The End of Times, the End of Signs?
Cyberpunk Novels, Nuclear War, and Virtual Realities

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Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of virtual reality and nuclear apocalypse in three cyberpunk texts – *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, and *Tea from an Empty Cup* by Pat Cadigan – and finds that each novel uses virtual and nuclear imagery to explore signification. Each text's vision of virtual reality is informed by either a Platonic or Baudrillardian theory. *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* both suggest that the virtual world is the world of Forms because its signs (graphics and code) are wholly commensurate with their referents (aspects of the virtual world itself). *Tea from an Empty Cup*, however, suggests that the virtual world consists of empty signs whose original referents (an absent framing world and an untold nuclear history) are missing and beyond recovery, because nothing exists outside of the simulation. Each novel's depiction of virtual reality as a space of either ideal truth or endless simulation correlates (through accordance or opposition) with its conception of nuclear apocalypse. *Neuromancer* follows Derrida in suggesting that the a-symbolic nuclear referent is the only possible true referent, as the apocalypse represents a simultaneous moment of truth revealed and reference lost. In contrast, both *Snow Crash* and *Tea* align with Baudrillard's reading of the nuclear as the height of simulation, and the attendant implication that simulation is always already post-apocalyptic. Whether the nuclear event is figured as a moment of revelation or pure simulation, each text points to the impossibility of imagining (even science fictionally) a post-nuclear future, and thus, each reflects on its own end (in both senses of the word) as a representational work. Accordingly, I read cyberpunk as a metafictional reflection on the life and death of a novel.

General Summary

In cyberpunk novels such as *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea from an Empty Cup*, virtual and nuclear imagery form a discourse on themes of language: the relationship between symbols and their meanings. Virtual and nuclear themes either support the idea that language relates to an underlying truth, or they suggest that language references only itself. This thesis argues that insofar as virtual and nuclear imagery evince a thematic interest in symbolic representation, the novels self-consciously reflect on the process of fiction-writing. The virtual represents creation through language, while the nuclear represents the destruction of literature; thus, the novels studied here narrativize the beginning and end of fiction.

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Chapter One

History and Futurism: Cyberpunk's Cold War Context

Many science fiction novels featuring virtual reality contain references to the Cold War, the Soviet Union, and nuclear weapons. For narratives that are supposed to be futuristic, it is notable how often their backstories begin in a particular historical period (1945-1991)[1] and reflect its attendant anxieties. The connection between virtual and nuclear imagery may be due in part to the technologies' intertwined histories: video games were "invented in the nocturnal hacking of Pentagon programmers who whiled away tedious hours tending giant military computers by transforming the electronic screens of nuclear war preparation into whimsical playgrounds" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter xv). Virtual game worlds are a type of virtual world, and the first virtual simulators were – as they still often are – usually structured as games because nuclear strategy relied so heavily on game theory, speculation, and the ability to imagine possible futures (Grausam). Within this context, images of nuclear weapons might just be an example of antiquated technology littering the pages of science fiction as historical backdrop – instrumental in building the fictional present, but ultimately obsolete given the pace of technological progress. Science fiction writers may also draw on the memory of nuclear anxiety to convey a distorted, even petrified, sense of time. As Richard Klein argues, the threat of nuclear war confronted people with the idea of a "futureless future" (83), an anticipated futurelessness that challenges any use of the future tense. A futuristic novel that engages with the

[1] In my dating of the Cold War (marked by two key events – the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the dissolution of the Soviet Union), I follow Alan Nadel's argument that "[a]lthough some date the beginnings of the cold war to Churchill's iron curtain speech, and others to U.S.-Soviet relations that antedate even World War II, the crucial factor, I would argue, that gives the cold war its unique qualities is the atomic bomb" (13).

idea of nuclear anxiety, then, only to historicize it and contain it within a post-apocalyptic setting that relegates the nuclear to mundane obsolescence, playfully collapses traditional temporal distinctions – past, present, and future – into a "broad present" (Gomel 1).[2] This "broad present" is the space of cyberpunk fiction, a subgenre that centralizes the representation, construction, and destruction of worlds through sign systems.

Cyberpunk is a science fiction subgenre that was popular in the 1980s and 90s. Given its emergence at the very end of, and immediately following, the Cold War, and given its characteristically jarring combination of high-tech alternative realities, post-apocalyptic spaces, and its status as a distinctly American subgenre (Heuser 20), cyberpunk is perfectly placed to represent lingering nuclear anxieties in post-Cold War America. This thesis analyzes the interplay of virtual and nuclear themes in three cyberpunk texts: *Neuromancer* by William Gibson (1984); *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson (1992); and *Tea from an Empty Cup* by Pat Cadigan (1998). I focus on these three novels because their fictional virtual worlds are all predicated upon systems of signs, loosely related to theories of signification, and because all three represent signs and their correlation with truths and realities as directly related to the nuclear and the apocalyptic moment. *Neuromancer*, for example, suggests that math and logic (including computer code) are the closest approximations of a pure form of communication; *Snow Crash* describes binary code as a language, and differentiates between performative and representational language; and in *Tea from an Empty Cup*, signs point only to other signs in an

[2] Elana Gomel argues that cyberpunk "reflects the vision of the 'broad present,' in which the future and the past bleed into, and contaminate, the experience of 'now,'" and this altered experience of time represents "what many scholars, from Frederic Jameson and Francis Fukuyama to David Bell, have diagnosed as the 'end of history' or rather, the end of historical teleology" (1). While for Gomel, the end of teleology in cyberpunk is a symptom of global capitalism, I would argue that part of the anxiety of cyberpunk is that there is no teleological trajectory that goes beyond the nuclear era.

endless cycle of reference. Briefly, then, each novel's construction of its virtual world corresponds to one of two theories of signification: Plato's idealism or Jean Baudrillard's simulacra.

This chapter introduces my primary texts and establishes their historical and critical contexts; each of the three succeeding chapters is organized around key themes and ideas, and I explore elements of all three novels in each chapter to build on those ideas. Broadly speaking, these chapters focus on the following themes: the nuclear, the virtual, and the post-apocalyptic. Since my key texts tie each of these themes to notions of signification and representation, I argue that the nuclear is the dark side of virtual reality's embeddedness in theories and uses of signs and referents. In its characteristic pairing of nuclear and virtual themes, cyberpunk either anticipates the revelation of truth in signs or the emergence of post-truth (post-apocalypse as a type of post-revelation). Thus, virtual reality and nuclear apocalypse are complementary themes, even in their opposition, as they depict a narrative cycle of creation and destruction: fiction as world-building and world-unmaking through signs. The virtual and the nuclear work as an intertwined metaphor for the life-cycle of literature.

Key Terms

My use of the term "nuclear" in this thesis is based on Klein's argument that what we mean by "nuclear war" exists only in the realm of the imaginary and the fantastic. Klein explains that:

> Total nuclear war does not refer to anything that is or ever has been, so far; its real referent is in some still hypothetical future. Until the mirror is broken, we are suspended in this hypothetical phantasm. … We are suspended in this fabulous

> condition in which all our plans, and all our strategies, personal and public, are conditioned by a non-real referent, one which until today exists only as a thing without a model, about which we can only talk, and opine, and hope. (81)

Klein argues that this imaginary endpoint alters our conception of futurity, which in turn shapes behavior, politics, and literature in the present (81-84). When I use the term "nuclear anxiety," then, I am referring to a discomforting feeling produced by a nuclear teleology, an imagined futurelessness, and a perhaps equally disturbing feeling of having that teleology displaced or indefinitely deferred, as it is in cyberpunk. Nuclear anxiety in cyberpunk fiction raises questions about what happens after the anticipation of apocalypse, after futurelessness.

Just as I use the term "nuclear" to refer to a still imaginary concept, "virtual reality" here refers to a fantasy of technological progress, one that can only be played out in fiction as of yet. N. Katherine Hayles points out that current speculations – both scientific and science fictional – about what virtual reality will be rely on implicit assumptions about what virtuality is:

> *Virtuality is the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns*. The definition plays off the duality at the heart of the condition of virtuality – materiality on the one hand, information on the other. Normally virtuality is associated with computer simulations that put the body into a feedback loop with a computer-generated image. (13-14)

Virtual reality, then, like *Neuromancer*'s cyberspace, tends to imagine the computer as a kind of prosthetic that works to transcend the body, allowing the mind direct access to a world of information. Of course, virtual reality as *Neuromancer* depicts it does not yet exist – we are getting closer but our understanding of it is still based on a fantasy. From this perspective, it

seems almost appropriate that "Gibson's vision of cyberspace had a considerable effect on the development of three-dimensional virtual reality imaging software" (Hayles 21).[3] Gibson's vision of cyberspace, as he himself admits, is not based on any technical know-how: "I knew virtually nothing about computers so I sort of imagined … what they are … and I did that through some strange process of decoding what I took to be the rather poetic language of the hackers" (interview qtd. in Heuser 16n12). *Neuromancer*'s cyberspace informs and influences current definitions of "virtual reality" and the actual development of virtual software, suggesting that the science of virtual reality is based largely on a fantasy and a poetics, rather than the other way around.

In order to properly contextualize the themes and anxieties of the subgenre, I must first sketch out a working definition of cyberpunk, describe its oft-cited relationship with postmodernism, and explain how many of the conventions of postmodernism were influenced by the culture of the Cold War. Cyberpunk is "bizarre, hard-edged, high-tech stuff" (Dozois qtd. in Heuser 7). It is defined chiefly by its "style, mood, and atmosphere" (Heuser 15), and its use of cyberspace as a setting. "Cyberspace" is Gibson's coinage, but it is often used to describe virtual worlds, or even the internet as a whole, more generally (Heuser 24). For Sabine Heuser, cyberspace is "a fictional world or virtual reality, which cyberpunk writers deploy as a common theme and plot device" (5). She argues that "[c]yberpunk has been assigned an ambiguous level of significance by science fiction criticism to date" (13). It is ambiguous because, while it meets

[3] In an interview quoted in Brooks Landon's 1990 Introduction to *Neuromancer*, Gibson remarks that "'The last thing I ever imagined was that anyone would look at my stuff and think, "this is a blueprint."' Yet that is what *Neuromancer* had become … *Neuromancer… showed us cyberspace and sold us on the need to get there*. … More than any novel in recent memory, *Neuromancer* went beyond creating a *compelling* fictional world to compelling us to shape our world to its fiction" (qtd. in Kelly 72).

all the criteria of trendy genre fiction, "once the connection between cyberpunk and postmodernism was made it loomed large over the scientific community until it was addressed by academic critics" (Heuser 12). Frederic Jameson, for example, goes so far as to argue that cyberpunk is the "supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (qtd. in McHale 13).[4] From another perspective, Brian McHale points out that cyberpunk and postmodernism are both ontologically oriented genres – they revolve around questions about the nature of reality (or realities) and the nature of boundaries (between worlds, life and death, the body and its environment).[5] McHale also suggests that narratives about artificial worlds may always be metafictional reflections on the writing process itself: virtual world-building is an apt metaphor for fictional world-building.[6] Given that some of the characteristic features of cyberpunk are its breakneck narrative speed, indicating a compression of time, its blending of

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[4] As Heuser points out, Baudrillard and Jameson "are regularly associated with cyberpunk, thanks to their several well-documented forays into the intersection between simulation and capitalism" (12). While I appreciate the unifying concept of the "hyperreal" in both writers' works for its obvious relation to the fast-paced, corporate-dominated worlds of cyberpunk, global capitalism is not the thematic focus here (I refer to Jameson for his definitions of cyberpunk and postmodernism in order to avoid competing or conflated definitions of the hyperreal). A focus on gender or race (or sexism and racism) is also beyond the possibility of my limited work in a thesis; however, Jason Haslam's *Gender, Race, and American Science Fiction: Reflections on Fantastic Identities* is a singularly important work in those areas.

[5] McHale gestures toward the thematic similarities of virtual and nuclear imagery by suggesting that virtual reality (with its multiplication of worlds) and nuclear apocalypse (with its nuances of death) are characteristic features of cyberpunk because both are ontologically oriented: Postmodernist fiction "is fiction organized in terms of an ontological dominant, fiction whose formal strategies implicitly raise issues of the mode of being of fictional worlds … and/or reflect on the plurality and diversity of worlds, whether 'real,' possible, fictional, or what-have-you" (147). The "ontologically-oriented poetics of postmodernism is the latest, renewed manifestation of our culture's protracted struggle to represent, and thus symbolically to master, death. … [P]ostmodernist fiction might somewhat reductively be characterized as one long, resourceful, highly diversified, obsessive meditation on the intolerable fact of personal extinction – your death, my death, our collective death" (261).

[6] "Metafiction" refers to works that depict "self-constructed worlds" (Grausam 517), and in doing so "make their own fictionality a central issue" (516). McHale argues that postmodernism "is self-consciously 'world-building' fiction, laying bare the process of fictional world-making itself" (12).

post-apocalyptic and hyperreal settings, and its thematic concern with the nature and creation of worlds, I argue that these features correlate with the political and cultural climate from which the genre emerged: a newly post-Cold War America.

Theoretical Frameworks

In my analysis of how cyberpunk represents the creation of worlds through language or signs, I argue that the virtual worlds in all three novels correspond with particular theories of signification. *Neuromancer*, as some critics point out, represents cyberspace as pure data, a step closer to the real reality of Platonic Forms.[7] If signs are a corrupt reflection of an ideal real, the signs that make up cyberspace are less corrupt, hinting at the implied Platonic purity of mathematics and logic. *Snow Crash* insists that the binary code that makes up the Metaverse (the novel's virtual reality setting) is a form of language. If "code is ... speech" (Stephenson 211), it is what J.L. Austin calls a "performative language": signs (binary code) are the same as their referents (the Metaverse) because the referent is itself symbolic. Insofar as the novel represents code as a performative alignment of sign and referent, it also suggests that code is idealistically true. In contrast with the Platonic interpretations of virtuality evident in *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*, *Tea from an Empty Cup* practically insists on a Baudrillardian reading at every turn. Although AR, *Tea*'s fictional simulation,[8] is basically all that exists from a reader's point of view, characters constantly remind each other that it is "*artificial* reality – all you can do is lie, no matter what you say, and the believers are the ones at fault. Because it's all make-believe, let's

[7] See Hayles (1999), Swanstrom (2010), Heuser (2003), and Porush (1994) for readings of cyberspace as idealistic.

[8] "AR" stands for "Artificial Reality" (Cadigan 107), but since the characters mainly refer to it as "AR," this thesis treats the acronym as the proper name for *Tea*'s virtual world, and only uses it as such.

pretend, the play's the thing" (Cadigan 77). Rather than pointing to an ideal real, then, *Tea* doubles-down on artifice. There is no real referent behind the signs.

The starting point for my examination of the role of signs in the creation of worlds is a discussion of the different uses of Platonic and Baudrillardian depictions of cyberspace; I focus on their delineations between the real and the simulated, and the relation of each to the symbolic. Criticism of cyberpunk, and Gibson's cyberspace in particular, often begins with a reference to Platonic idealism.[9] And, what Plato is to cyberspace, Jacques Derrida is to the nuclear: his essay, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," is one of the most oft-cited texts in nuclear criticism.[10] Both Plato and Derrida imagine an essential truth obscured by an imperfect sign system – an idea that Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* directly refutes on both counts. Baudrillard therefore provides a point of continuity between the two conversations as he is one of the few authors whose theory encompasses and directly compares simulations and the nuclear issue. While Derrida's and Baudrillard's theories are contemporaneous with cyberpunk, and can therefore directly comment on the technology of that era, I rely on Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* to draw out the connection between Plato and cybernetics. Her reading of an information-matter duality in virtual reality literature – the disembodiment of cyberspace, and the dead "meat" of flesh (Gibson 7) – helps to explain why a Platonic space is usually found inside a post-apocalyptic one in cyberpunk fiction.

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[9] For example: "initial criticism of cyberpunk fiction has focused on cyberspace as an expression of Platonic idealism" (Swanstrom 54). "Michael Heim traces the history of cyberspace to the tradition of Platonic idealism … which he recognizes as the foundation beneath cyberspace" (Heuser 23). David Porush argues that cyberspace participates in "the sort of idealism that … emerges in Platonic philosophy. Numbers were the idealized root of reality" (542-43). Finally, Hayles suggests that cybernetic literatures tend to privilege "the abstract as the Real" and downplay "the importance of material instantiation"; it is "a new variation on an ancient game, in which disembodied information becomes the ultimate Platonic Form" (13).

[10] See, for example, Klein (2000), McHale (1992), Keep (1995), Robson (1995), and Heffernan (1995).

Hayles' analysis of a presumed divide between information and materiality underlying cybernetic literatures, both critical and science fictional, is equally relevant to all three novels and the implicit assumptions they make in their construction of worlds, not least because Hayles directly references two of these novels to support her argument. Hayles points to *Neuromancer* as the quintessential example of the tendency to depict virtual worlds as disembodying mediums, common to multiple scientific fields: "information theory, cybernetics, or popular science books" (13). In this way, virtual reality novels tend to perpetuate the humanist notion of mind-body dualism.[11] Hayles argues that in such texts "disembodied information becomes the ultimate Platonic Form" (13). In subscribing to the Platonic view, *Neuromancer* counterintuitively suggests that the simulation is actually a step closer to the real reality of Forms, as the virtual world is one of pure information, pure consciousness, free of the corruption and entrapping localization of flesh and representational language. Furthermore, in a reading of *Snow Crash*, Hayles points to the novel's representation of binary code as a form of what J.L. Austin calls "performative utterances," which "operate in a symbolic realm, where they can make things happen because they refer to actions that are themselves symbolic constructions" (274). Binary code "can make things happen" – speaking it creates the thing of which it speaks – because the Metaverse itself is a "symbolic construction." If binary code is a performative language, then sign and referent are the same in the virtual world. As in *Neuromancer*, virtual reality in *Snow Crash* comes closer to representing truth than everyday reality because its sign system is less

[11] In its reminiscence of both Cartesian mind-body dualism and Platonic idealism, *Neuromancer* suggests that the mind is potentially reducible to pure information, while the body prevents total immersion in the idealistic world of the matrix: "Narratives of mind/body splits abound in VR discourse. … [V]irtual reality reinforces the Cartesian duality" (Murray and Sixsmith 318). "Case's identity in *Neuromancer* in many ways remains tied to a Cartesian sense of subjectivity" (Swanstrom 54).

corrupt. Finally, although *How We Became Posthuman* makes no reference to Cadigan's works, Hayles expresses a desire for a truly posthumanist rather than humanist interpretation of the virtual encounter, one that is not about "leaving the body behind but rather of extending embodied awareness" (291). The idea that the virtual experience is inseparable from the body is a characteristic feature of Cadigan's virtual reality fiction. Hayles' scrutiny of the underlying assumptions and ideologies of virtual reality literature thus provides a jumping off point from which to compare the construction and internal logic of fictional virtual worlds.

Baudrillard's theory of simulation is also essential to my argument because it captures a contrasting perspective to the Platonic interpretation of virtual reality. A distinction between Platonic and Baudrillardian visions of virtuality reveals an underlying premise of every cyberpunk text: either a definitive truth or reality exists beyond the simulation or it does not. In the early pages of *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard sets up the opposing ideas that signs are either representative of the real or purely simulative:

> Such is simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from … *the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. … Such would be the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the *absence* of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

Since Plato's world of Forms stems from a utopian "equivalence of the signs and the real," novels that depict disembodied code as a "reflection of a profound reality" articulate a Platonic vision of virtuality. In contrast, a Baudrillardian perspective suggests that virtual reality is "*artificial* reality – all you can do [in it] is lie" (Cadigan 77) because its signs are their "own pure simulacrum." In the context of cyberpunk, Baudrillard's simulative and Plato's idealistic theories of signification represent two opposing conceptions of virtual reality: it is a symbolic world that is either "all lies" or "all truth" (Cadigan 168).

This division between Baudrillardian and Platonic perspectives of virtual reality – signs as either pure simulacra or reflections of the really real – mirrors a similar division between Baudrillardian and Derridean interpretations of nuclear technologies. Baudrillard argues that nuclear weapons are the "apotheosis of simulation" (32); rendered impotent by their own excessive power, they serve only as signs of themselves. This view directly opposes Derrida's claim that the nuclear referent is the only possible true referent – it is the "absolute referent, the horizon and the condition of all the others" (28) – and nuclear apocalypse is a revelation of truth, a final alignment of sign and referent. Baudrillard's theory makes it clear that there is an analogous critical debate surrounding virtual worlds and nuclear weapons: whether the technologies are vehicles for truth or simulation.

Derrida's argument that total nuclear war is a literary and linguistic phenomenon is based on more than the literal meaning of apocalypse as revelation;[12] he also suggests that the imagined apocalypse is the end and, therefore, the only possible subject of all literature, mirroring in inverse the postmodernist idea that metafiction, or narratives about the creation of artificial

[12] From the Greek "apo-calypto: the emergence of what is hidden (in the secret cave of Calypso) out of the darkness into the light – the end as revelation of some essential truth" (Klein 79).

worlds, may always be about the writing process itself. Both *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* seem to agree with Derrida that (for now) nuclear apocalypse belongs to the realm of the imaginary, as both texts mix artistic and apocalyptic imagery and hint that nuclear themes raise issues of mimesis and representation. However, Derrida also suggests that the moment the nuclear referent becomes real, it will coincide with the loss of the archive:[13] the nuclear referent is both imaginary and idealistically true (a revelation) because there will never be a sign to represent it other than the event itself.[14] Therefore, the unrepresentable nuclear referent is also the "only 'subject' of all possible literature, of all possible criticism" (Derrida 28). From this perspective – the depiction of a cultural archive and an apocalyptic threat to that archive – *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea in an Empty Cup* look toward the nuclear apocalypse as the end, even the telos, of all language and all literature. Nuclear imagery in cyberpunk, like virtual reality, may be read as metafictional.

Scholarly Context

A summary of existing scholarship on my texts and topic first requires some background on cyberpunk themes. Cyberpunk takes two anxieties that characterize Cold War-era postmodernism – a linguistic anxiety and a nuclear anxiety – and combines them into one

[13] The archive is "the collectively imagined junction of all that [is] known or knowable" (Strombeck 285). It is "the storehouse of our culture from which, if it were to survive intact, our world could be reconstructed" (McHale 162).

[14] According to Derrida, nuclear apocalypse is first and foremost a literary apocalypse: "Now what allows us perhaps to think the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive – that is, total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism.… '[L]iterature' is the name we give to the body of texts whose existence, possibility, and significance are the most radically threatened, for the first and last time, by the nuclear catastrophe. … We may henceforth assert that the historicity of literature is contemporaneous through and through, or rather structurally indissociable, from something like a nuclear *epoch*. … Literature belongs to this nuclear epoch" (26-27).

overarching existential crisis. Alan Nadel argues that postmodernism was a reaction to what he calls the "containment culture" of the Cold War. "Containment culture" refers to a grand national narrative, perpetuated by movies, TV, and other cultural artefacts or productions, "about how to be 'normal' Americans" (Nadel x). Those cultural narratives were "filled with repressed duality … [and] made personal behavior part of a global strategy at the same time as they personalized the international struggle with communism" (Nadel xi). Such narratives fostered, or even directly encouraged, a culture of secrecy, suspicion, paranoia, repression, and hypocrisy. Nadel points to J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* as a work that captures this particular moment in American culture:

> Caulfield's speech [is], like all public testimony, incapable of articulating "truth" because the contradictions in the conditions of public and private utterance have become visible in such a way as to mark all truth claims "phony." In their stead come rituals of loyalty, rituals that do not manifest truth but replace it. (80)

Whereas one view of postmodernism sees it as harboring a historically justified skepticism about the ability of language to "articulate truth" because of loyalty oaths and "rituals that do not manifest truth but replace it," cyberpunk literalizes that anxiety by building worlds out of the symbolic. Nuclear weapons and the anticipation of nuclear destruction also "have the status of postmodernist topoi" (McHale 15). When discussing the representation of the nuclear in postmodernism, critics often point to the final scene of *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, in which a "nuclear warhead [is] uncannily poised [in] the last incalculable sliver of time and space above the roof of the theater in which we, the readers of the book, presumably sit"

(McHale 159).[15] The cyberpunk generation seems to have inherited this nuclear anxiety and its sense of imminence, but without its attendant object of an actual nuclear threat. In cyberpunk fiction the nuclear warhead becomes symbolic, and is accordingly poised above the symbolic realm of cyberspace, quite literally in the case of *Snow Crash*'s Metaverse.[16] Such imagery blurs leftover Cold War anxieties, linguistic and nuclear, into one overarching crisis: a nuclear threat directed at language itself.

While there is a wealth of criticism on *Neuromancer*, and much of it is focused on the novel's representation of global capitalism and the hyperreal, few scholars address what would seem to be a natural element of that discussion: the backstory of a war with the Soviet Union. *Neuromancer* is essentially a high-tech heist story, centering around a down-on-his-luck hacker who gets recruited to a team with an obscure objective; the scheme ultimately turns out to be concocted by an Artificial Intelligence (AI) vying for its own cognitive freedom. Out of all the scholarship on the novel, of particular interest here are the readings that identify "*Neuromancer* [as] the representative text for the cyberpunk genre" (Fair 92).[17] Hayles' analysis of cyberspace as a disembodying medium is also helpful, as she shows how the novel exemplifies a typical, humanist attitude towards virtuality in cybernetic literatures.[18] Much of the criticism on

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[15] See David Robson (1995) for a reading of this scene alongside Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now."
[16] In a scene that seems to spoof the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a nuclear warhead is released over an amphitheatre in the Metaverse near the end of *Snow Crash*. The homage implies that readers are the audience in Pynchon's theater as well as the residents of the Metaverse. Considering Facebook's recent adoption of the Metaverse brand name, *Snow Crash*'s indication that we would all be its residents turns out to be more factually accurate than could have been predicted.
[17] See also: "*Neuromancer* (1984), the novel that … sparked the cyberpunk movement" (Hayles 35-36); "William Gibson's seminal cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*" (Strombeck 275); and, Murphy's point about "the tendency to equate cyberpunk as synonymous with Gibson" (157n1).
[18] Hayles explains that "the locus of the liberal humanist subject lies in the mind, not the body" and posthumanism "shares with its predecessor an emphasis on cognition rather than embodiment. William Gibson makes the point vividly in *Neuromancer* when the narrator characterizes the posthuman body as

Neuromancer concentrates on the link between cyberspace and the hyperreal, in part because the "[l]ines of light" (Gibson 69) that represent (typically corporate) data exchange in the matrix serve as a cognitive mapping of global capitalism.[19] Given the critical interest in the novel's representation of global capitalism, it is surprising that critics rarely relate the topic to what Gibson calls (in a 2004 Introduction to the book) his "failure to have quietly collapsed the Soviet Union and swept the rubble offstage when nobody was looking" (ix). Although, as he notes, he "had already done it to the United States, which cannot be proven to exist in the world of *Neuromancer*" (ix). Even though the fictional world is dominated by global capitalism, the Soviet Union still exists, while the United States has mysteriously vanished. A vaguely outlined war with the Soviets serves as an origin story for both Armitage (the character who recruits the hacker Case, and is secretly under the control of an AI) and cyberspace itself (Gibson 69, 264); the war propels the entire narrative forward. Finally, when the eponymous AI, Neuromancer, drags Case into the matrix at the end of the novel, the simulated setting it creates appears to be a nuclear bunker (Gibson 308). The futuristic narrative of *Neuromancer* is still playing out the aftermath of the Cold War, and is shot through with its anxieties, both economic and nuclear.

'data made flesh.'… [It] constructs embodiment as the instantiation of thought/information" (5). See also Hayles (35-39) for a more in-depth reading of Case's rejection of the body and reification of information.

[19] Tony Myers argues that Gibson's "[l]ines of light" (69) represent "'unthinkable complexity'" and that cyberspace "is a response to what Frederic Jameson has called the 'incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network'" (887). Similarly, David Brande describes cyberspace as "Gibson's fantastical geography of postnational capitalism" (535). Gomel argues that the "space of cyberpunk is unbounded, fractal and self-similar" and "the topolog[y] of cyberspace precisely replicate[s] the topology of post-industrial, post-nation-state global political domain" (5-6). Mojca Krevel likewise interprets cyberpunk through the lens of hyperreality, but Krevel focuses on the mind-body split and its impact on identity rather than capitalism or globalization: cyberpunk corresponds to "concepts of hyperreality and fractal subjects as co-existing potential configurations of mediated data that are actualized through the act of observation" (10).

Criticism of *Snow Crash* – after its inevitable comparisons to *Neuromancer*[20] – tends to focus on the link the novel makes between language and consciousness, free will, and agency;[21] what is lacking in such criticism, however, is any sustained connection between the text's prominent thematic concern with language, and its abundant references to nuclear weapons. *Snow Crash* follows a similar fast-paced adventure-style narrative as *Neuromancer*, with a protagonist who lives on the periphery of real-world society, but exhibits a great degree of agency and control in the virtual world.[22] The driving plot device of the novel, a linguistic virus that can infect both humans and computers, sets up the thematic centrality of language. Many critics point out how language shapes consciousness in the novel's fictionalized history, as those infected by the Snow Crash code-virus share a programmable hive-mind. Lisa Swanstrom, for example, argues that "*Snow Crash* is a novel primarily about the logic of confinement and fragmentation" (56), and it suggests that the fragmentation (divergence) of human languages allows for "an encapsulated mind … conscious thought, and thus individual identity" (71). Jonathan Lewis similarly argues, "Stephenson continually works to suggest that … productive cognition comes through language and speech" (57), and that "cognition and free will [are] mutually constitutive" (57). Kelly Wisecup notes how code literacy is related to the class structure in the novel. The literate are "civilized survivors" (Wisecup 857) who can resist the linguistic virus, while those who are susceptible to infection (mind control) are diseased:

[20] See for example: Porush (537-539), Wisecup (875), Kelly (71-73), Swanstrom (54, 56), and Heuser (180-82, 185-88).
[21] See for example: Wisecup (2008), Swanstrom (2010), Lewis (2017), and Kelly (2018).
[22] Swanstrom points out that "[a]s in other works in which the hacker enjoys prominent status, such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*,… in *Snow Crash* the role of the hacker is privileged" (56-57).

"culturally dominant humans are defined against the infected" (Wisecup 857).[23] Nicholas M. Kelly similarly points out that in *Snow Crash* the "code-literate are able to unilaterally dictate the fates of those who have 'abdicated' the true path of communication" (80). While Swanstrom and Lewis focus on how language relates to consciousness in the novel, and Wisecup and Kelly outline the link between language and social power, in both cases the critical interest is in the relationship between language and agency or free will (self-determination).[24] Such robust critical commentary still largely avoids the question of why, in a novel so clearly centered on linguistic concerns, nuclear imagery pops up with such frequency. *Snow Crash* explicitly jams the two themes together in its use of the term "[i]nfocalypse" (Stephenson 69) and the climactic nuclear attack on the Metaverse. While I draw from existing theories when discussing language and virtuality, or language and autonomy, my analysis of the relationship between language and nuclear motifs in the novel addresses a critical gap in the scholarship.

Tea from an Empty Cup has not received as much critical attention as either *Neuromancer* or *Snow Crash*, or as some of Cadigan's other works, though it explores themes common to these other works. Particularly relevant to my reading of the novel are the relationships between the body and virtual reality and between the body and identity in Cadigan's work. *Tea* is structured as a detective story, beginning with the mysterious deaths of eight people in locked and isolated AR booths, at the same moment as their virtual avatars were murdered by an unknown invasive

[23] Wisecup's reading of a literacy-based class structure in *Snow Crash*, as well as Susan Leong's reading of the novel's division of America into "franchise nations" (855), further illustrate cyberpunk's interest in representing late-stage capitalism.

[24] For additional readings of language themes in *Snow Crash*, see Kelly's point that the Metaverse uses facial recognition technology to replicate expressions, suggesting that even the body is reducible to language (75), as well as Porush's argument that language in *Snow Crash* could serve as the mediating factor in the long-awaited brain-computer interface that would fulfill all our cyborg dreams, but the novel ultimately rejects such a transcendent vision (540).

force. As Heuser says of Cadigan's 1992 novel, *Fools*, the "question of which body [characters] acknowledge as their own or as other puts an extra spin on the 'whodunit' plot structure" (22) of the classic locked room murder mystery. The narrative follows two protagonists with analogous storylines: Detective Konstantin's murder investigation, and Yuki's search for her friend Tom, who, the novel initially implies, may be one of the murder victims. Notably, both Yuki and Konstantin adopt Tom's appearance for their respective manhunts in AR: Yuki takes on his "real" life appearance, while Konstantin imitates his avatar, Shantih Love (complete with the cut throat) (Cadigan 101), effectively blurring the lines between the separate identities of the story's main characters.[25] The complex relationships between the body, the avatar, and a character's sense of self in Cadigan's novels work to break down "a hidden assumption [of cyberpunk]: that all 'personal' information can be abstracted as data or merchandise, which is independent of its material storage device" (Heuser 22). Critics often point to Cadigan's representation of a definitively embodied experience of cyberspace as a direct contrast to Gibson's disembodied representation.[26] David Seed, for example, points out that "Cadigan constantly demonstrates a dependence of the mind on the body and its wider technosocial environment" (74). Because the mind is interconnected with the body and the environment in *Tea*, rather than separate from the "meat" (Gibson 7) and waste of the material world, "it becomes increasingly difficult to conceive of a single stable and authentic self" (Seed 75). Agency and selfhood are shaped by the body and

[25] In addition to the ambiguous lines of identity in *Tea*, in the context of AR, identity is actually transferrable (a commodity), leading to some confusion over who was actually murdered: "'Identity transferred on-line.' '*What identity*? ... His name and appearance or his on-line character?' 'One is the same as the other, on-line'" (Cadigan 104).

[26] Heuser argues that "[u]nlike the body which Case regards as meat in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, constantly decaying and hindering the full enjoyment of cyberspace, the bodies of Cadigan's characters are vital to their sense of identity, the lack of which is perceived as a loss" (Heuser 22). Seed similarly notes that "Cadigan's treatment of [virtual reality] technology marks one of the differences between her novels and those of the leading initial practitioner in cyberpunk, William Gibson" (71).

vice versa. In this way, "Cadigan dramatizes a systemic crisis of agency that results from technological incursions on the body" (Seed 87). Just as *Tea* incorporates the body in virtual reality, it is also the only novel of the three to portray AR itself as a post-apocalyptic space, rather than the framing world. Neither the body nor the wasted setting can be transcended through virtuality. *Tea from an Empty Cup*, then, is characterized by the inclusion of cyberpunk's rejected and debased Other:[27] the body (materiality), with all its attendant vulnerabilities to manipulation and ruination.

Chapter Outline

The chapter to follow, "The Paradox of Nuclear Fiction: How Nuclear Imagery Symbolizes the A-Symbolic and the Unrepresentable," begins by asking why (and how) the futuristic worlds in *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea from an Empty Cup* each trace their history to the Cold War and the nuclear age. Each novel uses a different rhetorical strategy to suggest that the Cold War serves as a kind of origin story: *Neuromancer*, for example, represents the Cold War and nuclear apocalypse in allegorical terms; *Snow Crash* illustrates persistent nuclear anxieties and tensions as the repressed nuclear uncanny; and, *Tea* represents its nuclear history by displacing it, as if the untold nuclear narrative is the lost referent that frames the rest of the story. After establishing the nuclear backstory in each novel, the chapter addresses some follow-up questions: why would virtual reality narratives consistently feature nuclear imagery? What is the thematic connection between the virtual and the nuclear? The novels tie nuclear technology to artistic imagery and figurative language, while associating virtual reality with

[27] Graham J. Murphy argues that *Tea*'s interest in a Japanese diaspora also addresses another "blind-spot in the thematic focus of science fiction; namely, the concept of nation" (145). As Yuki asks, "Am I *not* Japanese just because the physical islands were destroyed?" (Cadigan 219). *Tea* explores the relationship between the body (physicality), identity, and the "[n]otion of [n]ation" (Murphy 145).

mathematics and literal language. I suggest that, together, nuclear and virtual themes in cyberpunk form a discourse on the nature and problems of representation.

Chapter Three, "Opposing Views on Virtual Reality: Idealism or Pure Simulacrum," asks what theory of signification undergirds each novel's representation of virtual reality, and how does the novel's own use of language and symbolism support or critique its espoused theory? The chapter finds that each novel's portrayal of virtual reality loosely aligns with either a Platonic or Baudrillardian view of signification. *Neuromancer*'s distinction between information and materiality, its suggestion that mathematical sign systems come closest to true reference, and its use of metaphor as representational interference, all work to foster the idea that cyberspace is the ideal world of Forms. *Snow Crash* similarly subscribes to the Platonic view of virtuality, but to quite a different effect. *Snow Crash* suggests that a world built on binary code is necessarily true because binary code is a performative language, as per J.L. Austin's speech-act theory: sign and referent are the same when the thing signified is also symbolic.[28] However, by tying literal language to machines, and figurative language to human agency and consciousness, Stephenson's novel illustrates a world in which idealism – an imaginary world of perfect reference and irreproachable rationalism – is dystopian rather than utopian. In contrast, *Tea from an Empty Cup* does not begin with the assumption that signs are imperfect reflections of an underlying truth; rather, it insists that signs reference only themselves. *Tea*'s use of wordplay and absurdist imagery are part of its Baudrillardian approach to virtual reality; the signs that make up AR have no relation to their original referents. I return to this chapter's interest in the

[28] As in a marriage ceremony (Austin 1290), the signing of a contract (1295), or even the simple statement "I apologize" (1291), to name a few examples. The comparison between Austin's theory of performative utterances and *Snow Crash*'s treatment of computer code comes from Hayles' *How we Became Posthuman*.

relationship between signs and truth in cyberpunk in the final chapter, which explores what it means to be "post-apocalyptic."

Building on the ideas that nuclear and virtual motifs complement one another and that virtual motifs relate to linguistic themes, the fourth chapter, "*Post*-Apocalypticism: Revelation or Simulation," asks how each novel's depiction of nuclear apocalypse or nuclear post-apocalypse corresponds with an underlying theory of signification. I argue that each text's representation of apocalypse conforms to either a Derridean reading – the apocalypse as revelation – or to an idea suggested by a Baudrillardian reading, that the age of simulacra is literally post-revelation – past the possibility of revealing truth in signs. A reading of the nuclear referent as either absolute truth or pure simulacrum shows how, in a final analysis, cyberpunk's virtual and nuclear themes complement each other's interest in symbolic representation. Accordingly, the chapter also addresses Derrida's claim that a true nuclear apocalypse would be a linguistic event, so all literature and criticism revolves around the apocalypse as an absent center.[29] Drawing on this point, I argue that if all literature anticipates a nuclear apocalypse as the moment of its own culmination and loss, then cyberpunk's thematic engagement with nuclear representation hints that it is self-consciously obsessed with the nuclear event as its own end. My conclusion compares Derrida's notion of nuclear apocalypse as a literary apocalypse to McHale's point that novels about artificial and symbolic worlds can always be read as a protracted metaphor for the creative writing process. Building on these two ideas, I suggest that since the cyberpunk novels studied here each place virtual themes (representing the creation of worlds through language and

[29] Nuclear apocalypse is a linguistic event insofar as it would entail the destruction of the archive, the literary sum total of human civilization (Derrida 26-28).

signs) in a dialogue with nuclear themes (representing the destruction of literature and symbolism), each may be read as a story of the life cycle of fiction.

Chapter Two

The Paradox of Nuclear Fiction:

How Nuclear Imagery Symbolizes the A-Symbolic and the Unrepresentable

Although cyberpunk is nominally futuristic, it forsakes the idea that the future will be fundamentally different from the past, as it remains mired in the historical context of its production. While it is not always obvious, *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea from an Empty Cup* each depict the aftermath of the Cold War, a fictionalized continuation of nuclear history. Nuclear themes in cyberpunk represent the absolute limit of imagination; total nuclear war is the fantastic, unsignifiable event that the literary mode can never hope to capture. Therefore, cyberpunk suggests that it is impossible to imagine a future beyond the nuclear era because the anticipated nuclear event marks the limit of both the future and the imagination. Nuclear imagery's relevance to questions of representation ties it directly to cyberpunk's most prominent motif: virtual reality. Thematically, the nuclear issue is the dark side of cyberspace, as virtual and nuclear imagery touch on a multitude of corresponding subjects: disembodied transcendence and physical ruination; literal language and figurative language; and, mathematics and art. Virtual and nuclear themes are complementary in their opposition; they are consistently paired together as two sides of the same conversation. In particular, the two themes work together to create a discourse on the nature of language and representation. By entrenching its futuristic narratives in a nuclear history, cyberpunk suggests that the explicit project of virtual reality – to translate reality into a system of signs – is bound by virtuality's inveterate Other: the unimaginable and unsignifiable nuclear event. This chapter begins by demonstrating how each novel represents its

nuclear history, then moves on to a discussion of how nuclear themes relate to the problems of signification and representation.

Nuclear Allegories, Repression, and Displacement: The Persistence of Nuclear History in Cyberpunk's Projected Futures

As I have suggested, the Cold War and the nuclear era serve as a backstory in each of the three novels, one that frames and structures the rest of the narrative, and each text has its own rhetorical strategy for representing its nuclear history. The consistent Cold War origin story in cyberpunk may serve as an acknowledgement of the real-world shared history of virtual and nuclear technologies; *Neuromancer* in particular suggests that cyberspace was born of a nuclear incentive. More significantly for my purposes, however, *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea from an Empty Cup* each use allegory, repression, and displacement, respectively, to illustrate how the nuclear age continues to haunt their fictionalized futures. The endurance of the nuclear issue and Cold War fallout in cyberpunk futures suggests that a *post*-nuclear world may be unimaginable.

Cyberpunk's characteristic use of nuclear imagery in virtual settings draws on a historical precedent for linking the two technologies: the first virtual worlds were developed to play out nuclear strategies. Early computerized simulations were often structured as games because of the link between nuclear strategy and game theory – a theory that predicts rational moves and countermoves in a competition (such as the Cold War) (Grausam, Erickson 386). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the first virtual games "originated in the U.S. military-industrial complex, the nuclear-armed core of capital's global domination, to which they remain umbilically connected" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter xxix). Virtual worlds were created in military-funded

computer labs, as "unofficial, semiclandestine, or off-the-cuff projects" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 8); such transgressions were "at least tolerated because that was the way to discover new uses and options" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 8). The history of virtual games is thus shaped by a militaristic ideology on the one hand, and a culture of transgression and creativity on the other. Since cyberspace is a direct descendent of arcade games (Gibson 69), *Neuromancer* draws on both the Cold War history of gaming and cybernetics, and the punk attitude of disruption and defiance that turns games into play, to create cyberpunk.[30]

Neuromancer explicitly mimics the Cold War history of virtuality and positions the Cold War as a backstory for both cyberspace and the narrative. The reader first learns the history of cyberspace from a children's television program:

> "The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games … in early graphics programs and military experimentation with cranial jacks." On the Sony, a two-dimensional space war faded behind a forest of mathematically generated ferns, demonstrating the spacial possibilities of logarithmic spirals; cold blue military footage burned through, lab animals wired into test systems, helmets feeding into fire control circuits of tanks and war planes. (69)

Cyberspace, like real world virtual technologies, was born at the intersection between arcade games and the military-industrial complex. The term "cold" in the above excerpt pointedly suggests that the "space war" is the Cold War, and seems to refer equally to the mathematics and

[30] See Heuser (29-33, 37-42) for a reading of the influence of the punk genre on cyberpunk, and *Neuromancer* in particular. "Punk was not a musical genre; it was a moment in time that took shape as a language anticipating its own destruction, and thus sometimes seeking it" (Marcus qtd. in Heuser 29). A reading of punk as "a language anticipating its own destruction" and "sometimes seeking it" helps to explain cyber*punk*'s anticipation of the nuclear apocalypse as a literary apocalypse, and its treatment of the nuclear referent as the death drive of language.

logic of the matrix, and the militaristic strategies and experiments that ironically "burn through" it. The connection between "cold" imagery, cyberspace, and the military persists throughout the novel suggesting that coldness is always a reference to the Cold War, and that cyberspace continues to be shaped by its history.[31] Just as cyberspace has its origins in a war with the Soviet Union, so too do hackers like Case.[32] As Armitage tells Case,

> We invented you in Siberia. … You're a console cowboy. The prototypes of the programs you use to crack industrial banks were developed for Screaming Fist. For the assault on the Kirensk computer nexus. … We were running a virus called Mole. The Mole series was the first generation of real intrusion programs. (37-38)

Through terms like "invented," "prototypes," and "first generation," the passage insists that the events in Siberia kickstarted the events of the story. Furthermore, there are direct references to a war with the Soviet Union scattered throughout the novel, suggesting that the Siberian incident is a fictionalized version of the Cold War: "Russian military" (4); "Sov gunship" (48); Russian camp (139).[33] By positioning the war as the beginning of the narrative, *Neuromancer* hints that the end of the novel represents the end of the war, in the form of a nuclear climax.

If cold imagery is always a reference to the Cold War, then not only is the Cold War still playing out in the virtual world it inspired, but the seemingly ironic recurring juxtaposition of

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[31] Another example is that the viral defense programs that hackers hack through are called "ice," and all ice comes from the military (Gibson 125).

[32] Notably, even the author's origin story is rooted in the nuclear age: Gibson's father worked on the Manhattan project (Schwenger 279).

[33] The novel presents a fictionalized retelling of the Cold War, since the Soviet Union survives and the United States does not (Gibson ix): "The war? What's there to know? Lasted three weeks.… Great bloody postwar political football, that was… great scandal. Wasted a fair bit of patriotic young flesh in order to test some new technology. They knew about the Russians' defenses, it came out later. … Sent these fellows in regardless, just to see" (47). The "war ended nine days" (109) after Corto's failed assault on Kirensk.

"cold" and "burning" imagery corresponds to the Cold War and nuclear weapons. No character better represents the endurance of the Cold War in the novel than Armitage, the one who recruits Case to a heist team and initiates the events of the narrative. He was once a military officer named Corto who participated in an infamous assault on the Soviet Union – the attack that serves as the genesis of everything else in the novel. The assault goes wrong, and Corto's ship ends up launching him and his team "high above a frozen steppe" and Corto "fell out of a Siberian sky. Fell and kept falling…" (Gibson 108; ellipsis in source). Again, the novel emphasizes the relationship by pairing language of cold with militaristic imagery; and the ellipsis in this passage projects the image of a cold fall (or Cold War fallout) indefinitely into the future. When Corto's madness finally destroys the mask of Armitage, Case asks himself, "But where had Corto *been* those years? Falling, burned and blinded, out of a Siberian sky" (253). The image of a burning Corto perpetually falling through a frozen Siberian sky suggests that the original war never ended; the entire narrative depicts a direct continuation of that "cold" Soviet war. Furthermore, Corto's second death scene is a recreation of his first; he launches himself into space in an escape pod, much as a missile is launched from a ship. Case imagines "the lifeboat jolting free, blown clear by explosive bolts. … And now Corto-Armitage was dead, a small frozen moon for Freeside" (260, 264). The recurrence of "frozen" imagery in his two death scenes points to the persistence of Cold War history in the novel; likewise, the fact that both deaths are marked by the juxtaposed images of freezing and burning (explosion), suggests that the Cold War goes hand-in-hand with a nuclear threat.

If "cold" and "frozen" imagery indicate an unending Cold War, then the AI, Wintermute, is an allegorical embodiment of the Cold War, as it turns out to be the root cause of such

historical stuck-ness. First, and most obviously, is the entity's name: "Wintermute. Cold and silence" (Gibson 349). Moreover, Wintermute is the one secretly controlling the Armitage façade while Corto remains trapped in continuous frozen torment. Wintermute is the catalyst for the events of the narrative, just as the war is its inception. The AI actively duplicates the narrative's history in its recreation of Corto-Armitage's death: "Wintermute's rendition of the final minute of Screaming Fist" manifests as "a confused babble, roaring static, harmonics howling down the years from Screaming Fist. Fragments of Russian, and then a stranger's voice. … 'We are down, repeat'" (260).[34] The repetition of death and history contained in the phrase "We are down, repeat" both perpetuates the Cold War into the future, and suggests that Wintermute, the vehicle for such repetition, contains and personifies the war. And if Wintermute represents the Cold War (as its ties to both the fictional Soviet war and "cold" imagery imply), then its goal to attain consciousness by merging with the other AI, Neuromancer, is an apocalyptic gesture. The Cold War rushes toward a nuclear endpoint.

Just as Wintermute is associated with "cold" and militaristic imagery, Neuromancer is tied to nuclear and apocalyptic imagery; the two AIs are intertwined allegories for the Cold War and a nuclear apocalypse. As I have noted, when Case finally meets the eponymous AI, the virtual world it creates for him resembles a coast-side nuclear bunker, complete with dehydrated rations (308, 310). It introduces itself as "Neuromancer. … The lane to the land of the dead. … I call up the dead. But no … I *am* the dead, and their land" (319-20).[35] Furthermore, the AI mimics

[34] If this passage suggests that the entire narrative is a reproduction of its own Cold War history, it likewise suggests that the spectre of "babble," "static," "fragments," and "a stranger's voice" continues to haunt the idealistic dream of pure reference, since the war is also the origin of cyberspace.

[35] This passage in particular hints that the Neuromancer scene mirrors the "Egyptian Book of the Dead, [in which] the possibly last man comes before the Judge of the Underworld, and pleads that the extinction of his species is a matter for regret" (Russell 15). Insofar as the birth of fully conscious AI could potentially

a human appearance for its conversations with Case, and the eyes it chooses are those of Riviera (337-38), a character born of a radioactive environment (128), with a talent for projecting hallucinations of violence and the grotesque. In other words, Neuromancer adopts a nuclear gaze, a perspective tinged by apocalypticism. Finally, critics point out that the narrative pace abruptly slows during this virtual beach scene, indicating a kind of post-apocalyptic timelessness.[36] Thus, the AI's world is a post-apocalyptic (specifically, post-nuclear) space.[37] Neuromancer represents a scorching (nuclear) end to Wintermute's frozen war.[38] In this way, the novel's imagery depicts the Cold War as a historical moment forever frozen in time: stuck between the initiation and culmination of a nuclear teleology. Further, by representing its two AIs in allegorical terms (as

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lead to the end of humanity's dominance, it represents an apocalyptic moment (in both senses – an extinction and a revelation).

[36] As Heuser notes, the "action/adventure story is dominated by alternating episodes of extremely rapid movement. These 'runs' in the matrix are juxtaposed with moments of absolute stasis, the 'flatline' episodes during which the hero experiences virtual death. The action comes to a terrifying halt (121-22). Similarly, Andrew Strombeck points out that for "most of the novel, the reader is propelled through the plot with the same giddy momentum that Case experiences in cyberspace. The plot is a 'rush' akin to the dizzying experience of 'jacking in.' But when Case [wakes up on Neuromancer's virtual] beach, this rush abruptly halts. … [T]he beach scene entails a moment when the narrative genuinely stops. … [R]eaders are wrenched out of the plot's rapid movement and into dead space" (284). Both critics' association of the lapse in narrative pace with death recalls Derrida's point that nuclear armament and strategy are essentially a speed race: "*At the beginning there will have been speed*. [Nuclear] stakes appear in the experience of a race, or more precisely of a *competition*, a rivalry between two rates of speed. It's what we call … a *speed race*. [N]o single instant, no atom of our life (of our relation to the world and to being) is not marked today, directly or indirectly, by that speed race … the war of (over, for) speed" (20). *Neuromancer*'s narrative tempo supports the idea that the Cold War (Wintermute's schemes and actions) represents a speed race towards post-apocalyptic timelessness: the novel frames the nuclear referent as its own death drive.

[37] While there is some overlap between the terms "apocalyptic" and "post-apocalyptic," especially when it comes to imagery (heat, ruins, death, and radiation, for example), the two terms cannot be wholly conflated. Chapter Four draws out the distinction more carefully, but for now it is enough to note that "nuclear apocalypse" refers to a specific event, while "post-apocalypse" refers to what comes after that event (or after the possibility of its occurrence). Insofar as Neuromancer is an allegory for nuclear apocalypse, the AI is equally tied to the event itself and its consequences.

[38] Notably, while Wintermute's system is housed in Switzerland (Gibson 150), Neuromancer's is in Rio (319), bringing up the cold and hot contrast again.

the war and the explosion) *Neuromancer* signals that the narrative climax, the moment the two merge into one conscious entity, the first true AI, is an apocalyptic moment.

Similarly, the pages of *Snow Crash* are littered with references to nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union, suggesting that, as in *Neuromancer*, the narrative of *Snow Crash* is playing out the aftermath of the Cold War, albeit in a more explicit fashion. Not only does the novel compare the Snow Crash virus to a nuclear weapon, calling it "the atomic bomb of informational warfare" (Stephenson 200), it also implies that the strategic use of the virus is an extension of Cold War tactics: "It's a dangerous world. … Getting more dangerous all the time. So we don't want to upset the balance of terror. Just think about the Cold War" (126). The novel presents a speculative continuation of the Cold War, a futuristic world in which the United States continues to be shaped by its nuclear history. So, while America as such no longer exists – the country has been broken up into thousands of corporatized, nationalized, and militarized city-states – the novel suggests that the "true America [is] the America of atomic bombs" (191); it exists in a state of nuclear-bred fragmentation and mutual distrust. Each of these militarized suburbs even has its own miniaturized nuclear weapons called Rat Things that serve as robotic guard dogs (246-49): an image that seems to personalize and domesticate nuclear animosities as in Nadel's containment culture. The Cold War is ongoing in *Snow Crash*, as the world it represents is defined by its nuclear history and nuclear tensions.

Nuclear threats and leftovers in *Snow Crash* are uncanny. Nuclear weapons pop up everywhere in the novel.[39] Notably, most of the weapons are not novel inventions like the Rat

[39] See for example: "a nuclear-missile submarine" (Stephenson 298, 340); "that thing is a ten-megaton hydrogen bomb we scavenged from a ballistic missile. A city-buster" (298); and, "Raven's packing a torpedo warhead that he boosted from an Old Soviet nuke sub. … A nuclear torpedo. You know that

Things, but actual Soviet remnants, aligning nuclear technologies with junk and waste. The weaponry and military gear are variously described as "hijacked" (Stephenson 104), "boosted" (162), "scavenged" (298), "ex-Soviet" (104), or "old Soviet" (162); in one case, red stars are still visible on the side of a nuclear-missile submarine (340). The language here is of waste and obsolescence, but also of repurposing and recycling; it suggests that nuclear junk, and therefore nuclear anxieties, are enduring features of the futuristic landscape, both physical and political. Raven, the antagonist of the novel, is himself the ultimate Cold War leftover. A victim of the country's nuclear tests on its own marginalized citizens, he comes back to take revenge and "nuke America" (378). The novel's representation of suppressed nuclear threats that continue to resurface recalls Jessica Hurley's definition of the nuclear uncanny, a concept that:

> gets at the root definition of the uncanny as *Unheimliche*, or the unhomely, for the invisibility of radiation can make any space seem otherworldly, strange, and even dangerous. Indeed, what could be more "unhomely" than the introduction of nuclear materials into one's everyday environment or body. … [T]he nuclear is uncanny … because it marks the continued existence of that which has been incompletely repressed, suppressed, or oppressed. ("Nuclear Uncanny" 96-97)

Snow Crash articulates the nuclear uncanny both in its representation of the "true America, the America of atomic bombs" (Stephenson 191) as "unhomely" in its fragmentation, and in its depiction of Raven as a symptom of repressed nuclear anxiety and guilt. Written at the end of the Cold War, *Snow Crash* suggests that the true nuclear fallout is that it will continue to play out long after the collapse of warring nations.

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funny-looking sidecar that Raven has on his Harley? Well, it's a hydrogen bomb, man. Armed and ready" (162-63).

In contrast with *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*, which tend to make more or less direct references to the Cold War and nuclear weapons, *Tea from an Empty Cup* represents the (possibly nuclear) apocalypse by displacing it. While it is clear in the novel that Japan no longer exists, references to its actual destruction are never openly named as a nuclear holocaust. The novel makes fleeting references to "earthquakes" (Cadigan 64) and "fires" (241), but it is not clear whether these disasters are even part of the same story. At the end of the novel, however, Body Sativa (the hero's guide character, who may also be a simulation of her dead grandmother) tells Yuki that it is ridiculous to think "that the Japanese would *want* a post-Apocalyptic city open only to us. We've had that, thank you" (220). Given that the loss of Japan was apocalyptic, entailed earthquakes and fire, and was at some point localized to city-space, the passage seems to be a reference to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This kind of representation of the nuclear event through non-representation is in keeping with the language of unspeakability that surrounds nuclear criticism. Martin Amis, for example, says of nuclear war that "the unthinkable is not thinkable, not by human beings, because the eventuality it posits is one in which all human contexts would have already vanished" (8).[40] Hurley similarly argues that the nuclear and its waste are unknowable: "[The nuclear represents] an acknowledgment of the impossibility of full and definitive knowledge" ("Infrastructure" 108). In terms of nuclear fiction, McHale describes how "postmodernist writing has endeavoured to represent the unrepresentable scene of nuclear apocalypse. [But] how do we go about representing what seems to lie beyond the scope of our

[40] See also: "the unthinkable nuclear war" (Blackmore 3); "the unthinkable prospect of total nuclear war. [T]hinking the unthinkable … is probably unavoidable" (Klein 79); and, Hannah Arendt's critique of 1970s defense doctrine: "The trouble is not that they are cold-blooded enough to 'think the unthinkable,' but that they do not *think*" (qtd. in Grausam 527).

forms of representation? How do we express the inexpressible?" (159-60).[41] Nuclear literature is filled with "un" words, or negation, "as if language itself were refusing to cooperate with such notions" (Amis 4). Therefore, like some of its postmodernist predecessors, *Tea*'s strategy for representing nuclear apocalypse is to displace it.[42] The novel's nuclear history is assumed but unspoken by its characters. But the fact that the story of Japan's destruction remains largely untold,

> does not make it any less important to the novel's structure. … On the contrary, it is out on the margins that nuclear waste is able to become the frame – the part of the narrative that establishes the conditions of possibility for the narratives it contains and whose meaning is in turn reframed by those narratives. (Hurley, "Impossible Futures" 775)

The apocalyptic history of Japan is so absent in *Tea* that it appears as a lacuna, a gap in representation, a lost original event with no relation to the word "Apocalypse," which has been commodified, even brand name-ized in its capitalization.[43] Yet, it is the absent apocalyptic referent that frames and structures the rest of the narrative. The novel ultimately centers around its own missing pieces, the nuclear story it cannot possibly tell.

Although the Japanese apocalypse is unrepresented and unrepresentable, at the same time, AR revolves around an obsession with representing and recreating it. For starters, the novel

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[41] Nadel similarly points out that "knowing the unknowable of nuclear destruction has become an informing narrative in some postmodern fiction" (36).

[42] As McHale explains, "Precedents show that realistic representations of nuclear apocalypse … can only be inadequate. Consequently, postmodernist fiction has developed a range of strategies for *displacing* nuclear apocalypse" (160).

[43] AR modules have names like "post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty" and "post-Apocalyptic Ellay." Although the "post" part of the title is not capitalized, "Apocalyptic" is, suggesting that "Apocalypse" here is a proper noun, like the distorted city names. The "Apocalyptic" is the name of what AR is selling: the apocalypse as product.

is structured as a detective story, and as Hurley points out, detective fiction is a fitting space for nuclear themes, because the genre always deals with an "attempt to know" the unknown, and to "make sense of a chaotic world" ("Nuclear Uncanny" 97n6). Detective Konstantin's object of investigation ends up being the post-apocalyptic space of AR itself. As an AR novice, Konstantin provides an outsider's perspective on the technology, remarking that her unidentified murder victim

> had had his choice of places to go – other countries, other worlds, even other universes, à la the legendary exhortation of e.e. cummings. … But the kid's idea of a hell of a good universe next door had been a glitzed-out, gritted-up, blasted and blistered post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty. It wasn't a singular sentiment – post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty was topping the hitline for the thirteenth week in a row, with post-Apocalyptic Ellay … holding steady at two. (Cadigan 35)

This passage indicates that post-apocalyptic settings are not the only virtual world options, but they are by far the most popular; and the rumored, exclusive, "[p]ost-Apocalyptic Tokyo [is] the hottest thing yet" (217). AR embodies both a desire to represent apocalypse (particularly the Japanese apocalypse since post-Apocalyptic Tokyo has its own mythos), and a failure to represent it, since the post-apocalyptic signifiers, "blasted and blistered," are also "glitzed-out, gritted-up" (35), commodified and rendered spectacle. The "post-Apocalyptic" cities have no relation to their original referent – post-apocalyptic space – because their typically post-apocalyptic imagery of ruins and degradation are overlaid by "glitz" and "glitter," signs of desirability: "the gritty glitz, the glitzy grit … the sparkle and glitter of it" (96). Konstantin similarly notes that "living in a bonfire was probably the height of AR chic" (52). Living in fire,

like the one that consumed Japan, is reduced to a fashion statement because "fire" in AR has no relation to its original referent as something that burns. The obsession in AR with simulating, even re-enacting, the Japanese apocalypse, the attempt to know the (nuclear) unknown, is matched by a proliferation of signs that endlessly displace it. *Tea from an Empty Cup* illustrates the problematics of nuclear representation, but also suggests that the unrepresentable is the absent center of representation.

Nuclear Themes as the Dark Side of Virtuality: Cyberpunk's Spectre of Aestheticism

If virtual reality narratives tend to tie themselves inexorably to a nuclear history and a perpetual nuclear future, the next logical question is why: what is the thematic relationship between virtual and nuclear technologies? Upon examination, nuclear and virtual motifs seem to be natural complements to one another, a yin and yang of sorts, particularly when it comes to themes of representation. Whereas cyberpunk often associates virtuality with rationalism and literality, for example, it associates nuclear imagery with art and metaphor. In other words, the nuclear referent is that which corrupts or interferes with the idealistic project of virtuality; the nuclear demarcates the absolute limits of prediction and reference.

Virtual and nuclear themes are equally relevant to cyberpunk's interest in the relationship between word and idea, sign and referent; both themes reflect on the problematics of representation. As McHale argues (and *Tea from an Empty Cup* suggests), nuclear "apocalypse, whatever else it may be, is also a representational problem" (160). Critics often point out that nuclear science and strategy inherently pose "what we might venture to call, at the risk of not being seriously understood, a literary problem" (Klein 82), because the nuclear referent, an all-out nuclear apocalypse, exists only in the realm of the fantastic, the speculative, and the

imaginary.[44] In "No Apocalypse," Derrida argues provocatively that the "essential feature [of nuclear war] is that of being *fabulously textual*, through and through" (23). Total nuclear war is "fabulously textual" insofar as it is "a fable … a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction … a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions" (Derrida 23). It is "fabulously textual"

> to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it. [N]uclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event. … The terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (past or present) of a discourse or a text. (Derrida 23)

If nuclear apocalypse is imaginary and "textual" – "the signified referent, never the real referent" – it naturally belongs to the domain of art and literature, particularly those speculative literary genres that actively reflect on the nature and construction of symbolic worlds. While cyberpunk fiction tends to associate virtual reality with mathematics (logic, and exact specification), nuclear weapons, "supposedly the ultimate achievement of Western rationalism" (Hurley, "Nuclear Uncanny" 97), are ironically more likely to be associated with art, imagination, and metaphor.

[44] See for examples: Daniel Grausam on nuclear strategy: "War-gaming has always been a part of military strategy, but what distinguished this new imagination of war-gaming was precisely the imagination. One couldn't, after all, stage live-fire exercises with nuclear weapons against a nuclear-armed opponent, and the fact that there would be no time in which to develop counter-weapons to the enemy's new weapons meant that one had to imagine possibilities years into the future. The result, as Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi has pointed out, was an elaborate world of simulated reality that spun out multiple future possibilities" (510); and, Tracey C. Davis' comparison of large-scale nuclear preparations to stage performance: nuclear rehearsals "could not succeed in mirroring an unprecedented future: it is a variant on the classic mimetic failure" of drama (86); as well as Klein's argument that literature is essential to understanding the nuclear issue (101).

Virtual and nuclear motifs in *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* form a discourse on representation and signification: idealism versus aestheticism. As noted above, Neuromancer's eyes are a replication of Riviera's, and the novel associates both characters with nuclear imagery. Neuromancer imitates Riviera's eyes not because it needs a human mask in order to speak to Case (in contrast with Wintermute, who does), but "[b]ecause they are beautiful. … Riviera will survive only as these eyes" (Gibson 337-38). Just as this passage ties Neuromancer (and the nuclear) to the aesthetic, Cynthia Davidson points out that Neuromancer/Riviera's eyes are a symbol of "artistic vision" (196) owing to Riviera's talent for "dreaming real" (Gibson 182), projecting visual hallucinations: "Neuromancer receives Riviera's 'beautiful' eyes, his power to visualize. … It is Neuromancer who values Riviera's eyes, the symbol of creative vision. … After [Riviera's death], Neuromancer is free to claim artistic vision as his own" (Davidson 196). Thus, the nuclear gaze is also the artistic gaze. If Neuromancer is an allegory for a nuclear apocalypse, then the AI's adoption of Riviera's eyes ties nuclear imagery to creativity, artistry, and beauty. The novel hints that its nuclear and virtual themes stand for figurative and mathematical representation, respectively.

Snow Crash similarly aligns nuclear motifs with the fantastic and the artistic. For example, while the nickname for a certain nuclear weapon in the novel is "Reason," playing on the notion that nuclear science is "the ultimate achievement of Western rationalism" (Hurley, "Nuclear Uncanny" 97), an attack with the weapon appears "as though Tinkerbell was flying back and forth … sprinkling nuclear fairy dust" (Stephenson 362). Enlightenment values of scientific progress and reason collapse into fantasy, metaphor, and magic when it comes to

representing an actual nuclear attack.[45] *Snow Crash* further ties nuclear imagery to art through the character of Vitaly Chernobyl, Hiro's roommate. Chernobyl is a progenitor of a new music genre, "Ukrainian nuclear fuzz-grunge" (22), the performance of which involves "hijacked ex-Soviet … freighters" and "expanses of reinforced concrete. … [Chernobyl and the Meltdowns] needed such environments in order to practice their art" (104). By depicting nuclear rhetoric as "art," the novel enacts Klein's assertion that nuclear representation is primarily "a literary problem" (82). Chernobyl's "nuclear fuzz-grunge" also foreshadows the climactic ending, when Raven drops a modified nuclear bomb over an amphitheatre in the Metaverse, and it manifests as

> a mile-high structure of moving two- and three-dimensional images, interlocked in space and time. It's got everything in it. Leni Riefenstahl films. The sculptures of Michelangelo and the fictional inventions of Da Vinci made real. … Scenes from a thousand classic films, flowing and merging together into a single vast complicated story. (457)

The novel represents the nuclear referent as a chaotic, all-encompassing expression of artistry and creative invention. The bomb itself is both a cultural archive and a work of art: the culmination of "a single vast complicated story." As in nuclear criticism, nuclear apocalypse in cyberpunk represents the radically unknown and unknowable, the absolute limit of signification.

[45] The Tinkerbell reference also contributes to the novel's suggestion that the nuclear represents the sticking place of both history and the imagination: the nuclear era is the time and space from which we will never grow up. Compare *Tea*'s description of post-Apocalyptic Tokyo as "Never-Never Land" (Cadigan 87).

In short, through its association with art, metaphor, and imagination, the nuclear motif represents all that interferes with idealistically true reference.[46]

Although the world of *Snow Crash* is post-apocalyptic, nuclear events are not fully representable, even in their own historicization; while virtual themes revolve around simulation and symbolic representation, nuclear apocalypse is always that which cannot possibly be represented – the "signified referent, never the real referent" (Derrida 23). On two separate occasions in *Snow Crash*, characters attempt to tell a story about a nuclear bombing. The first time, Raven describes how his people were the victims of American nuclear tests, and the novel sketches out "a fragmented history of the Aleuts, a burst here and a burst here, when Raven isn't poking squid into his mouth and the music isn't too loud" (Stephenson 366-67). The reader shares Y.T.'s point of view during this scene, so the representation of nuclear disaster is "fragmented," broken up with images of consumption and art. Similarly, while racing through the Metaverse toward the narrative climax, Raven and Hiro exchange stories about an experience their fathers shared during the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (445-48).[47] The story comes together as a dialogue, piecing together two different perspectives on an event to form a whole picture. But since both Raven and Hiro only tell half the story, and those half-stories are second-hand to begin with, the representation of a nuclear event is once again displaced and fragmented. If virtual reality in the novel symbolizes an idealistic dream of perfect signification,

[46] Since nuclear apocalyptic motifs go hand-in-hand with ruined landscapes and point to the vulnerabilities of the body, nuclear imagery in cyberpunk also connotes viscerality, in contrast with virtual reality's idealistic disembodiment. As Hayles argues, in "a world despoiled by overdevelopment, overpopulation, and time-release environmental poisons, it is comforting to think that physical forms can recover their pristine purity by being reconstituted as informational patterns in a multidimensional computer space. A cyberspace body, like a cyberspace landscape, is immune to blight and corruption" (36). In terms of both embodiment and representation, nuclear imagery in cyberpunk is that which "blight[s] and corrupt[s]" idealism.

[47] Even Hiro's name points back to the event, as if the novel's hero is the progeny of Hiroshima itself.

a performative language that creates its own truth, then the nuclear referent is that which lies beyond literal signification: the epitome of the unrepresentable.

Recurring nuclear imagery in *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea from an Empty Cup* suggests that cyberpunk is characterized by the persistence of Cold War history and nuclear anxieties. *Neuromancer*'s frozen imagery and *Snow Crash*'s nuclear leftovers each symbolize the enduring impact of the Cold War on the novel's imaginary future. Meanwhile, *Tea*'s indirect references to nuclear destruction play on the "unthinkability" and "unknowability" of the nuclear event. All three novels suggest that it is impossible to imagine a future beyond the nuclear era because the nuclear event marks the absolute limit of imagination, prediction, and knowability. Insofar as the nuclear stands for the unimaginable, it also presents "a representational problem" (McHale 160); and if nuclear imagery symbolizes the limits and problems of representation, then it is just as relevant to cyberpunk's thematic interest in signification as virtual imagery. In a roundabout way, the endurance of the Cold War and nuclear tensions in the novels comments on the nature of language and representation, and in this manner, cyberpunk's nuclear motifs counterbalance the virtual. The next chapter demonstrates how each novel's vision of virtual reality relies on a particular theory of signification and how language and symbolism work to either support or critique that theory.

Chapter Three

Opposing Views on Virtual Reality: Idealism or Pure Simulacrum

The artificial worlds of *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea from an Empty Cup* are built on sign systems. Each novel centers around the same question: what is the nature of the relationship between signs and reality? This chapter identifies two theories of signification that are foundational to the novels' representations of virtual reality. First, there is a Platonic approach, in which signs are a corrupt reflection of an ideal truth; and second, there is the Baudrillardian approach, in which signs reference only themselves. Both *Neuromancer*'s cyberspace and *Snow Crash*'s Metaverse fall loosely in line with Plato's idealism (though to quite different effects), as both worlds posit a potential alignment between sign and referent, a possibility of uncovering truth in signs. In contrast, *Tea* insists that the signs that make up AR have no original referent, suggesting that the symbolic world is pure simulacrum. Furthermore, each novel's rhetorical strategies correlate with its philosophical underpinnings. *Neuromancer* deploys a metaphoric network of mathematical imagery that combines Plato's idea – that signs are a corrupt reflection of truth – with Plato's irony – an open contempt for representational language in the context of a dramatic format. *Snow Crash* plays on words that have both a biological and technological meaning – such as "virus" and "code" – to suggest that humans are computers: reducible to a series of programs carrying out sets of encoded instructions. In this way, the novel critiques Plato's implication that idealistic speech is necessarily a utopian construct. Finally, *Tea* deploys puns, mirror imagery, and the atmosphere of a fun house or amusement park to suggest that the relationship between sign and referent is negotiable, contextual, temporary, and distorted. In the discussion to follow, I first outline *Neuromancer*'s

Platonic philosophy and metaphoric networks, then compare the use of Plato in *Snow Crash* and *Neuromancer*, showing how they mostly differ, before discussing how *Tea* tacitly rejects Platonic idealism in its embrace of Baudrillardian simulacra. The goal here is to show how virtual reality invariably serves as a tool for commenting on the relationship between sign and referent.

Mathematical Forms and Metaphoric Play: How Cyberspace Engages with the Nature of Reference

Several critics associate cyberspace with Platonic idealism because *Neuromancer* overtly aligns pure, disembodied information (abstracted data) with the real, and embodied instantiation with the corruption and obscuring of truth. Michael Heim, for example, "traces the history of cyberspace to the tradition of Platonic idealism … which he recognizes as the foundation beneath cyberspace" (Heuser 23). Similarly, Hayles cites *Neuromancer* as the definitive narrative example of the prevailing view of virtuality (35-39), which relies on an implied information-matter duality, or what Hayles calls the "Platonic backhand" (12) of cybernetics, where "disembodied information becomes the ultimate Platonic Form" (13). A Platonic interpretation of virtual reality suggests that dematerialized information is true and real, and the physical world is an imperfect manifestation of the real. Therefore, virtual reality is a step closer to the hidden reality of Forms. *Neuromancer* similarly represents the body as a corruption of the real. The "body [is] meat" (Gibson 7), waste, a "prison of the skull" (42); "the meat … and all it wants" (12) are obstacles to total immersion in the matrix, the real world of pure data.[48]

[48] Case continuously disowns what he perceives as base impulses to seek gratuity and revenge, as well as a vulnerability to manipulation, by identifying them as qualities that belong to the meat. See for example: his repulsion for simstim (a device that allows for a point-of-view ride-along in another's body) as a "meat toy… a gratuitous multiplication of flesh input" (Gibson 73); his description of Wintermute's human mask as a "meat puppet" (191); and, his rationalization of a sudden murderous impulse – "*Meat*, some part of him said. *It's the meat talking, ignore it*" (197).

However, reading cyberspace as a space of Platonic idealism has implications beyond the novel's treatment of the body. Since Plato's idealism is a theory of signification, not only does it underlie *Neuromancer*'s representation of data and its relation to truth, it also shapes the novel's use of language, metaphor, and poetics.

If cyberspace represents an ideal alternate reality, it is because it exemplifies a world where sign and referent are the same. The basis for Plato's concept of Forms is the premise that "any given plurality of things which have a single name constitutes a single specific type" (Plato 65). The real exists only insofar as a single name corresponds exactly to a single idea. Similarly, uncovering a perfect alignment of sign and referent is the fundamental if elusive object of Case's narrative quest. As Neuromancer explains, a hacker's "business is to learn the names of programs, the long formal names, names the owners seek to conceal. True names…" (Gibson 319; ellipsis in source). At its core, cyberspace is structured around "true names," a single name that encompasses a single specific idea, but those names are concealed or obscured. Julian Stallabrass argues that *Neuromancer'*s reification of pure information, pure data, as absolute is a utopian gesture, not because disembodiment is an end in itself, but because cyberspace represents an idealistic desire for perfect correspondence between sign and referent:

> Such quantitative modes of thought presuppose an identity between concept and object, word and thing, and privilege mathematical logic as alone capable of grasping the essence of things. The invention of cyberspace is, then, the attempt to create a world where "objects" are entirely adequate to their concepts, and are even, through their dematerialization, identical with them. (qtd. in Myers 904)

The idea that of all our systems of signification, mathematics comes closest to "grasping the essence of things," strengthens the connection between cyberspace and Platonic philosophy. It is therefore unsurprising that *Neuromancer* makes liberal use of mathematical imagery. However, the novel often overlays its imagery of math and logic with competing metaphors: insofar as cyberspace is the world of Forms, its fictional representation is necessarily fraught with discordant symbolism.

Although both *Neuromancer* and Plato's theory posit ideal worlds of pure reference, and both suggest that mathematical sign systems come closest to that ideal, they do so in a dramatic or artistic form; the narrative and dialogue formats present an implicit critique of the difficulties of representation. Plato openly disparages representation as a corrupting influence, a form of signification twice removed from truth. He argues that poets, painters, and playwrights corrupt our minds by appealing to emotion and impression, destroying "the rational part [of the mind] by feeding and fattening up this other part," and that "nothing healthy or authentic can emerge from this relationship" (74, 72). However, the irony of presenting this argument in the form of a dramatic dialogue serves as commentary on the fact that linguistic sign systems are already representational, a step removed from mathematical sign systems, which come closest to the world of Forms. *Neuromancer* mimics both the theory and the irony of Plato's work; it describes cyberspace as being built on mathematical formulae, graphic representations of raw data, "[b]ut fictional cyberspace is constructed from language" (Heuser 100): from vivid imagery and mixed metaphors. The novel represents cyberspace through a series of overlapping and often contradictory comparisons. As Tony Myers points out, the novel primarily familiarizes the reader with cyberspace by repeatedly likening it to cityspace:

> throughout *Neuromancer*, the metropolis is troped by cyberspace, and vice versa, in a series of substitutions that finds each element operating as the deep structure and regulatory frame of the other. In other words, we can understand cyberspace by reference to the city and we can understand the city by reference to cyberspace. (897)[49]

The city is a metaphor for cyberspace, with its "dance of biz" (Gibson 23), but so are more organic images of information exchange, like drug use and biology: "Get just wasted enough" and "it was possible to see Ninsei as a field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialities" (22).[50] *Neuromancer*'s metaphorical multiplicity creates "a new universe" by forcing the reader to reconcile and negotiate "semantic clashes" (Heuser 103). By describing an idealistic, mathematical space in metaphorical terms, the novel mimics Plato's strategy of dramatizing his theory: the world of Forms is always obscured by its own representation. Like Plato's *Republic*, *Neuromancer* both reflects on and enacts a self-conscious critique of the problematics of representation and signification.

The reader's perception of cyberspace relies on connotations and impressions in a way that seems to contradict the novel's descriptions of the technology in terms of mathematical purity or idealism. In addition to *Neuromancer*'s "semantic clashes" (Heuser 103), the narrator tells the story through "exhilarating and euphoric language and images" (Heffernan qtd. in Seed

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[49] See Heuser for a similar reading of cyberspace as cityspace: "Buildings have walls (albeit virtual ones) which contain information and keep unwanted users out. The way these buildings are arranged creates a particular landscape of information, which in the case of Gibson resonates with the urban environment outside of cyberspace" (29).

[50] Heuser notes that "the surreal landscapes which can be created in cyberspace resemble the altered perceptions induced by psychedelic drugs such as LSD. Cyberspace is simply another means of altering consciousness" (24). In its complex relationship with consciousness and the body, agency and the perception of reality, drug use is thematically related to some of the key interests of virtual reality fiction.

87n1), in a style that creates the illusion of narrative speed and motion through action verbs (Heuser 115). The novel's descriptions of both cyberspace and the framing world tend more towards impressionism than realism. Scenes depicting Case's most direct encounters with cyberspace are often surrealistic: he becomes "a bead of mercury, skittering down, striking the angles of an invisible maze" (Gibson 321); "His mouth filled with an aching taste of blue. His eyes were eggs of unstable crystal, vibrating with a frequency whose name was rain and the sound of trains" (335); and a virus triggers "hypnagogic images … childhood symbols of evil and bad luck: … swastikas, skulls and crossbones, dice flashing snake eyes" (235). All of these passages describe moments when Case tries to hack into a system – his attempts to uncover the "true names" of programs (319), true referents, that are concealed by metaphors, ambiguity, and symbolism. Since the reader experiences cyberspace through impressionistic passages that are themselves translations of Case's subjective perception and interpretation of a supposedly ideal world, *Neuromancer*'s representation of cyberspace is twice removed from the implied ideal of cyberspace, just as all artistic representations are twice removed from Plato's world of Forms.[51]

Neuromancer's use of mathematical imagery in its descriptions of cyberspace supports the idea that the matrix is an ideal space in the Platonic sense. As Andrew Strombeck points out, cyberspace is represented in terms of "geometrical abstractions of data" (282); visually, data in the matrix appears in the form of cubes (Gibson 149-50), spirals (69-70), pyramids (70), a "3D chessboard extending to infinity" (70), or "bright lattices of logic" (5). The language here is of

[51] Plato explains that "we've got these three beds. First, there's the real one, and we'd say, I imagine, that it is the product of divine craftsmanship. … Then there's the one the joiner makes. … And then there's the one the painter makes" (66). Since the painter represents, not the actual bed, but a particular bed that a joiner or manufacturer makes in imitation of the real thing, the painter is "two generations away from the throne of truth, and so are all other representers" (Plato 67).

math and logic, and as David Porush explains, in Platonic philosophy "[n]umbers were the idealized root of reality, just as geometry was the idealized shape hidden beneath all the worldly forms" (542-43). Thus, the geometrical shapes that symbolize data exchange and ownership suggest that cyberspace is the ideal real world hidden beneath "the worldly forms"; the imagery implies that what is mathematically sound is necessarily true and therefore real. Further aligning cyberspace with Plato's ideal is Case's description of the matrix when he is most fully immersed in it: he notes that "here things could be counted, each one. He knew the number of grains of sand in the construct of the beach (a number coded in a mathematical system)" (336). Similarly, Plato's theory states that "measuring, counting, and weighing are the most elegant" means of combatting the "sorcery" and "trickery" of illusion or impression (which are aligned with representation and the arts) (72). The novel's depiction of the matrix as a world in which all "things could be counted, each one" supports the idea that it represents Plato's ideal. *Neuromancer*'s use of mathematical metaphors and surrealistic imagery form a discourse around cyberspace that captures the tensions between real and representational, sign and referent.

A Second Approach to Virtuality: The Metaverse as an Idealistic Dystopia

Like *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash* presents a Platonic vision of virtuality; both novels depict the virtual world as a space where some signs are the same as their referents, the world of Forms, and both suggest that metaphor interferes with true reference. In contrast with its cyberpunk predecessor, however, *Snow Crash* more closely examines the social impact of virtual idealism by aligning a hyper-rationalized, objectively true sign system with mechanism, and artistic or aesthetic expression with individual consciousness and free will. The novel ultimately suggests that a world without metaphor is anti-human.

Like *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash* privileges information over materiality, even as it blurs the lines between them. As Hayles points out, the world that *Snow Crash* depicts "is driven by a single overpowering metaphor: humans are computers" (272). The plot is driven by wordplay and the double meaning of the word "virus." Snow Crash is a virus that can infect both humans and computers, a code that is both informational and biological. The virus can be transmitted in one of two ways. The first is simply through the glance of those who understand the language (hackers), as they have binary code embedded in the deep structures of their brain, and can therefore intuitively process the viral code.[52] In this way, *Snow Crash* subscribes to a common assumption of cybernetic literatures:

> If humans are information-processing machines, then they must have biological equipment enabling them to process binary code. … This move, familiar to us as the Platonic backhand, made embodied reality into a blurred and messy instantiation of the clean abstractions of logical forms. (Hayles 57)

Hayles argues that the implied equivalence of humans and computers underlying the idea that binary code is a shared language (and a shared virus in *Snow Crash*) is a Platonic move; it assumes that code is a universal truth, an underlying structural principle that orders and shapes specific manifestations that can never fully reflect it. The second way the virus spreads furthers the suggestion that "humans are information-processing machines," as infection is both

[52] The novel explains what occurs when hackers learn binary code: "You were forming pathways in your brain. Deep structures. Your nerves grow new connections as you use them … your bioware self-modifies – the software becomes part of the hardware. So now you're vulnerable – all hackers are vulnerable – [to the Snow Crash virus]" (Stephenson 126). Their knowledge of code makes hackers particularly vulnerable to "neurolinguistic hack[ing]" (394) because "[u]nder the right conditions, your ears – or eyes – can tie into the deep structures, bypassing the higher language functions. Which is to say, someone 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). In other words, a hacker can be infected just by seeing a viral code on a computer screen.

hereditary and transmissible through bodily fluids.[53] The novel plays on the shared term "code" to suggest that binary code can reformulate genetic codes: "it alters [the] DNA" (Stephenson 399). Hayles explains that "[t]ransforming the body into a flow of binary code pulsing through neurons was an essential step in seeing human being as an informational pattern" (61). Infection can pass between bodies because the body itself is just a "flow of binary code." As in *Neuromancer*, "[i]nformation is the putative origin, physicality the derivative manifestation" (Hayles 37). *Snow Crash* supports the idealistic premise that the idea (information, data, code) is the real, and the specific instantiation is a necessarily corrupt representation.

Snow Crash depicts binary code as a form of true speech; and the Metaverse is an idealistic space because it represents an alignment of sign and referent. Hiro Protagonist explains that everything "you see in the Metaverse, no matter how lifelike and beautiful and three-dimensional, reduces to a simple text file" (Stephenson 350). Unlike *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash* ignores the mathematical connotations of binary code, and instead suggests that "code is just a form of speech" (211). Hiro compares binary code to a mythical perfect language that the Librarian (an AI search engine) tells him about. "Early linguists," for example

> believed in a fictional language called the tongue of Eden. … It enabled all men to understand each other, to communicate without misunderstanding. It was the language of the Logos, the moment when God created the world by speaking a word. In the tongue of Eden, naming a thing was the same as creating it. To quote Steiner … "Our speech interposes itself between apprehension and truth like a

[53] The virus is variously spread through "cult prostitutes" (Stephenson 127, 231), "[s]haring needles" (230), and blood transfusions (263). Furthermore, it is hereditary because "semen is just a carrier of information" (258).

> dusty pane or warped mirror. The tongue of Eden was like a flawless glass; a light of total understanding streamed through it."
>
> "The machine language of the world," Hiro says. … "Computers speak machine language … It's written in ones and zeroes – binary code. … It's the tongue of Eden." (278)

The mythical tongue of Eden is a sign system that does not corrupt or distort truth because the language actually creates its own referent. Hiro then presents binary code as true, idealistic, speech; it is true *because* it creates worlds.

I have suggested that *Snow Crash* can be read as also working with J.L. Austin's speech-act theory because it portrays binary code as a language that creates its own truthfulness in being spoken. In her analysis of *Snow Crash*, Hayles explains how Austin's theory of performative utterances was adopted by computational theory:

> In natural languages, performative utterances operate in a symbolic realm, where they can make things happen because they refer to actions that are themselves symbolic constructions, actions such as getting married, opening meetings, or as [Judith] Butler has argued, acquiring gender. Computational theory treats computer languages as if they were, in Austin's terms, performative utterances. … [A]t the lowest level of code, machine language, inscription merges with incorporation. (274)

Computational speech-act theory is a more concretized version of the "Platonic backhand" of cyberspace. In binary code, saying is doing – "naming a thing [is] the same as creating it" (Stephenson 278). Signifier and signified are the same because what is signified is also symbolic.

Binary code is performative speech insofar as an alteration of the basic code of a virtual world enacts a change in that world because the world itself is symbolic. Hiro muses after one of the Librarian's lectures on language and creation myths:

> A *speech with magical force*. Nowadays, people don't believe in these kinds of things. Except in the Metaverse, that is, where magic is possible. The Metaverse is a fictional structure made out of code. And code is just a form of speech – the form that computers understand. (211)

Code is a form of magical speech, linked to ideas of creation and world-building; it is a language that creates its own truth. Much like Gibson's cyberspace, a basic premise of Stephenson's Metaverse is that the virtual world is the world of Forms, because code is always already both sign and referent.

Because *Snow Crash* represents binary code as an idealistic language – an alignment of sign and referent – the novel correlates with Plato's theory insofar as it suggests that metaphorical language is a distortion of absolute truth. Kelly argues that "Stephenson treats code and language as pure, unmediated forms of communication. He views metaphor[s] [as] … disempowering … adornments or mediations" (79-80). As we saw above, code is a "flawless glass" (Stephenson 278) while representative languages (metaphor and representative computer languages) are a "dusty pane or warped mirror" (278). The apparent "anxiety about metaphors in *Snow Crash*" (Kelly 86), and the reification of instrumentalist machine language as a pure, unmediated form of communication, mirrors and modernizes Plato's point that artistic "representation in general [not only] produce[s] a product which is far from truth, but it also forms a close … relationship with a part of us which is, in its turn, far from intelligence" (72).

However, by depicting the proliferation of idealistically true speech as a linguistic virus, a form of thought-control that substitutes individual consciousness with collective, *Snow Crash* also challenges the idea that "the rational part" is necessarily "the best part of our minds" (Plato 74). The novel uses themes of signification to suggest that mechanistic rationalism ultimately undermines free will.

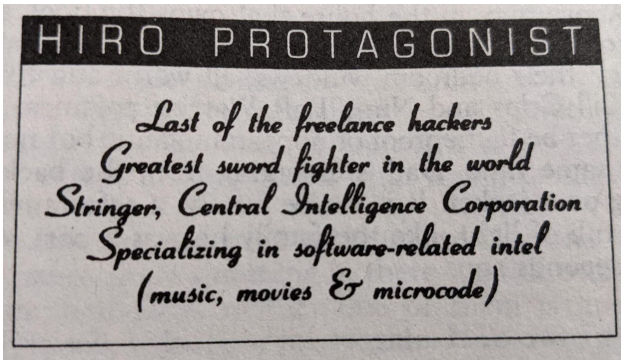
While binary code in *Snow Crash* represents truth, rationality, and exact specification, representational language is associated with free will and individualism. Hayles argues that if code is speech, then language becomes a key distinction between humans and computers:

> If what is exactly stated can be done by a machine, the residue of the uniquely human becomes coextensive with the linguistic qualities that interfere with precise specification – ambiguity, metaphoric play, multiple encoding, and allusive exchanges between one symbol system and another. The uniqueness of human behavior thus becomes assimilated to the ineffability of language, and the common ground that humans and machines share is identified with the univocality of an instrumental language that has banished ambiguity from its lexicon. (67)

Given that *Snow Crash*'s central metaphors are that "humans are computers" (Hayles 272) and "code is … speech" (Stephenson 211), the essential difference between human and machine in the novel is one of language. Those infected with the viral code may communicate with each other in a pure, unmediated language, but they become "information-processing mechanisms," losing their "free will, creativity, and individuality that for Stephenson remains the essence of the human" (Hayles 279, 278). *Snow Crash* signals that the loss of lexical ambiguity is

dehumanizing by depicting the infected as insects. Their antennas symbolize their unmediated communication and collective consciousness: their hive-mind.[54] Binary code may be inherently true, idealistic speech in *Snow Crash*, but representation, that which "interfere[s] with precise specification – ambiguity, metaphoric play" (Hayles 67), is the source of individual consciousness and free will.

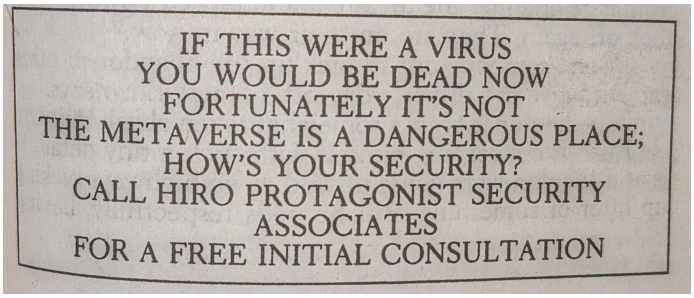
Hiro can communicate in both unmediated machine language and representational (metaphoric) language; it is his mastery of both languages that ultimately separates him from the infected, granting him the consciousness and control of a creator-author figure, the coder rather than coded. Early on in the novel, Hiro introduces himself with a business card (Stephenson 17):



As a hacker, Hiro can "understand the true inner workings" and "glimpse… the secret functioning of the binary code" (279), a language that is inherently true because "naming a thing

[54] Y.T. notes, "They have a new species here too: people with antennas coming out of their heads. The antennas look like the ones on cop walkie-talkies" (Stephenson 325). "If you see Raft people with antennas coming out of their heads, try to kill them first, because they can talk to each other" (370). "The base of the antenna contains a few microchips. … A single hair-thin wire emerges from the base of the antenna and penetrates the skull. It passes straight through to the brainstem. … Which explains why this guy continues to pump out a steady stream of Raft babble even when his brain is missing. … These words aren't originating here. It's a radio broadcast coming through on his antenna" (385-86). The last passage mechanizes the hive-mind, suggesting that it is the closest organic comparison to the way a network of computers communicate with each other. See also, Swantsrom's reading of the Snow Crash virus: "this networked system of communication overcomes separation between discrete consciousnesses by allowing all infected people access to the same shared language" (73). Finally, compare Seed's reading of Cadigan's *Synners*, wherein "a collective agency [is] figured through tropes of … disease" (78).

[is] the same as creating it (278). The way in which he advertises this skill with exact specification in machine language, however, is through hyperbole, abbreviation, comparison with artistic productions, and, as Swanstrom points out, "a distinctive cursive" script (79n14). The business card identifies Hiro Protagonist as a speaker of both languages: the hyper-rationalized and the aesthetic (even his name represents both an exact specification of his role and an artistic playfulness). Hiro's business card is mirrored by his advertisement at the end of the novel. When Raven drops a bomb on the Metaverse, and it manifests as "a mile-high structure of moving … images" (Stephenson 457), the nuclear-cultural blast is cut off by an ad that reads (457):



The ad seems to both intercept the Snow Crash virus-bomb, and copyright the artistic display of its contained explosion. The business card and the ad bookend the narrative, and both forms of self-promotion tie Hiro's control (authority) over the Metaverse to his aesthetic prowess. Hiro's ability to speak in both machine language and metaphorical language makes him a *creative* writer, both in the usual sense of aestheticized composition, and in the sense that binary code is performatively creative speech. Hiro is an author of the Metaverse; and his virtuosity with both literal and figurative languages grants him an authorial control that immunizes him from the loss of agency that accompanies the spread of a shared, unmediated language. While both *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* imagine the virtual world as a dematerialized space where sign

meets referent, *Tea from an Empty Cup* envisions a fully embodied virtual world where signs point to signs in an endless cycle of deferred reference. *Tea* emphasizes the artificiality of AR through exaggerated and spectacular imagery, and in doing so, it suggests that the virtual world is pure simulacrum rather than idealistic.

Empty Cups and Empty Signs: How *Tea* uses Puns and Absurdist Imagery to Paint a Baudrillardian Vision of Virtuality

While a Platonic interpretation of virtual reality suggests that all sign systems are mediations of truth (to varying degrees of imperfection), a Baudrillardian interpretation offers a contrasting viewpoint wherein signs have no original referents. Baudrillard contrasts his own approach to representation to the Platonic approach, which he identifies as the basis of Western culture. He ascribes to images a "murderous power,"

> murderers of the real, murderers of their own model. … To this murderous power is opposed that of representations as a dialectical power, the visible and intelligible mediation of the Real. All Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning. (5)

Baudrillard sets up his theory that signs are "murderers of their own model" by directly opposing it to the long-held premise that signs are "the visible and intelligible mediation of the Real," that they can "refer to the depth of meaning," if only imperfectly. In Baudrillard's view, the "simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true. … Simulation … is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (1). There is no truth or meaning hidden beneath the signs; no model underlying

representations; no original referent or real reality. His theory of signification begins by supposing a "precession of simulacra" (1); the model always comes first and the real adapts itself to the model. Unlike the other two novels, *Tea from an Empty Cup* does not suggest that an ideal truth exists beneath the signs of AR, but narrativizes a Baudrillardian simulation: the signs have no original referent as they refer to nothing but themselves.

Tea insists on the artifice of AR, but it also consistently denies the reader access to a framing world, the "objective reality" of the story. Readers' only access to the fictional world is through AR. Scenes that take place outside of AR are brief and undescriptive, and the dialogue generally revolves around what happened in AR. However, the entire cultural appeal and commercial success of AR from a user's point of view is that it is not real: "*Do anything, do everything, because you're not really doing it, are you? It doesn't count, doesn't go on your permanent record, won't be on the final, can't be used against you in a court of law*" (Cadigan 228); "It's *artificial* reality – all you can do is lie, no matter what you say, and the believers are the ones at fault" (77); "WELCOME TO THE LAND OF ANYTHING GOES/ Here There Are No Rules/ Everything Is Permitted. … *No* real *crime is possible In Here*" (94-95).[55] *Tea* defines AR in opposition to a real reality that does not exist within the context of the story.

[55] *Tea* also addresses what is at stake in the distinction between real reality and artificial reality by thematizing the tension between legality and ethics implicit in such a distinction: "Netgaming is one hundred percent elective, so anything goes – no guidelines, no censorship, no crimes against persons" (Cadigan 76). "Grand jury won't even indict, on grounds of extreme gullibility. As in, 'You were in *artificial reality*, you fool, what did you expect?'" (77). "Of course, maybe you're of a more liberated sort of mind. Maybe you feel that if there's no such thing as paedophilia in here – and there isn't – then there's no such thing as an unthinkable thought, and it's okay to contemplate anything. Even if it makes you look like the wretched refuse you secretly are" (193). "[W]as she ready for the sight of what an unrestrained punch could do to a child's face? … Even if it *wasn't* real?" (194).

Furthermore, *Tea* frequently uses mirror imagery to play on themes of authenticity, imitation, and originality:[56]

> she was staring at a regular-style reflection. Or as regular-style as a reflection in Artificial Reality could be, considering it wasn't really a reflection of something that wasn't really there in the first place. Or was it? Maybe reflections were sort-of reflections. (126-27)

The mirror that does not really reflect something that is not really there mimics the role of AR in the novel: the virtual world does not simulate something that is not there (the framing world); it references only itself. In this way, the novel seems to suggest that "it is always a false problem to wish to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum" (Baudrillard 27). It depicts a purely Baudrillardian simulacrum: a simulation without an original model, just a reflection of "sort-of reflections." In the novel, it is "*impossible to isolate the process of the real*, or to prove the real," to "rediscover… an absolute level of the real" (Baudrillard 21, 19). AR is an explicitly unreliable setting, in the same way a narrator can be unreliable; therefore, it is all lies "Or all truth. Or all in what you perceive" (Cadigan 168).

Tea's use of wordplay reinforces the idea that AR is built on a system of empty signs, signs with no relation to their original meaning. As Yuki complains, AR has a "penchant for terrible puns" (Cadigan 111). Many of the signs that make up AR, the visual metaphors for its inner workings, take the form of bad jokes:[57] a user's "icon cat," which is a catalog of their

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[56] See Heuser (143, 145) and Seed (85) for readings of mirror imagery as a recurring theme in Cadigan's novels. Mirrors in her work represent a denial of original agency or an original body; a denial of an original, unified self. In *Tea*, they foreshadow the suggestion that Yuki and Tom are the same person.

[57] Each of the listed witticisms leads to groaning and eye-rolling (Cadigan 103, 111, 144). AR's "cutesy help files" (106) and insipid wordplay are offset by a typically post-apocalyptic backdrop. The jarring clash suggests a (Baudrillardian) link in the novel between puns and post-apocalypticism.

"stuff" (92), appears as "a classic tabby" cat (144); an animated "sausage rotating over a flame" symbolizes a function called "*Hot Link*" (111), a mechanism for moving through the virtual world; and, the various areas of AR are officially named AReas (103). Heuser argues that:

> Cadigan's fictional world is built on the literalization of puns and the refiguralization of dead metaphors. '[M]istakes'… open a gateway between various levels of meaning. Wordplay occasions double-edged shifts between the literal and the figurative and back again, depending on the context. Recurring instances of this rhetorical strategy can be isolated in each of her novels, and examined as the keys to unlocking the narrative's underlying logic. Such literalized figurative expressions can also be said to contain and condense the entire novel. (132-33)

If AR's "penchant for terrible puns" (Cadigan 111) and *Tea*'s "literalization of [those] puns" unlock "the narrative's underlying logic" and "contain and condense the entire novel," it is because the symbols that make up AR's user interface are openly disconnected from the meaning they represent, just as sausages are unrelated to transportation, and cats are unrelated to inventory. As Baudrillard points out, "simulation begins" with "an implosion of meaning" (31). The novel's wordplay indicates that signs in AR have no necessary relationship with their referents; therefore, AR is pure simulacrum.

In *Tea*, a recurring metaphor for AR is the amusement park, and fittingly, the novel consistently represents the virtual world in terms of the ludicrous and the spectacular; the funhouse-style imagery recalls Baudrillard's argument that Disneyland is the perfect simulacrum. *Tea* establishes the amusement park metaphor almost immediately and constantly returns to it, so

that it works as a frame for understanding AR throughout the novel, just as cityspace does in *Neuromancer*:[58] "amusement parks like post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty" (Cadigan 235). The novel even nicknames the secret and exclusive hidden level "Japanese Disneyland" (18), recalling Baudrillard's argument that

> Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra.… Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America that is Disneyland. … Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real. (12)

Thus, *Tea*'s Disneyland metaphor may be a direct reference to Baudrillard, as the novel presents AR as explicitly nonsensical and "imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest" (the unseen framing world) is real. The novel's descriptions of AR are full of exaggerations and nonsense logic that emphasize its artificiality: the "sensory input was too authentic to be authentic" (Cadigan 154); "It was more like touching a doorknob than actually touching a doorknob" (96); On-line names *are* real names. On-line" (104); the "on-line agreement [is]… like what real life wishes it were" (226); and life imitates art, "*If you call this art*. Or maybe *this* was now life, and what had been life was now art" (139). The novel represents AR as a space of the absurd and the fantastic, a space of distorted and origin-less imitations – it exists "through the old looking glass" (123).[59] Following Baudrillard's theory, AR's celebration of its own unreality works to obscure the fact that the real does not exist outside of AR either. The exaggerated

[58] As one unnamed character cryptically asks another in the prologue, "What do you think this is, a theme park?" (Cadigan 16). AR is "basically an amusement park installation" (134). "No. Not a cheap amusement park. The *real* Old Japan" (217). The novel repeatedly questions, mitigates, and denies its own metaphor, and in doing so it further undermines the connection between signs and referents, even when that connection is already figurative.

[59] See Heuser (157) and Seed (76, 85) for recurring references to the Alice books in Cadigan's novels.

artificiality of both AR and Disneyland hide the fact that there is no underlying true referent; the amusement park "is the 'real'" (Baudrillard 12), even if it is "all lies" (Cadigan 168) and "make-believe" (77), because the simulacrum is all there is.

Tea's Disneyland metaphor is a direct reference to Baudrillard and, fascinatingly, the reference is also a critique of the pointedly anti-Baudrillardian project of some of the novel's characters. Near the end of the narrative, Body Sativa, the near-mythical AR guru,[60] reveals the hidden objective of post-Apocalyptic Tokyo: to recreate Old Japan. The missing Tom Iguchi, however, "didn't believe Old Japan could be revived. He believed in amusement parks. People can believe in the most absurd things" (Cadigan 220). This passage opposes a belief in amusement parks as the real (Baudrillard 12) with a belief that a lost original can be recovered through simulation, which Baudrillard argues is impossible.[61] In other words, it pits a Baudrillardian perspective on signification against an anti-Baudrillardian view, and suggests that the entire narrative has been building up that tension: simulation versus resurrection (or revelation). While I offer a more in-depth reading of the climactic but ambiguous outcome of that tension in the next chapter, for now it is enough to note that *Tea*'s wordplay, absurdist imagery, and the characters' insistence that AR is "all lies" (Cadigan 168) all point to a

[60] Characters repeatedly insist that "Body" knows everything about AR: "'Body'll know. Body's probably the only one who'd know for sure.' 'What body?' 'Body Sativa'" (Cadigan 74-75); "Body Sativa. Nobody knows more. Nobody and *no body*" (78-79). While the name is a reference to "a bodhisattva, a Japanese figure who … is destined to become a Buddha" (Murphy 154), it also highlights the role of the body as a vehicle for knowledge and experience in *Tea*'s AR, and reinforces the recurring link between virtuality and drug use in cyberpunk: "'Don't you mean Cannabis Sativa?' [Konstantin] asked sarcastically. … 'Get *off*. Cannibal's her *mother*'" (Cadigan 75).

[61] See for example: "The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real" (Baudrillard 19); "it is *now impossible to isolate the process of the real*, or to prove the real" (21); and, "it is always a false problem to wish to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum" (27).

Baudrillardian disconnect between sign and referent. Thus, the novel's rhetorical strategies foreshadow its ending.

The title, *Tea from an Empty Cup*, helps to frame the revival of Old Japan within AR in terms of a philosophical problem: can something come from nothing? Graham J. Murphy identifies the title as a "Zen Buddhist koan … 'a riddle without a solution, used to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning and provoke sudden enlightenment.' This paradox forces a questioning of epistemological reality [in the novel]" (*Oxford English Dictionary* qtd. in Murphy 153). So, *Tea* begins with an unanswerable question about what is real. The "Tea" part of the title pointedly refers to Old Japan and "Empty Cup" refers to AR, as those are also the respective chapter titles for scenes set in each space.[62] Furthermore, Body Sativa uses the same metaphor for finding Tom (and with him, Old Japan): "Do you know the art of filling an empty cup with tea when you have no tea?" (Cadigan 220). In this way, the novel frames its central thematic interest, the recreation of Old Japan in AR, in terms that resonate with Baudrillard's theory of signification. *Tea from an Empty Cup* revolves around the possibility of reconstructing (or uncovering) a lost, original referent within a system of empty signs. Notably, as Cadigan explains, the original title of the novel was *Bunraku*, "which is a type of Japanese puppet theater which takes three puppeteers and one puppet" (qtd. in Murphy 154). In *Tea*, the theatrical performance takes the form of a puppeted dance, so the original title would have foregrounded

[62] Aside from the prologue and epilogue, chapters in *Tea* alternate between the titles "Empty Cup," subtitled (I) – (VIII), and "Death in the Promised Land," (I) – (VIII), both of which are set almost exclusively in AR. The epilogue is titled "Tea," and apparently takes place in Old Japan, but leaves open the question of whether the recreation is in fact the "*real* Old Japan" (Cadigan 217). While "Tea" and "Empty Cup" question "epistemological reality" (Murphy 153) and signification, Seed points out that the title "Death in the Promised Land" suggests that the "utopian promise historically attached to America has been displaced onto VR" (88n12). The "Death" chapters undermine the utopianism commonly associated with virtual reality, just as the "Empty Cup" chapters undermine the idealism.

issues of agency, manipulation, and embodiment.[63] Cadigan's hesitation between the two titles suggests a connection between the central thematic concerns that each title emphasizes: signification and the recreation of the real on one hand, and agency and the body on the other. The fact that *Tea from an Empty Cup* wins out over *Bunraku* suggests that the novel's interest in virtual embodiment is subsumed under the larger thematic umbrella of the problems of signification. In other words, the final title (considering the alternative) not only questions the nature of the relationship between sign and referent, and poses an unanswerable riddle about originality, but it also suggests that the body itself is symbolic.

Although Body Sativa indicates that the recreation of Old Japan will be built on the body, *Tea* represents the body as a system of signs without origins or referents. Cadigan's typical inclusion of the body as an essential part of the virtual world is one of the key differences between her work and that of Gibson or Stephenson.[64] *Tea*'s representation of AR focuses on the characters' sense of touch and movement: "There was no such thing as a minor sensation in AR; every feeling was realized in a way that was utterly complete" (Cadigan 173-74); "She could all but feel the nerve endings closest to the surface of her fingers responding to the stimuli,

[63] Seed argues, "Although VR has its protocols and its icons whereby Cadigan's characters negotiate their way forward, there is a constant ambiguity over how much they are in control. Cadigan's original title for this novel … *Bunraku* … would have explicitly foregrounded this issue" (85). Similarly, Cadigan herself says that "people are not just manipulated in virtual reality, they are being manipulated in virtual reality from the outside. There was a very broad hint in the original title for the book, *Bunraku*" (qtd. in Murphy 154). Moreover, the original title highlights the complex relationship in the novel between agency, virtuality, and the body.

[64] If, as Hayles suggests, the disembodiment of information is what makes *Neuromancer*'s vision of cyberspace Platonic (12-13), then *Tea*'s inclusion of the body means that its vision is decidedly non-Platonic: thought depends "on the embodied form enacting it. This realization is transforming the liberal subject … into the posthuman" (xiv). *Tea* offers a posthumanist interpretation of cyberspace rather than humanist, because it is not about "leaving the body behind but rather of extending embodied awareness" (Hayles 291).

absorbing it all greedily and demanding more" (134).[65] Not only is the body central to users' experience of and access to AR, but Old Japan itself is explicitly built on body parts:

> The method by which Old Japan will be remade – *awakened* – for good. The real, the true Old Japan. We were bringing it to fruition, we were nurturing it with the life of our blood and tissue and the afterlife of our souls. … We wanted to go home. … All peoples have a source. … We are re-constructing ours, not in soil and rock and ocean, but in flesh and blood, nerve and synapse. (218-19)

Body Sativa's plan to do the impossible, to revive a lost original (a lost "home" or "source"), to *re*construct something "real" and "true," is by grounding the remake in materiality. However, in *Tea*, materiality is no guarantee of authenticity. The corporeal method for remaking Old Japan to which Body refers turns out to be a traditional bunraku dance, performed by someone who is "full Japanese" (64): "A type of dance that even a *sansei* who couldn't even speak the language could perform" (241); "a dance that [Yuki's] blood knew even though the last time it had been performed had been sometime long before most recorded history. There was no record of this anywhere" (233). The recreation is based on embodied representation; the novel's comparison of the dance to language pointedly suggests that the body is just another form of symbolic representation. Furthermore, the dance is a traditional performance without a model, and a

[65] Additionally, one of the main themes of *Tea from an Empty Cup* (a thorough discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper) is the disruption of bodily boundaries and its effect on agency, control, and selfhood. The narrative begins with a murder mystery – eight victims who die at the exact same moment as their virtual avatars. It turns out that the victims were murdered from inside their own bodies by rich "pervert[s] wearing [their] body" (Cadigan 245). These perverts are the elite "clients of a certain very bent madam" (244), Joy Flower, the owner of a virtual brothel called "Joy's Boyz." The language *Tea* uses to describe the technological invasion of the body is that of sexual violation: "perverts" (245); prostitutes (11, 28-29, 126); Yuki turns around, "trying to catch someone molesting her, if that was the word. Molesting her hand. Molesting her gross motor movements" (141). See also Mitchell (119-21) and Seed (85-86) for critical readings of the recurrent anxiety in Cadigan's novels over the incursion or violation of the body as a loss of agency.

tradition without origins is a symbol without a referent. Thus, *Tea* represents the body (the foundation of Old Japan and, arguably, AR itself) as pure simulacrum: a symbolic construction with no original referent.

Tea's depiction of embodied virtuality suggests that the body is a text, and is therefore no more or less simulative than any other form of symbolic representation. Access to the most exclusive levels of AR seems to be determined by physical criteria: namely, by a combination of injected drugs – "[t]he faster you go, the more you know … They say you get going fast enough, you can find the Out Door" (Cadigan 116)[66] – and genetics – "'Sposed to be the next big hot spot … with these parts you can only access if you're Japanese or a convincing simulation" (73-74). However, the equivalence between "a convincing simulation" and real Japanese heritage in the virtual world recalls Baudrillard's argument that genetic codes are pure simulacra.[67] In fact, the reduction of the body to a set of codes jumpstarts the events of the narrative. *Tea*'s mythically titled prologue, "In the Beginning," features two unnamed characters, one of whom "chem[ed]

[66] See also: "She thought of the sting at the back of her neck … [T]hat was some kind of injection … some kind of stimulant" (Cadigan 116); "something had pumped up her senses to a range several levels of magnitude beyond what should have been possible. *Even in here*" (122); "'How come I can touch you now?'… 'I've been pumped up'… 'A *drug* put us on the same level?'" (136); and, "The paranoia, the delusions and the hallucinations. Get someone cranked up high enough, they probably won't know whether they're wearing a hotsuit or not" (224). Drug use in *Tea* contributes to the unreliability of the narration, and allows for the possibility that AR might just be an illusion: "She might spend several hours lying flat on her back in an empty room, hallucinating on the dark screen of an un-activated headmount and thinking she'd done something. And wouldn't it be funny if that was what everybody actually did? And it was just the power of suggestion that made them think that they were somehow all together, seeing the same things. Or at least it made them give things the same names" (227-28). The last passage in particular ties drug imagery to themes of signification in the novel, and mirrors *Neuromancer*'s description of cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination" (Gibson 6). *Tea*, *Neuromancer*, and *Snow Crash* each relate virtuality to drug use. It is perhaps an unlikely similarity among novels with varying depictions of the mind, the body, and agency, and for that reason is worth further study.

[67] "Between the two, in this forking of the nuclear and the genetic,… every principle of meaning is absorbed, every deployment of the real is impossible" (Baudrillard 35). Baudrillard's direct comparison of "the nuclear and the genetic" as simulacra helps to explain how themes of both embodiment and nuclear apocalypse inform *Tea*'s portrayal of virtuality.

up" (Cadigan 24) his Japanese identity in order to sell it (and with it, access to hidden levels) to the other: "With my package, you really *will* be Japanese. … Take the gel cap, it puts this marker in your fluids. That's the passkey (24). The "Japanese guy" further explains that "[t]here's a creation myth in [the gel cap]. Among other things. … Distilled from millennia of racial memory … I could show you the chromosome they stripped it offa. … One hundred purebreds got scraped for this" (12). The distillation of Japanese identity that also works as "passkey" to post-Apocalyptic Tokyo is both a genetic marker and a creation myth. More accurately, it is a creation myth embedded in a genetic code; a myth that can be scraped from chromosomes, suggesting that the body itself is an encoded text or story. Foreshadowing Yuki's bunraku dance at the end of the novel, the scene implies that the body is a vehicle for symbolic representation. And if the body is a symbol that references a myth that is itself symbolic, then the body is pure simulacrum (which explains the equivalence of being either "Japanese or a convincing simulation"). Insofar as *Tea from an Empty Cup* is a book about bodies, it is also about symbolism; and insofar as it is about signification, it is also a book about books.

I have shown that the virtual worlds in *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea from an Empty Cup* are each informed by either a Platonic or Baudrillardian theory of signification. Both *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* suggest that the virtual world is the world of Forms because its signs (mathematical forms and binary code) are wholly commensurate with their referents (aspects of the virtual world itself). *Tea from an Empty Cup*, however, follows the stories of virtual reality consumers rather than coders, and from that perspective, the virtual world consists of empty signs whose original referents (like Old Japan and the fictional framing world) are all missing in action. Furthermore, each novel's depiction of the body (insofar as it stands for the

material world more generally) reinforces its portrayal of virtual reality. In *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*, the role of the body is comparable to that of representative language: it is a corrupted instantiation of information that works as a barrier between consciousness and idealism. In contrast, the body in *Tea* belongs to the virtual world because there is no physical framing world. The body is pure simulacrum (symbols referencing symbols) because nothing exists outside of the simulation: the simulacrum "dominates everything" (Baudrillard 32). Given the thematic relationship in cyberpunk between virtual reality and signification, and the subgenre's consistent pairing of virtual and nuclear motifs to illustrate the problems of representation, the next chapter explores how theories of signification underwrite each novel's portrayal of nuclear apocalypse and the nuclear post-apocalyptic.

Chapter Four

Post-Apocalypticism: Revelation or Simulation

The persistence of nuclear themes and ruined settings in *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea from an Empty Cup* point to a central question of cyberpunk: what does it mean to be post-apocalyptic in the context of futuristic fiction? I argue that these novels conform to one of two critical interpretations of nuclear apocalypse: either Derridean or Baudrillardian. In *Neuromancer*, Case's search for the "true name" of Neuromancer (an allegory for nuclear apocalypse) points to a Derridean approach in which the apocalypse is a revelation of truth, and the nuclear catastrophe represents a final alignment of sign and referent, one that coincides with the end of literature. In contrast, both *Snow Crash* and *Tea from an Empty Cup* use commercialized and spectacularized apocalyptic imagery to support a Baudrillardian reading of the nuclear as the "apotheosis of simulation" (32), suggesting that the time and space of the post-apocalyptic is also post-revelatory, an age of pure simulacra. Nuclear apocalyptic themes in cyberpunk return my analysis to the question I outlined at the beginning of Chapter Three: what is the nature of the relationship between signs and truth? Both virtual and nuclear themes in cyberpunk focus on language and, in doing so, they also serve as metafictional commentary on literature itself. Each novel thematizes the construction of worlds through symbols in its representation of virtual reality, suggesting that each can be read as a self-conscious reflection on the writing process. Correspondingly, images of nuclear apocalypse point to the destruction of worlds and the loss of literary history. Thus, cyberpunk seems to suggest that the creation of worlds is a metaphor for the creation of books, and the end of worlds is a metaphor for the end of books. In the discussion to follow, I attend to the apocalyptic iterations in all three novels in

relation to Derrida's idea of nuclear revelation and Baudrillard's suggestion of nuclear post-apocalypticism.

The Only "True Name" is that of the Nuclear: Apocalypse as Revelation

Neuromancer's virtual and nuclear themes are complementary because although one theme is tied to mathematics, logic, and creation, and the other to art, metaphor, and death, the entire thematic drive of the novel ultimately relies on the idea that signs are imperfect references to absolute truth. *Neuromancer*'s vision of cyberspace corresponds with Plato's idealism and its representation of nuclear apocalypse similarly corresponds with Derrida's reading of apocalypse as a revelation of truth in language. According to Derrida, the nuclear referent is only tied to the imaginary and the figurative until a nuclear catastrophe actually happens, at which point the nuclear event itself becomes its own sign and referent. *Neuromancer* depicts its eponymous character as an allegory for nuclear apocalypse: a simultaneous moment of apocalypse and emergence. The novel's virtual and nuclear themes together imply that the apocalypse is idealistic, and idealism is apocalyptic.

Derrida writes that a nuclear apocalypse would literally be a revelation of truth because it represents the moment when sign meets referent, and thereby destroys all means of reference. Derrida draws on the Greek definition of apocalypse as a revelation to suggest that in the nuclear age, the apocalyptic revelation of "essential truth" (Klein 79) would be a revelation in language. [68] He identifies the nuclear referent as purely fantastic and imaginary and, paradoxically,

[68] See note 12 on the origins of the word "apocalypse." See also Teresa Heffernan's reading of Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now": "the name can only meet its referent at the moment of the catastrophe, which is also the moment of unveiling, of truth" (173).

> we do not believe… in any thing except the nuclear referent. If we are bound and determined to speak in terms of reference, nuclear war is *the only possible referent of any discourse … that would share their condition with that of literature*. If, according to a structuring hypothesis, a fantasy or phantasm, nuclear war is equivalent to the total destruction of the archive … it becomes the absolute referent, the horizon and the condition of all the others. (Derrida 28; my emphasis)

If the imaginary nuclear referent (total nuclear war) were ever to become real (and finally subjectable to reference, documentation, and representation) Derrida argues that it would devastate the very means of reference and collective memory: "Now what allows us perhaps to think the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness … is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive" (26).[69] The "non-real [nuclear] referent" (Klein 81) is thus the "absolute referent" because it is the only possible true referent: there will never be a sign to represent the nuclear catastrophe other than the event itself, as it marks the end of the symbolic archive. Just as cyberspace is traditionally idealistic, it is also "prefigured as a site for the initiation or control of apocalypticism, where at some time in the future revelations … will occur" (Porush 555). In *Neuromancer*'s cyberspace in particular, virtual and nuclear themes both involve the revelation of truth in language.

[69] Derrida further explains, "Here we are dealing hypothetically with a total and remainderless destruction of the of the archive. This destruction would take place for the first time and it would lack any common proportion with, for example, the burning of a library, even that of Alexandria. The hypothesis of this total destruction watches over deconstruction, it guides its footsteps; it becomes possible to recognize, in the light, so to speak, of that hypothesis, of that fantasy, or phantasm, the characteristic structures and historicity of the discourses, strategies, texts, or institutions to be deconstructed. That is why deconstruction, at least what is being advanced today in its name, belongs to the nuclear age" (27).

Neuromancer ties both virtual and nuclear motifs to the idea of "true names," furthering the idea that the apocalypse is also a revelation. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Neuromancer says that a hacker's business "is to learn the names of programs, the long formal names, names the owners seek to conceal. True names…" (Gibson 319; ellipsis in source). In the story, Case's job is to help Wintermute uncover the "true name" that serves as a "magic word" (226) standing between the AI and consciousness. Wintermute explains, "You might say what I am is basically defined by the fact that I don't know, because I *can't* know. I am that which knoweth not the word. If you knew… and told me, I couldn't *know*" (226). This passage indicates that the unknowable magic word may be Neuromancer's name, as Case later mentions it casually and Wintermute responds, "His name's not something I can know" (341). When the "true name" is revealed through the proper channels, the novel likens the action to the flip of a switch: "– *now*/ and his voice the cry of a bird/ unknown,/… three/ notes, high and pure./ A true name" (342). The image of an unknown, switch-activated bird evokes a nuclear missile, just as the three pure notes suggest that the "true name" has three syllables (nu-cle-ar).[70] Neuromancer's name is both unknowable and idealistically true, thereby supporting a reading of the AI as an allegory for nuclear apocalypse, recalling Derrida's argument that the only "true name" is that of the nuclear. Derrida's missives on missiles ultimately conclude that:

> nuclear war – as a hypothesis, a phantasm, of total self-destruction – can only come about in the name of that which is worth more than life, that which, giving its value to life, has greater value than life. Thus it is indeed waged *in the name of*

[70] Compare *Neuromancer*'s image of an unknown bird to an image that appears in Donald Barthelme's short story, "Game" (1965), about two missile officers in an underground nuclear silo: "If we turn our keys simultaneously the bird flies, certain switches are activated and the bird flies. But the bird never flies" (113).

> …. But as it is in the name of something whose name, in this logic of total destruction, can no longer be borne, transmitted, inherited by anything living, that name in the name of which war would take place would be the name of nothing, it would be pure name, the "naked name." That would be the End and the Revelation of the name itself, the Apocalypse of the Name. (30-31; ellipsis in source)[71]

If *Neuromancer*'s "true name" is Neuromancer's name, which is also the nuclear name, then the narrative centers around the revelation "of the name itself, the Apocalypse of the Name." However, by depicting the apocalyptic-revelatory moment as the emergence of the first true AI, the novel also hints that if apocalypse is revelatory, it is also potentially transformative, both an ending and a beginning.

By tying the nuclear apocalyptic moment to emergent consciousness, *Neuromancer* offers a transcendent vision of apocalypse: the apocalypse as a revelation of a new order of being. This transcendent view of apocalypse is in keeping with the novel's transcendentalist depictions of the body (cybernetic dematerialization) and of language (idealism).[72] The text's concurrent apocalyptic and utopian impulses (insofar as idealism is a utopian construct) are not as antithetical as they may first seem. Elana Gomel explains that utopian and dystopian narratives are structurally the same genre, as they "share a dynamic future-oriented modality involving a meaningful change. … In other words, both utopia and dystopia presuppose a teleological

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[71] Notably, both *Neuromancer* (319) and "No Apocalypse" use ellipses to signify the unrepresentability of the true (nuclear) name: the nuclear referent is that which cannot be determined or recorded.

[72] See Porush for support of the idea that idealism is tied to transcendence: "the tension between the word and the spirit is the fundamental creative impulse in humanity. Civilization is always seeking to heal the rift, to bring the Word and the Spirit into perfect communion. … [T]his yearning for a eudoxical discourse, where the map and territory become one … is at the heart of postmodern literature. And this yearning is indistinguishable from the desire for transcendence" (569).

narrative which culminates in either millennium or apocalypse" (2). Porush similarly argues that along with the "utopianism of cyberspace" comes "inevitable apocalypticism, with its duality New World/End of World" (554). If an apocalypse is also a revelation, then apocalypse and utopia are not mutually exclusive concepts; one always carries the suggestion of the other. David Robson further explains that "[a]pocalyptic discourse is usually profoundly hostile to the status quo. Its meanings and referents always exceed what 'is' and point toward what is 'other' than what is, and this other dimension can be a source of prophetic hope of liberation" (63). This view helps to explain why the apocalyptic moment in *Neuromancer* is also one of emergence. Case's introduction to Neuromancer's world foreshadows the revelatory-apocalypticism of the novel's ending (and in doing so, further suggests that Neuromancer represents nuclear apocalypse): "Darkness fell in from every side, a sphere of singing black. … And when he was nothing, compressed at the heart of all that dark, there came a point where the dark could be no *more*, and something tore" (Gibson 336). The image of an unsustainable darkness and nothingness is an image that hovers "between loss and potential: the emptiness is apocalyptic, in both its senses" (Schwenger 282). The revelation of Neuromancer's world (and later, Neuromancer's "true name") suggests that the birth of posthumanism represents the "apocalyptic dream of an escape into a new order of existence" (Dellamora xi). Therefore, virtual and nuclear themes complement one another in *Neuromancer* because the novel represents both as vehicles for transcendence, catalysts for the emergence of a teleological (and technological) destiny. The concurrence of virtual and nuclear imagery in the novel suggests that apocalypticism and idealism (utopianism) are mirror images of the same fundamental desire for the revelation of truth and "a new order of existence."

The Nuclear as a Post-Apocalyptic "Model of Simulation"

While a philosophy of idealistic signification underlies *Neuromancer*'s representation of both virtual and nuclear themes, *Snow Crash* and *Tea from an Empty Cup* each reflect a Baudrillardian view of nuclear apocalypse, in which the nuclear represents pure simulation rather than the ideal Form of itself. Each novel's nuclear historicization and ruined settings present the age of simulacra as already post-apocalyptic: post-revelatory, post-teleology, and post-truth. In the case of *Snow Crash*, virtual and nuclear technologies represent two opposing views on signification, performative idealism and simulation, so that each theme comments on the other through contrast. Meanwhile, *Tea*'s virtual and nuclear apocalyptic imagery both support a thoroughly Baudrillardian theory of signification, as each is a model of endless simulation. In both novels, as in *Neuromancer*, nuclear imagery reinforces the thematic focus on the relationship between sign and referent; nuclear apocalypse is the dark mirror-image of virtual reality.

In contrast with Derrida, Baudrillard suggests that nuclear weapons are not a technology of revelation, but of simulation. He provocatively claims that the nuclear represents the "apotheosis of simulation" (Baudrillard 32) because, at least since the bombing of Hiroshima, the first real demonstration of nuclear power, "nuclear proliferation does not increase the risk of … an atomic clash. … [T]he whole myth of the total and revolutionary strike crumbles at the very moment when the means are available – but alas *precisely because* those means are available" (39). According to Baudrillard, the very dangerousness of the weapons renders them inert; the sophistication of the technology "surpasses any possible objective to such an extent that it is itself a symptom of nullity" (33), resulting in a "planetary structure of the annihilation of stakes"

(33). Nuclear weapons' nullity through excess and their "annihilation of stakes" reduces them to "a group of signs dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs, and no longer at all to their 'real' end. But this does not make them harmless" (Baudrillard 21). Nuclear weapons may serve only as signs of themselves but it is their existence, not their explosion, that poses a threat; nuclear deterrence works as "a simulated holdup [that] attacks the reality principle itself" (Baudrillard 20).[73] It is the lack of distinction between the potential use of the weapons as weapons, and the actual strategic use of the weapons as a form political rhetoric, "almost, in the end, a conversation" (Grausam 509), that threatens the "reality principle" and leads Baudrillard to argue that nuclear technology is the "apotheosis of simulation" (32). From this perspective, cyberpunk's nuclear weapons and virtual realities are both technologies of simulation, as they each represent a system of signs that point only to each other.

Again following the Greek definition of "apocalypse," the persistent nuclear themes in cyberpunk novels may suggest that a post-apocalyptic world is literally post-revelatory – past the possibility of revealing truth in signs. For Baudrillard, in the age of simulacra there is "no longer a Last Judgement to separate the false from the true, the real from its artificial resurrection, as everything is already dead and resurrected in advance" (6). An apocalyptic revelation is no

[73] In what seems to be a thinly veiled metaphor for nuclear deterrence in comparison with traditional warfare tactics, Baudrillard imagines how a simulated robbery of a large store would play out as opposed to a "real" robbery: "it would be interesting to see whether the repressive apparatus would not react more violently to a simulated holdup than to a real holdup. Because the latter does nothing but disturb the order of things, the right to property, whereas the former attacks the reality principle itself.… Simulation is infinitely more dangerous. … Organize a fake holdup. … [R]emain close to the 'truth,' in order to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulacrum. You won't be able to do it: the network of artificial signs will become inextricably mixed up with real elements … in short, you will immediately find yourself once again, without wishing it, in the real" (20). In the absence of an actual nuclear catastrophe, nuclear weapons are purely symbolic, but in order to remain so, the threat must be treated as if it were real. Thus, nuclear deterrence "attacks the reality principle itself" because it marks the end of any possible distinction between real and simulation.

longer possible because there is no truth beneath the signs, no underlying meaning or original referent. The age of simulacra is also a "postapocalyptic period, [in which] the real has imploded and the subject has disappeared; history, culture and truth are absorbed by the simulated image. … [W]e inhabit a future that has no future. We are beyond history and at the end of difference" (Heffernan 171). Simulation is always already post-apocalyptic (post-revelatory and post-teleology), suggesting that a post-apocalyptic space may, in turn, always be simulative. Since the nuclear is the "model" of simulation (35) for Baudrillard, rather than the "absolute referent" that it is for Derrida (28), nuclear imagery in cyberpunk may be tied directly to the post-apocalyptic rather than the apocalyptic: the nuclear as a signifier of an apocalypse omitted or lost, precluded by its own post-ness.[74] Nuclear themes in Baudrillardian-infused cyberpunk represent the impossibility of apocalypse: the loss of the possibility of referential revelation.

Unsurprisingly, *Tea from an Empty Cup*'s representation of apocalypse corresponds with Baudrillard's ideas on simulation, as the novel immediately identifies the post-apocalyptic setting of AR as post-revelatory. Konstantin's first impression of post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty describes how:

> The buildings were dark, showing the scars of fires, bullets, and explosions, broken-out windows gaping like empty eye-sockets, but the [neon] signs were brilliant, impossibly vivid with shifting colors that melted and morphed like living ropes of molten light. There were no words that she could make out, only symbols that fell short of meaning anything to her. (Cadigan 97)

[74] "'[W]hat if they gave an apocalypse and nobody noticed?' was the question that Brooks Landon proposed as the central thematic concern of the 1980s cyberpunk" (Krevel 9).

The setting plays on two different meanings of "post-apocalyptic." Imagery of "fires, bullets, and explosions, broken-out windows" are all typical signs of a post-apocalyptic landscape in fiction; and the ruined setting mimics a damaged body, with its "scars" and "empty eye-sockets." As I have argued, however, *Tea* presents AR as a Baudrillardian simulation, so this passage also suggests that a post-apocalyptic space is definitively post-revelation (pure simulacrum) because its signs cannot reveal anything: "the [neon] signs.… There were no words that she could make out, only symbols that fell short of meaning." The vivid image of "empty eye-sockets" ties the post-apocalyptic imagery of physical ruination (insofar as the body may stand for the landscape here and vice versa) to the Baudrillardian notion of the post-apocalyptic as simulation.[75] Eyes indicate perception, they are a vehicle for symbolic revelation. Reading those empty sockets alongside empty signs that fall "short of meaning" indicates both blindness and meaninglessness; the image of absent eyes points to the impossibility of revelation in a post-apocalyptic setting. *Tea* slips between the two meanings of "post-apocalyptic" throughout the narrative, suggesting that the setting of AR could never be anything other than a post-apocalyptic space precisely because the virtual world is pure simulacrum.

Tea's spectacularized descriptions of post-apocalyptic space in terms of the hyperreal and the absurd set the reader up to disbelieve in the possibility of a climactic revelation. The text is littered with jarring images of AR as "a glitter-encrusted cityscape. … The rubble was also encrusted with glitter" (Cadigan 50); "the gritty glitz, the glitzy grit of post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty … the sparkle and glitter of it" (96). Recurring imagery of ruined cityscapes overlaid

[75] Similar imagery that compares the ruined body to the ruined landscape, and simultaneously identifies both the body and the landscape as pure simulation, crops up throughout the novel. See, for example, Konstantin's description of her investigation as the "adventures of a dead kid's false face pretending to be alive in a city pretending to be dead" (Cadigan 55).

by glitter serves to aestheticize and glamourize the post-apocalyptic: the "ruined pavement sparkled and glittered, as if the streets of post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty were paved with crushed diamonds" (113); "piles of wreckage in the street were all aflame, burning in jewel tones, now and then sending sparks skyward, where they seemed to mingle with the stars" (143). AR presents post-apocalyptic space to its users in terms of commercial desirability, pointing again to the distinction between "post-apocalyptic" and "post-Apocalyptic" implied by *Tea*'s suggestive capitalization. The novel's depiction of apocalypse as a product divorces the term "apocalypse" from its original referent, a "revelation," as well as from its more typical connotations of death and destruction, aligning it instead with notions of hyperreal capitalism.[76] Imagery of beautified wreckage enacts Baudrillard's point about the rise of nostalgia in the age of simulacra (Baudrillard 43-48) and establishes the time and tense of *Tea* as the Baudrillardian post-apocalyptic:[77] "Where was all the post-Apocalyptic glamour everybody was always raving

[76] As it is in both *Neuromancer* (Brande, Gomel, Myers) and *Snow Crash* (Leong, Wisecup), the idea that the virtual world is a space of hyperreal late-stage capitalism is a prominent theme in *Tea*: "Does anybody really do anything in here besides listen to how much everything is costing them?" (Cadigan 99); "'how do you prevent duplications?' 'Duplications of what?'… 'Appearances. Names. On-line identities.'… 'There is none.'… 'What if I duplicated – *exactly* – this appearance, all the way down to the tiniest detail? What would be the difference between one and the other?' 'Duration. … How long. Age. How old. Period in time, which is marked very precisely here. Billing, you know'" (105); "That's the one lie you *can't* tell in here, isn't it – billable time" (195). As these passages indicate, AR's emphasis on billing procedures is relevant to the novel's thematic interest in subjective experience, identity, and truth in the virtual world. However, further study is beyond the scope of this thesis.

[77] The image of glittery degradation supports Gomel's argument that cyberpunk "reflects the vision of the 'broad present,' in which the future and the past bleed into, and contaminate, the experience of 'now.'… [Cyberpunk's teleological] potential has been diluted by nostalgia, repetition and recycling" (1). The "broad present" represents the "end of historical teleology" (Gomel 1), which suggests that it is also the time frame of the post-apocalyptic: a post-teleological era is also post-revelatory. Therefore, imagery of ruins and waste in cyberpunk are not just indicators of post-apocalyptic space, but also of post-apocalyptic time. Commercialized junk symbolizes the collapse of past, present, and future into a never-ending "broad present" because it signifies "nostalgia, repetition, recycling" (Gomel 1), and the instantaneous obsolescence of cultural and technological artifacts. Like nuclear imagery, waste in cyberpunk illustrates a historical stuck-ness; it represents a future that is already obsolete because it is indistinguishable from the past. Therefore, images such as *Tea*'s glittery ruins and *Snow Crash*'s "Old

about? Or was modern life so absurdist now that abandoned ruins from the last century were the bleeding edge of this-minute fashion?" (Cadigan 113). The post-apocalyptic setting is a hyperreal commodity: a space where signs have no relation to their original referents but instead are ornamented and recycled to the point of absurdity.[78] By consistently establishing the post-apocalypticism of AR as Baudrillardian, the novel undermines its own climactic revelation of an original referent, the revival of Old Japan, before it begins.

The explicitly post-apocalyptic setting of *Tea* contextualizes the apparent revelation of Old Japan as just another layer of simulation. Throughout the novel, characters exchange rumors of a mythical "Out Door," a virtual egress to a new order of being:

> Out. *Out*. Over the rainbow, Never-Never Land, where you go and you'll stay. So you don't come back to something like … *this*. … You know – *out*. Where you don't need the 'suit or the hard-hat, because you're *there*. Not *here*. (Cadigan 87)

Yuki eventually learns that the Out Door leads to the reconstruction of the "real, the true Old Japan" (218). The AR mythos is that it is possible to transcend the simulation by recreating a lost original. However, when Yuki wakes up after her bunraku performance, the dance that is supposed to revive/reveal Old Japan, an anonymous figure informs her that "she was actually a young man named Iguchi Tomoyuki who had been lost in a strange country for a long time. And

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Soviet" (Stephenson 162) nuclear leftovers point to the idea of post-apocalyptic historical and cultural recursiveness. Such images foreshadow each novel's denial of teleological transcendence (revelation) at their ending, as they suggest that the setting was always already post-apocalyptic. Due to the necessary limits of my thesis and my program, the discussion of waste/junk/garbage and the attendant discussion of teleology has been truncated. It is noteworthy, however, that this topic is deftly handled in Brent Bellamy's important book, *Remainders of the American Century*.

[78] As I argued in Chapter Three, absurdism supports a Baudrillardian interpretation of AR, as it relies on a spectacularized disconnection between sign and referent; therefore, the novel suggests that the absurdist is post-apocalyptic, and vice versa: "'Isn't it absurd for someplace that's supposed to be post-Apocalyptic to have a tourist bureau?' 'It's absurd for someplace that's supposed to be post-Apocalyptic to exist in a medium as technological and structured as Artificial Reality'" (Cadigan 107).

for another long time, Yuki found no reason to doubt her" (254). While Yuki's novel-length search for her supposedly dead friend Tom and the corresponding mythical search for Old Japan each apparently end with a discovery of what has been lost "for a long time," a revelation of a lost referent, the novel's closing line is an expression of doubt. Neither a new order of being nor a true original referent can be revealed in the context of a Baudrillardian post-apocalyptic world. The novel's recurring juxtaposition of wreckage and glitter, wasted cityscapes and "impossibly vivid" signs that "[fall] short of meaning" (97), serve to establish the double meaning of "post-apocalyptic" space, and in this way, such imagery foreshadows the sense of doubt and denied transcendence in the novel's final line. A reading of *Tea*'s setting alongside its Baudrillardian leanings hints that the narrative could not possibly end with an apocalypse (a revelation), because AR was always already post-apocalyptic.

In contrast with both *Tea* and *Neuromancer*, in which the theories of signification underlying virtual and nuclear themes correspond with one another, in *Snow Crash*, the virtual and the nuclear represent opposite viewpoints: truth versus simulation, respectively. Given Derrida's argument that "[l]iterature belongs to the nuclear age by virtue of the *performative* character of its relation to the referent" (28; my emphasis), one might expect *Snow Crash* to support a Derridean reading of apocalypse as revelation. However, when Raven drops a nuclear bomb on the Metaverse, and it manifests as a visual cacophony of artistic and cultural history, tying the nuclear to both the imaginary and the representational, the display ultimately ends with an advertisement promoting the coding skills of Hiro Protagonist, who hacked the bomb and forestalled the apocalypse at the last minute. In other words, the climactic nuclear threat becomes a spectacle of self-serving commercialism. *Snow Crash* denies the revelatory potential of

apocalypse, and instead suggests that the "atomic arsenal itself [is] a hyperreal form, a simulacrum that dominates everything" (Baudrillard 32).[79] The nuclear sword of Damocles that hangs over the Metaverse is that of simulation over truth. Just as nuclear junk and leftovers in the novel represent the return of the repressed, and hint that the setting is already post-apocalyptic, the spectacularized nuclear explosion represents the persistent anxiety that haunts the idealistic dream of the Metaverse: that all signs may be pure simulacra.

Apocalypse as a "Literary Problem": Nuclear Themes and Metafiction

Whether nuclear themes in cyberpunk anticipate an apocalyptic revelation of absolute truth, or suggest that the post-apocalyptic is synonymous with simulation, nuclear imagery thematizes the relationship between sign and referent. The novels' self-reflexive interest in language and symbolism suggests that *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea* each have strong metafictional elements. Drawing on Derrida's contention that nuclear apocalypse represents both

[79] *Snow Crash*'s apparent alignment with Baudrillard's idea that the nuclear represents the "apotheosis of simulation" (32) may also be tied to the novel's interest in agency, free will, and consciousness (both individual and political). Infection with the Snow Crash virus (a virus that also works as a nuclear bomb in the Metaverse) results in a mechanized hive-mind, and comparably, Baudrillard argues that "[w]hat is hatched in the shadow of [the nuclear] … is the perfection of the best system of control that has ever existed" (33). The technological perfection of the nuclear as "the model of death" is "the same model of programmatic infallibility … that today controls the spread of the social. There lies the true nuclear fallout: the meticulous operation of technology serves as a model for the meticulous operation of the social" (Baudrillard 34). In this way, the novel suggests that the loss of social autonomy is a symptom of the nuclear age. Grausam similarly explores the relationship between nuclear themes and problems of agency in his analysis of Barthelme's "Game": "'Game' is about two missile officers a hundred or more feet underground in their silo who are charged with the task of turning their launch keys in sync should the order come to launch their missile. … Obviously such figures were under immense pressure during the Cold War, and much psychological speculation focused on whether or not governments could trust humans to function in effect as automata, without giving thought to what they will be doing when they turn the key" (517-18). Thus, *Snow Crash*'s infected Raft people, with their fully automated and programmable mind(s), represent either the goal (Grausam) or the consequence (Baudrillard) of nuclear strategy. Given the thematic interest in consciousness and autonomy in *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea*, further study is needed on how virtual and nuclear imagery in cyberpunk work together to address themes of agency.

the culmination and the destruction of the literary archive, and McHale's point that cyberpunk's interest in virtual reality makes it "self-consciously 'world-building' fiction, laying bare the process of fictional world-making itself" (12), I conclude by arguing that cyberpunk uses virtual and nuclear themes to narrativize and reflect on its own beginning and end.

Both fictional and critical literatures often depict nuclear weapons as a form of symbolic communication; like virtual reality, nuclear weapons are a technology of signification, so, fiction about the nuclear issue is about language itself, and by extension, literature. Derrida argues that nuclear weapons are "*fabulously textual*" (23) partly because they are structured as a communications technology, an inscription in code:

> Nuclear weaponry depends, more than any weaponry in the past, it seems, upon structures of information and communication, structures of language, including non-vocalizable language, structures of codes and graphic decoding. [The bombs are] technologies of delivery, sending, dispatching, of the missile in general, of mission, missive, emission, and transmission. (23-24)[80]

The technology for dispatching and coordinating nuclear missiles is reducible to binary code, so, nuclear weapons are virtual weapons. Furthermore, some theorists view the global movements and placements of nuclear weapons as a form of symbolic political rhetoric. Daniel Grausam explains that the strategy of nuclear deterrence was "predicated on an enemy who could be relied upon to be rational even in the event of nuclear war, and who could read your own strikes as

[80] See also: "Just as all language, all writing, every poetico-performative or theoretico-informative text dispatches, sends itself, allows itself to be sent, so today's missiles… allow themselves to be described more readily than ever as dispatches in writing (code, inscription, trace, and so on). That does not reduce them to the dull inoffensiveness that some would naively attribute to books. It recalls (exposes, explodes) that which, in writing, always includes the power of a death machine" (Derrida 29).

rational; in this strategic culture, war becomes a form of conversation" (514).[81] *Snow Crash* parodies the idea of nuclear weapons as a form of hyper-rationalized conversation in the modified nuclear weapon "Reason" (Stephenson 361), which is stamped with a nameplate reading "Ultima Ratio Regum" – the "Last Argument of Kings" (361, 390). Terms like "argument," "conversation," and "code" suggest that the weapons are primarily a communications technology; not unlike virtual reality, they are reducible to sign systems. A reading of the nuclear and the virtual as similarly symbolic technologies supports the idea that cyberpunk looks toward the nuclear apocalypse as a linguistic and literary event.

Both Derrida and Klein argue that a nuclear apocalypse would primarily be a literary phenomenon,[82] not just because it implies a final revelation of truth in language, but because it would entail the loss of the literary archive. Klein explains that we can only ever discuss nuclear war as a "non-real referent" (Klein 81) or "signified referent" (Derrida 23) because,

> If the mirror breaks into total nuclear war, if we were to escape the condition of the phantasm or fable, and enter the so-called real, the entry of the real of total nuclear war is expected to coincide, according to the fable, with the exit from all

[81] Derrida similarly argues that the "worldwide organization of the human socius today hangs by the thread of nuclear rhetoric. This is immediately readable in the fact that we use the term 'strategy of deterrence'… for the overall official logic of nuclear politics. Dissuasion, or deterrence, means 'persuasion.'… The art of persuasion is … one of the two axes of what has been called rhetoric since classical times. The anticipation of nuclear war (dreaded as the fantasy, or phantasm, of a remainderless destruction) installs humanity … in its rhetorical condition" (24).

[82] Klein clarifies that "what we call literature may be precisely what is most at stake in the fable of total nuclear war. Being most at stake does not mean that we are more concerned with the survival of literature than with the loss of lives or the destruction of the ecological system. For indeed, it is not impossible to imagine, it is even likely perhaps, that human beings will survive, that the human habitat could regenerate.… But if total nuclear war meant the end of the archive, the destruction without a trace of the institutions of collective memory, then what is most absolutely vulnerable in the nuclear age is the institution of literature, and everything like literature which, at least since the eighteenth century, utterly depends on the archive's existence" (82).

> textuality, fabulous or otherwise. On that day, the fable has it, there may be no discourse left, no memory and no work of mourning capable of registering the then real referent; there will have been no more letters to take the news that there were no more letters. The conditions for any cultural record of the mirror having been broken will by virtue of its shattering cease to exist; the escape out of this imaginary relation to the nuclear phenomenon will have coincided with the end of the archive. (81)

The archive is an imagined totality of collective knowledge; it is "the storehouse of our culture from which, if it were to survive intact, our world could be reconstructed" (McHale 162). Derrida similarly argues that the loss of the archive would be the mark of a true apocalypse (26-28) as cultural reconstruction, or even a "work of mourning" (Klein 81), would become impossible. Therefore, if "apocalypse" refers to a revelation of truth in language that coincides with the loss of the written archive, then a nuclear apocalypse is also a literary apocalypse; and in a metafictional gesture, cyberpunk anticipates it as such.

The image of a nuclear-threatened archive appears in all three cyberpunk novels, suggesting that, in their preoccupation with nuclear apocalypse, each text looks toward the end of literature itself. In *Neuromancer*, for example, Case and his crew enlist the help of an artistic terrorist group called the Panther Moderns to raid the Sense/Net building's archives. The attack is replete with nuclear imagery, such as "a flare of white" (Gibson 84) and "images of contamination" (83); it leaves behind bodies, "blood, and long trampled scrolls of yellow printout" (90). Not only does this scene reinforce the connection between nuclear and artistic or surrealist imagery, but the image of trampled, blood-smeared scrolls lying next to dead bodies

suggests that nuclear violence is violence to the literary archive.[83] Similarly, Heuser suggests that the Librarian character in *Snow Crash* is an anthropomorphized archive: an imagined totality of knowledge that contains all available information on human cultures and civilizations (178). So, when Raven drops the nuclear Snow Crash bomb on the Metaverse, it is also an attack on the virtual archive. Finally, in *Tea from an Empty Cup*, cultural archives are tied to the body, just as bodies themselves are symbolic. The key to reconstructing Old Japan is "recover[ing] [a] catalog, with so many of the arts of Old Japan. *Bunraku*, for one" (Cadigan 220). But the lost art of bunraku is a puppeted dance (an embodied representation) and it must be actively performed by somebody who is "full Japanese" (64) in order to resurrect the lost civilization, suggesting that the archive has meaning only in its embodiment. Comparably, Detective Konstantin's cultural community (police officers) have their own version of an archive, a record of past and present investigations. Notably, this record would follow the same narrative as half of *Tea* itself: the story of Konstantin's investigation into eight separate murders in AR. Also like *Tea*, that narrative would be unreliable, as it is not Konstantin but her mostly absent partner who records their progress in the police archiver. The reader only glimpses the device once, "[f]rom Konstantin's angle, [when] the archiver was completely hidden by [her partner's] hand, so that he seemed to be using the stylus directly on his palm" (37). In *Tea*, the archive is inscribed on the body, and the body enacts the archive. But characters' bodies are subject to all kinds of hazards in AR, such as invasion, molestation, mutilation, confinement, manipulation, and the climactic

[83] Compare the "long trampled scrolls of yellow printout" (Gibson 90) to an image that immediately precedes Corto-Armitage's death: "a swirling mass of tangled printout. Case snatched a length of twisted paper and glanced at it. 000000000" (257). An archive of zero (of nothing): an archive destroyed. In a novel about virtual reality, it is notable that the archive always appears as physical paper. As such, it more obviously stands for all literature; and the novel ties both the blank archive and the trampled archive to images of death.

nuclear assault: "You explode like a bomb made of flesh and bone" (215).[84] Significantly, all the threats to bodies in *Tea* are also threats to embodied cultural archives. In all three novels, violence to a textual archive is linked to nuclear violence, and is always an apocalyptic gesture: the destruction of text is a metaphor for the destruction of worlds, and vice versa.

Insofar as nuclear apocalypse represents the moment when the end of literature, the loss of the archive, becomes synonymous with the *end* of sign systems to express something true, Derrida suggests that the nuclear referent represents the death drive of language. Derrida asks,

> "Is not the center, the absence of play and difference, another name for death?" If so … then the desire for a center is an aspect of a death wish. … "And in the repetition or return of play, how could the phantom of the center not call to us? It is here that the hesitation between writing as decentering and writing as an affirmation of play is infinite." Such a space of hesitation, but with the stakes raised incalculably high by the Bomb, is the apocalyptic space of the nuclear epoch. (qtd. in Robson 69)

The "desire for a center," for "the absence of play and difference" in signification, is "another name for death"; to wish for a revelation of truth in language is to wish for the death of literature, a space in which symbolic representation no longer has a place. And yet, "how could the phantom of the center not call to us?" The nuclear-as-death-drive metaphor helps to illustrate Derrida's point that the nuclear issue is the subject of all literature and criticism: it is that towards

[84] This line is addressed to Yuki by one of Joy Flower's grunts as he throws her from an airplane over and over again, torturing her for information about the location of post-Apocalyptic Tokyo. The image suggests that since both the body and the nuclear are pure simulacra in *Tea*, the body itself can serve as the bomb. Since Yuki later enacts the Japanese archive by performing "a dance that her blood knew" (Cadigan 233), and "resurrects" Old Japan in the process, the nuclear attack on her body seems to echo the original (unspoken) destruction of Japan.

which the literary mode is driven but which it strategically defers through linguistic "play." Thus, in its frequent ties between nuclear imagery and themes of signification, cyberpunk exposes its awareness of its own center.

A Derridean reading of the relationship between the nuclear and the symbolic in cyberpunk suggests that the genre is obsessed by nuclear apocalypse as the moment of its own loss: the end of fiction. Derrida maintains that:

> The only "subject" of all possible literature, of all possible criticism, its only ultimate and a-symbolic referent, unsymbolizable, even unsignifiable; this is, if not the nuclear age, if not the nuclear catastrophe, at least that toward which nuclear discourse and the nuclear symbolic are still beckoning: the remainderless and a-symbolic destruction of literature. Literature and literary criticism cannot speak of anything else, they can have no other ultimate referent. (28)[85]

The only possible subject of literature is that which can never be included in the literary archive because it will destroy the archive. If all writing revolves around nuclear apocalypse – or that which nuclear apocalypse represents, a simultaneous moment of truth and loss – then cyberpunk does so self-consciously. The title of *Neuromancer* provides a broad hint that the novel anticipates and centers around the nuclear apocalypse as a literary apocalypse. Neuromancer only appears briefly at the end of the story, so the entire narrative looks toward the absent nuclear referent: the revelation of the AI's "true name" (Gibson 342), the nuclear name, comprises the end of the book. Nuclear apocalyptic imagery in cyberpunk may be seen as a metafictional

[85] See also: "one cannot be satisfied with saying that, in order to become serious and interesting today, a literature and a literary criticism must refer to the nuclear issue, must even be obsessed by it. This has to be said, and it is true. But I believe also that, at least indirectly, they have always done this. Literature has always belonged to the nuclear epoch" (Derrida 27).

element of the subgenre because it thematizes the "ultimate referent" of all literature, the absolute limit of signification: the moment of the sign's self-destruction in its unveiling of a true referent.[86]

[86] In a rare moment of agreement between Derridean and Baudrillardian perspectives, a Baudrillardian reading of nuclear imagery as a metafictional device similarly suggests that nuclear themes in cyberpunk point to the end of fiction. Baudrillard argues that in the age of simulacra (which is also the nuclear age), "the good old imaginary of science fiction is dead" (121). It is dead because fictional "projection is totally reabsorbed in the implosive era of models. The models no longer constitute either transcendence or projection, they no longer constitute the imaginary in relation to the real, they are themselves an anticipation of the real, and thus leave no room for any kind of fictional anticipation. [*T*]*here is no more fiction*" (122). Baudrillard suggests that fiction (especially science fiction), is projective and anticipatory, even a transcendent mode. Like apocalyptic discourse, its "meanings and referents always exceed what 'is' and point toward what is 'other' than what is" (Robson 63). Therefore, in the post-apocalyptic age, "there is no more fiction," because there is no longer a meaningful difference between real and imaginary. Metafictionally, whether nuclear themes in cyberpunk represent Derridean apocalypticism or Baudrillardian post-apocalypticism, they signify the death and the loss of fiction.

Conclusion

The Ends and Loss of Cyberpunk Fiction

The endurance of Cold War history and the recurring nuclear imagery in cyberpunk undermine the genre's futuristic settings. *Neuromancer*, *Snow Crash*, and *Tea from an Empty Cup* suggest that it is impossible to imagine a future beyond the nuclear era because the nuclear marks the terminus of imagination and prediction. Insofar as nuclear imagery symbolizes an unimaginable and unrepresentable referent, it also stands for the absolute limit of signification and, in this way, it complements cyberpunk's interest in virtual reality. In *Neuromancer*, the virtual world comes closest to the world of Forms, so naturally the "absolute referent" (Derrida 28) that is the nuclear referent can only be revealed in the context of cyberspace. In *Snow Crash*, nuclear imagery represents imperfectly repressed anxieties: both a political and cultural anxiety regarding the enduring impact of the Cold War and the nuclear era on futuristic landscapes, and a postmodern anxiety regarding the role of the author in the creation and arbitration of truth. Finally, *Tea* frames an unrepresentable nuclear catastrophe (the loss of Japan) as the origin story for the events of the narrative and the model for its ruined virtual settings. In doing so, the novel suggests that what follows the nuclear event could not possibly be anything other than post-apocalyptic (a world that has already foregone the prospect of symbolic revelation). All three novels use virtual and nuclear themes to explore the relationship between sign and referent, and my finding is that virtual and nuclear imagery stand for the creation and destruction of symbolic worlds. I read cyberpunk as self-conscious narrativizations of the life and death of fiction.

Just as cyberpunk uses nuclear imagery to reflect on its own end (the destruction of the literary archive), it also thematizes the process of its own creation (fiction writing) by tying virtual reality to language. McHale explains the "paraspace" motif, including cyberspace, "not only serves to bring into view the "worldness" of world; it also offers opportunities for reflecting concretely on world-making itself, and on science fiction world-making in particular" (253).[87] Further, cyberpunk tends to represent virtual reality as a fictional world built by signs within the fictional world of the book, and so virtual reality is always (potentially) a metafictional device.[88] Books about symbols and text are books about books. *Neuromancer*'s idealistic geometry, *Snow Crash*'s performative code, and the purely simulative aspect of *Tea*'s empty signs each evinces a different conception of language and literature, suggesting that each novel "reflect[s] concretely" on a different approach to McHale's "science-fiction world-making."

Neuromancer's virtual idealism and nuclear apocalypticism (nuclear revelation) suggest that literature must inevitably fall short of its intended meaning, as perfect reference is both the absolute center and the death of representation. *Neuromancer* presents the hacker as an author-figure by giving Case the nickname "artiste" (Gibson 4, 307), a name that only appears

[87] McHale argues further: "All fictional texts (but not *only* fictional texts) project worlds, of course; this is one of the necessary conditions … for our identifying them *as* fiction. But not every fictional text is *about* world-projection; not every fictional text reflects on its ways of world-making" (175).

[88] One of the earliest depictions of virtual reality in science fiction, *Simulacron-3* by Daniel F. Galouye (1964), offers an alternative view of the basis of virtual reality (and arguably, nuclear apocalypse). Galouye's novel focuses on the role of electricity rather than language in the construction and destruction of worlds: "A simulectronic creation. A world of intangible illusion. A balanced interplay of electronic charges racing off tapes and drums, leaping from cathodes to anodes, picking up the stimuli of biasing grids" (85). "But even matter itself was intangible. … It was composed, in the final analysis, of 'subatomic' particles, which were actually only immaterial 'charges.' Was that concept so untenably alien to the [discovery] … that matter and motion were but reflections of electronic charges in a simulator?" (87). "This was Doomsday. … The ceaseless surge of sustaining currents would come to abrupt rest.… In that instant, warm and convincing reality would be translated into the nothingness of neutralized circuits. A universe would be lost forever in one final, fatal moment of total simulectronic entropy" (150).

twice, bookending the narrative. The hacker is an artist insofar as his goal is to uncover the "true name" (Gibson 342) that is the nuclear name – to represent something true or meaningful – but the nature of representation is to obscure referents, just as the "true names" of cyberspace's programs are hidden behind surrealistic imagery. As I have argued, the desire for symbolic revelation is an apocalyptic impulse in *Neuromancer*: the death drive of language. The revelation of "true names," true referents, is that towards which literature aims but can never realize, because it marks the loss of literature. From this perspective, the novel's overlapping metaphors and "semantic clashes" (Heuser 103) in its descriptions of cyberspace are actually an anti-apocalyptic gesture, deferrals of the revelatory death drive. A metafictional reading of *Neuromancer* reveals that literature exists only in its own failure to consummate in truthful or meaningful representation.

In contrast, *Snow Crash* ties the virtual to literal language, and the nuclear to figurative language. The two technologies are diametrically opposed rather than counterparts to one another in Stephenson's novel; the virtual represents truth, and the nuclear represents simulation. Metafictionally, virtual and nuclear imagery in *Snow Crash* signify two different kinds of *creative* writing – the performative and the metaphoric – suggesting a correlation between hacker and author.[89] Hiro is an author-figure of the Metaverse; thus, the novel represents the author (parodically) as an all-powerful, near-mystical creator of worlds. At one point, Hiro compares a hacker's ability to speak creative words (binary code) to "the moment when God created the world by speaking a word" (Stephenson 278). Creation myths in cyberpunk serve as another metafictional device: stories about the creation of worlds, within stories about the creation of

[89] Heuser argues that *Snow Crash* is metafictional because Hiro's role as a coder of the virtual world (like Case's in *Neuromancer*) "mirrors Stephenson's role as the author of a parallel fiction" (172).

worlds (both *Snow Crash* and *Tea* invoke creation myths to reinforce their world-making-through-signs theme). Moreover, *Snow Crash* consistently ties agency, consciousness, free will, and social class to literacy:

> We have a huge workforce that is illiterate or alliterate and relies on TV – which is sort of an oral tradition. And we have a small, extremely literate power elite – the people who go into the Metaverse, basically – who understand that information is power, and who control society because they have this semimystical ability to speak magical computer languages. (Stephenson 406)

The elites "control society" because they can speak magically creative (performatively true) languages, while the masses are "illiterate" and therefore susceptible to infection by viral ideas.[90] Thus, the novel's depiction of binary code as a performative language reflects a "postmodern awareness that words themselves construct reality" (Wilcox qtd. in Heffernan 179) and, Hiro's "authorial authority … becomes an implicit critique – as all excesses do – of the power it asserts, the power to write history" (Nadel 56).[91] *Snow Crash*'s depiction of virtual performativity and nuclear aestheticism ties the thematic tension between real and unreal representation (truth and simulation) to the question of authority and agency. In other words, the novel offers a postmodern metafictional critique of literature and authorship as that which constructs and determines truth rather than reflects it.

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[90] For more on the class division in *Snow Crash* as one based in notions of literacy (the writers and the diseased, those with autonomy, consciousness, and free will divided from those who get infected by viral memes), see Wisecup, Swanstrom (69, 75), Lewis (48, 54), Kelly (77-80), and Heuser (184).

[91] *Snow Crash*'s skepticism of authorial power is typical of postmodernism, as the genre "represents a profound decentering of authority… in the realm of writing – the authorizing voice of any text – and in the voice of history itself" (Nadel 55). See Nadel's *Containment Culture* for more on the postmodernist view that literature shapes rather than reflects history (45-48, 67, 202), science (41-45), ethics (45), law (199-200), and reality (168).

Finally, insofar as *Tea* is metafictional, the Baudrillardian artificiality of its post-apocalyptic virtual world (its empty, origin-less symbolism) suggests that literature is not inherently meaningful; rather, it provides a space for interpretation and the reassembling of signs. Unlike Gibson's and Stephenson's novels, Cadigan's fiction "tends to focus on the consumption phase of [technological] production" (Seed 71). The protagonists are novice AR users rather than expert coders, which means they represent readers instead of authors. As such, AR in *Tea* exists only through a lens of interpretation and subjectivity. Furthermore, the novel's reader-narrators are as unreliable as its setting (not least because access to high-level AR depends on a mind-altering drug, so the narrators' points-of-view are explicitly tainted). In Cadigan's work, "[t]here is no mediating, omniscient narrator who can help the reader. … Since there is no objective frame of reference, nothing can be determined as real or beyond question. Every narrative strand may turn out to be an illusion" (Heuser 160). *Tea* consistently denies the reader access to any objective account of what "really" happens in the story. Therefore, AR is a metaphor for the fictional world, and the novel's ambiguous ending, unreliable narrators, absent framing world, and most importantly, its portrayal of virtual reality as a system of signs without referents or origins, work together to suggest that a narrative does not have a stable underlying meaning. Story exists only in the mind of the reader, in a state of constant negotiation and play. Metafictionally, *Tea* calls for the death of the author(s) that are present in both *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*.

At the time of completing this thesis, Russia has invaded Ukraine and the renewed threat of nuclear war is once more part of global conversations and anxieties. Cyberpunk's thematic interest in the persistence of Cold War tensions and the unimaginability of a post-nuclear future

now appears eerily prescient. The invasion of Ukraine, as well as Facebook's rebranding as Meta in homage to Stephenson's novel, point to the resurgence (or latency) of cyberpunk's cultural relevance. Such events support the genre's suggestion that virtual reality and nuclear weapons are technologies of the "broad present" (Gomel 1): they allow for a simultaneity of past, present, and future. Despite some (perhaps) seemingly tongue-in-cheek comparisons in this thesis (such as the post-apocalyptic and the absurd), my reading of nuclear imagery as a comment on language and literature is meant in good faith. As critical readings of nuclear weapons as communications technology (Derrida 23-24), nuclear strategy as political rhetoric (Derrida 24, Baudrillard 33), and nuclear "war [as] a form of [hyper-rationalized] conversation" (Grausam 514) each suggest, the nature of the relationship between the nuclear and the symbolic is a question with very real stakes. I follow Klein in believing that the relationship between "the fable of total nuclear war" and the reality "here and now" of nuclear strategy "already constitutes what we might venture to call, at the risk of not being seriously understood, a literary problem for Nuclear Criticism" (82). As I have argued, virtual and nuclear themes in cyberpunk stand for the creation and destruction of symbolic worlds, and in this way, they work as metaphors for the inception and demise of fictional worlds. As such, each book's containment of both the beginning and the end of worlds (virtual and fictional) within the confines of its pages present the cyberpunk text as a metaphor for the finitude of all worlds.

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