may be unan-swerable; *Queen of Angels* ends with an emphatic 'I' made up of many smaller 'I's' which seems to suggest an essentially unified human consciousness. Thus while on one level Bear is transforming a radical political view into a conser-vative one, on a literary level Bear seems to have transformed a genre associated with a radically postmodern viewpoint, into a more stable and secure modernist viewpoint well-suited to Bear's apparent political goals.

10. Pro/Conclusions

Queen of Angels ends on a seemingly positive note. Goldsmith commits suicide after being tortured by Selectors (showing that there is still retributive justice in this world). Choy escapes from Hispaniola, rescuing Goldsmith's passive brother (thus perhaps rescuing what is good in Goldsmith) who is free from psychotic guilt despite having suffered hellclamping. AXIS' earth-based simulation rises to self-consciousness in a clearly religious passage: "I am without sin for the moment ..." (Bear, 1989:384). The Garden of Eden image implies a new beginning implicit in the binary millennium 2048, inverse of 1984.

This resembles the transcendental endings of many cyberpunk texts (notably *Count Zero/Mona Lisa Overdrive* and *Wetware*) where technology solves the problems of the main characters. However, in these texts the solution is individual – Gibson's artificial intelligence escapes to Alpha Centauri, while Rucker's central character turns himself into a cybernetic dolphin. This is inevitable, since the society which they leave behind them is dystopian. They cannot beat the global culture, but they cannot accept it either, so they flee.

Bear swallows the global culture whole, yet his optimism is at odds with much of the reality in *Queen of Angels*. Is the vaguely-sketched chaos in the world outside America really trivial as long as Americans are happy (thanks to the dubious practice of therapy)? Is AXIS triumphant, or doomed to be a victim? What about the American underclass and the miseries which Fettle and Goldsmith illustrate? The text ends with a triumph of human society over evil instability – the very forces which provide the motive power for cyberpunk texts, but in cyberpunk the forces of instability are identified with positive images like change and self-criticism, while stability is associated with physical pollution and social betrayal.

Queen of Angels certainly draws on the background, and perhaps the audience, of cyberpunk. Nevertheless Bear's goals in this text are radically different to those of cyberpunk. He is conservatively moralistic about society, where cyberpunk tends to distrust absolutes and resist attempts to curb individual freedom. The detective motif in *Queen of Angels* is superficial, for unlike a cyberpunk text, there is no dark secret to discover, simply an inevitable process unfolding. Revelations only affect individual. The emphasis is on security rather than insecurity; Bear is defending a vision of the status quo, where the cyberpunks (I believe) try to show the potential horror of a future America.

One should not idealise cyberpunk; it is not a realistic genre. Plausibility and internal criticism is often sacrificed to appropriateness – its world is made credible by pandering to the prejudices of its American liberal and radical audience.

(Gibson's rich characters are mainly crude stereotypes of debauched, power-hungry capitalists.) Sey argues that in cyberpunk "SF becomes the record of the present, not the vision of the future" (Sey, 1992a:116), but this is surely the case for all science fiction and indeed all literature; cyberpunk's present is seen through ideological spectacles. Likewise, Sey's claim that "Cyberpunk ... may be the beginning of a post-humanist ... popular fiction" (Sey, 1992a:114) is surely an exaggerated (and imprecise) claim in the light of cyberpunk's narrow popular base and its close ties to earlier liberal/radical SF writers like Dick, Ballard and Bester. Nevertheless cyberpunk, by its nature as a minority report on society, encourages critical thought in its audience.

In *Queen of Angels* Bear seems to strain out the intellectually challenging aspects of cyberpunk theme and form, and replace them with conservative certainties. Though *Queen of Angels* is more finely crafted and seemingly more sensitive to human consciousness than most cyberpunk texts, it is also in some ways more shallow, because it addresses the contented or the aspiring contented, assuring them that they need not work, for the future will be like the present if they will only behave. It is not surprising that it was nominated for the Hugo Award.

Queen of Angels thus shows that one can write texts which are almost indistinguishable from cyberpunk in tone and texture, but which are ideologically opposed to it. It may not be coincidence that at much the same time, cyborgs and artificial intelligences were turning up in conservative, militaristic formula science fiction; the *Cyborg Commando* series from 1988 (warring against evil Heinleinesque arthropoidal aliens) and the *Cybernarc* series from 1991 (see Cain, 1991), the year after *Queen of Angels* appeared; *Cybernarc* featured a heroic robot fighting the 'War on Drugs' ...

The appropriation of subversive cyberpunk images for conservative purposes illustrates how vulnerable science fiction is to ideological transformation and, hence, how doubtful its claims are to being a literature of social change. As participants in an essentially capitalist genre, science fiction writers have no special control over what happens to their intellectual creations. They may be ignored, they may be misinterpreted – or, like any weapons, they may be turned on their creators.

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