

The Rebirth of Science Fiction: Postmodernism and the New Wave writers

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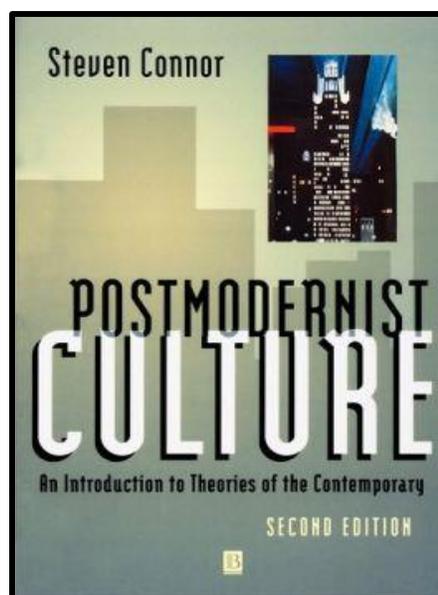
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Introduction

The 1960's science fiction writers, also known as the new wave writers, imagined the destruction of the planet, the annihilation of the human race and other post-apocalyptic inspired visions. The new wave movement did not define itself as a development of the science fiction which came before it, but rather reacted against it. "The new wave represents a productive experiment in fantasy fiction. The new wave of the 1960s and 1970s arguably embodied science fiction's claim to literary 'seriousness.' This desire for seriousness is not snobbery, as sometimes suggested by folks who overemphasize the entertainment function of speculative fiction; it's about recognition of the vast possibilities within the field" (Darja Malcolm-Clarke, 59). Informed by postmodern literature, the new wave writers focused on stylistic experimentation as well as literary quality instead of scientific accuracy. Their stories told of destructive events, events may occur in the not too distant future. Such writers include J.G. Ballard, Philip José Farmer, Pamela Zane whose major themes were destruction and devastation, with underlying themes that represented a rising epidemic in society. In this essay, I will explore how J.G Ballard and John Brunner examined social anxieties regarding new technologies. After summarizing postmodernism and its relationship to science fiction literature, I will analyze two key works by each author, *The Drowned World* and *Crash* by Ballard, as well as *The Jagged Orbit* and *The Shockwave Rider* by Brunner.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is essentially a response to the presumed inevitability of scientific, or objective, efforts to elucidate reality. In principle, postmodernism branch from the acknowledgement that reality is not solely reflected in human understanding, but instead, is formed as the human mind attempts to apprehend its own individual and personal reality. The current postmodernist belief is that the true meaning of reality can never be unmasked and that it is impossible to attain a description of reality. Furthermore, from a postmodern perspective, everything is dependent upon interpretation; reality comes into existence solely through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually. Therefore, Postmodernism hinges greatly upon concrete knowledge over abstract principles, having in mind the idea that the product of one's own experience will necessarily be imperfect and relative, rather than definite and universal.

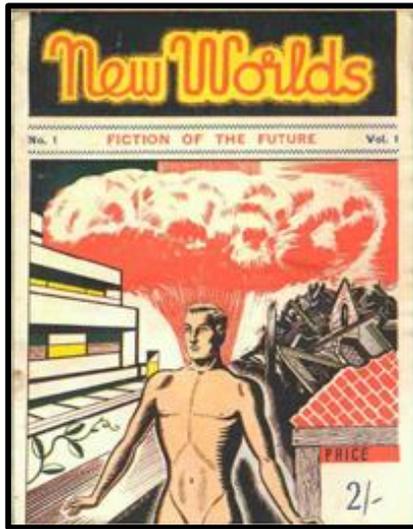


The postmodern movement gave birth to a genre of literature known as postmodern literature. Postmodern literature is classified by a substantial dependence on methods like disintegration, enigma, and questionable narrators. As a genre, Postmodernism is usually defined as a style that emerged in the post–World War II era and is seen as a reaction against enlightenment thinking as well as modernist methodologies towards literature. However, there may be a few accounts of literary postmodernism that would insist on some form of critical engagement with modernism rather than simply turning away from it. Postmodern literature, like postmodernism, endeavors to oppose definition or classification as a ‘movement’. While there is little agreement on the specific characteristics, extent, and importance of postmodern literature, as is often the case with artistic movements, postmodern literature is commonly defined in relation to a predecessor. For example, according to Steven Connor in his book, *Postmodernist culture*, “a postmodern literary work tends not to conclude with the neatly tied-up ending as is often found in modernist literature, but often parodies it” (Connor 139). Postmodern authors tend to praise chance over dexterity, and utilize metafiction to challenge the writer's authority. Furthermore, one of the most remarkable developments in postmodernist writing and writing about postmodern writing has been the increased prominence and establishment of science fiction.

Postmodernism and Science Fiction

The postmodern movement also had a substantial impact on the literary genre of science fiction. The literary genre of science fiction has been interpreted in several forms. Science fiction is a broad field containing various themes and sub-genres. As stated by Damon Knight in *Search of wonders: Essays on Modern science fiction*, “science fiction is what we point to when we say it” (Knight). Similar to the definition that Mark Glassy presents in his article, *The Biology of “Science Fiction Cinema”*, in which he stated, “the definition of science fiction is like the definition of pornography: you do not know what it is, but know it when you see it (Glassy). The genre of science fiction literature is so prevalent that scholars and practitioners are still contesting the question of its exact origins and definition. Contingent upon one’s interpretation and point of view, science fiction is either a fairly contemporary literary phenomenon that, despite its unpretentious roots, is gaining an immense amount of popularity and is rapidly moving towards a brighter, more lucrative future, or one of the hoariest and most well-known of literary genres, a genre of ingenious fiction that continues to effectively reinvent itself time after time, but now finds itself desperately struggling to keep up with the astounding uncertainties of high-tech reality itself. Despite the views of many critics, an essential aspect of science fiction can be seen as understanding our world and surroundings. Science fiction describes how the advancements of science and technology affect society. Furthermore, science fiction is the literature of change, for example, when a society goes through a substantial change as a result of technological and scientific advancement, writers and authors compose literary works that express their views on how that change affects the delicate fabric that we call society. The changes put forth by these authors shape our future, as well influence our society to a great extent. Therefore, science fiction plays a vital role in how certain social and technological development will impact our society.

New Wave Science Fiction Writers



During the postmodernist movement, a profound transformation swept through the genre of science fiction. A new generation of science fiction authors surfaced in Britain and the United States who established a profound literary and experimental style of science fiction writing. These authors, who became known as the new wave of science fiction, pushed their creative imagining towards stylistic experimentation, valuing literary excellence over scientific accuracy. The term "New Wave" is borrowed from the French film movement known as the *nouvelle vague*. A wide variety of authors were part of the new wave movement, authors including J. G. Ballard, Samuel R. Delany, Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and Philip K. Dick. These authors have attained critical attention in the literary mainstream. The rise of the new wave writers was understood as an intentional cessation of

the traditional science fiction, also known as pulp science fiction, which many of the new writers thought to be unrelated and lacking ambition. One of the most distinctive differences that the new wave/postmodern science fiction had from traditional/pulp science fiction was that, the new wave writers sought to challenge the pulp genre conventions that they felt had dominated science fiction since the Golden Age; therefore, they began to focus more on the soft science rather than the hard science. In the last half-century, the term hard science fiction has been used to describe works in which writers provide a significant amount of attention to accurate scientific theories, and technological applications (for example "Gravity," directed by Alfonso Cuarón in 2013). In other words, it is a work of science fiction that bears a strong relationship to science, pure or applied. Conversely, soft science fiction mainly focuses on philosophy, psychology and identity transformation in the face of new technologies for example, *The Atrocity Exhibition* by J.G Ballard. As Ballard states in his essay "Which Way to the Inner World", "The biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is *inner space*, not outer, that need to be explored. The only truly alien planet is Earth. In the past the scientific bias of science fiction has been towards the physical sciences—rocketry, electronics, cybernetics—and the emphasis should switch to the biological sciences" (160). In this assertion, Ballard is arguing that in order for us to develop a deeper anticipation of our upcoming future; we need to invest our attention towards our planet rather than exploring the deep abyss of outer space.

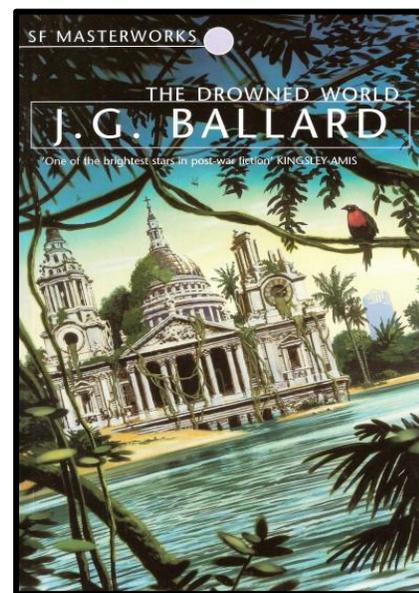
Ballard along with many other new wave science fiction writers believed that science fiction should be taken seriously as a form of literature. In order to fulfill this belief the new wave science fiction writers began experimenting with language and their style of writing, creating "cognitive estrangement", a literary technique referring to the idea that by imagining peculiar worlds we learn to see our own world in a new perspective. Cognitive estrangement indicated a kind of alienation or de-familiarization effect that new wave writers used to separate postmodern/new wave science fiction from traditional/pulp science fiction.

Ballard

Ballard was born in Shanghai in 1930, where he spent the first fifteen years of his profound life. At the age of sixteen, Ballard interned at a Japanese camp during World War II and was deported to England. He attended Cambridge University and obtained his degree in medicine and a few years later he sold his first story to *New Worlds*, a renowned science fiction magazine, in 1956. He is the author of numerous novels and short story collections, including *Crash*, *Empire of the Sun* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Ballard stepped into the realm of the new wave movement, early in his career with apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic novels such as *The Burning World* (1964), *The Crystal World* (1966) and many others. Ballard was a writer who challenged easy categorization: even his most speculative books cannot be fitted neatly with a genre label, and his more mainstream works contain fantastical and speculative elements.

The Drowned World

Ballard's style of writing was very distinct; most if not all of his works primarily focus on dystopian modernity, bleak man-made catastrophic landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments. Additionally, Ballard focused on an extensive variety of short stories as *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), which illustrated closer comparison with the work of postmodernist literature. However, his first popular novel, *The Drowned World*, was published in 1962, at the brink of the postmodern movement. In his novel, *The Drowned World*, Ballard posits a fictional realm in which the world has been overcome by a catastrophic greenhouse effect. The violent solar storms have depleted the outer layers of Earth's ionosphere, resulting in temperature and solar radiation to rise exponentially, melting the polar ice caps. This vast outflow of water

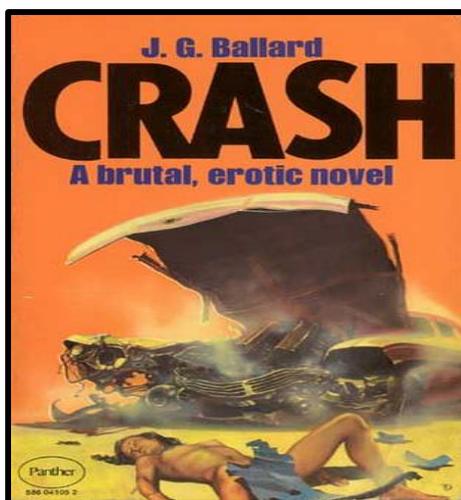


carries with it tons of topsoil, obstructing the oceans and entirely changing the delineations of the continents, sinking some parts of the world and dividing others. The radiation not only drowns half of the world, but it also creates freak mutations in Earth's flora and fauna, beginning a new biological era similar of the Paleozoic era, in which the giant lizards and reptiles were the dominant species along with tropical plants. As Ballard describes, "As the sun rose over the lagoon, driving clouds of steam into the great golden pall, the terrible stench of the water-line, the sweet compacted smells of dead Vegetation and rotting animal carcasses" (Ballard, ch 2, 1962). This is Ballard's representation of a future London immersed under water, in which survivors must contend with intense heat, giant mosquitoes, and the constant threat of attack by rival gangs scattered across the flooded city.

For Ballard, environmental catastrophe presents an opportunity to explore the instability of innovation. The key character of the novel is Dr. Robert Kerans. Dr. Kerans is portrayed as a manager of a biological testing station, who monitors drastic changes in the world. In this novel, Ballard is not concerned with the typical apocalyptic matters of how man is defeated or discovers a technology to escape the situation. Instead, he illuminated the apocalyptic

experience by combining an alternative physical world with an alternative psychic one, as his main character, Kerans, develops a powerful connection with nature, resulting from both imagination and genetic unconscious. As a result, the novel becomes a strange intermingling of Kerans inner and outer worlds. As the story develops, Karen begins to become aware of the biological and psychological changes beginning to occur in his human nature. However, he is unable to control these changes, which ultimately lead to his death. Ballard closely monitors Kerans struggles against that devolutionary compulsions of the environment, and from it, he crafts a highly persuasive demonstration of the instability of the 'technological man'. He belittles man in comparison to nature by illustrating that man has no control over its inner or outer world. A small but ruthless change in the planetary environment results in the destruction of mankind through natural disaster and left the ones who survived, struggling against the mind. Ballard portrays, how man's fragile grip on his survival lies in the fact that he cannot acclimate quickly enough, and that his subconscious impulses destroy the body even if they produce a sense of unity with the altered world. Ballard presents this idea in the novel through Kerans, as he is truly caught in a paradox towards the end of his survival. He is doing what his subconscious self wants, but, because he has morphed beyond the biological to the technological in order to support his survival, the inner self of the cells offer guidance, which is suicidal. Therefore, from this we can see how Ballard is promoting the ideas that mankind will become impermanent and vulnerable if it relies solely on the means of technology for survival. Thus predicting the effect of technological advancement for the future of human civilization and mankind.

Crash

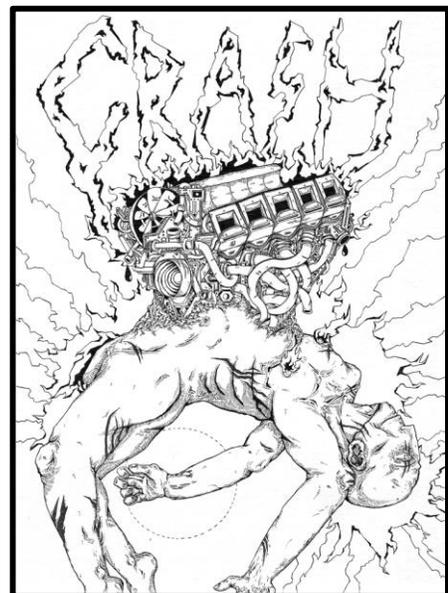


Ballard further examines the role of technological advancements and how they impact the human mind in his novel *Crash*. *Crash* is an unorthodox novel that epitomizes the idea of postmodern science fiction. The novel itself explores the very notion of transportation and, in the process, re-imagines the possibilities of technology in late industrial culture. Similar to some of Ballard's previous works like *High Rise*, *Concrete Island* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*. *Crash* is a techno-apocalyptic novel that revels in medical representations of the destruction of the human body while it employs the promise of new human hybrid forms. In the novel, James Ballard, the protagonist and narrator, one day is involved in a car accident, in which he accidentally kills a man. In that accident, he meets Dr.

Helen Remington, the wife of the victim and as the story progresses Ballard and Remington develop a strong intimate relationship. They eventually meet a man named Dr. Vaughan, who has a sexual fetish for car crashes. Subsequently, Ballard, Remington and Vaughan start to follow car crashes around the city of London, and begin to partake in sexual activity in their vehicles. All of their sexual adventures escalate, with Vaughan having the ultimate goal of being involved in a head on collision that will result in the death of the actress Elizabeth Taylor. The novel, *Crash* reveals the fate of the human body in a world of automotive disaster. In many respects is the most profound and inventive of all Ballard's novels. Unlike *The Atrocity Exhibition*, it is strained, continuous and quite comprehensive; however, it is just as scientific

and bizarre. For example, when Ballard writes, “Did the odor of illicit sex acts infest (the nurse’s) underwear as they drove home from the hospital, the traces of smegma and vaginal mucus on their hands marrying with the splashed engine coolant of unexpected car crashes?” “Already the skin picked in a palisade of notches from her lower lip marked the arithmetic of widowhood...” “I wanted to adjust the contours of her breasts and hips to the roofline of the car, celebrating in this sexual act the marriage of their bodies with this benign technology.” The novel, *Crash*, is truly a pornographic novel with sexual descriptions that are as graphic as one can find, yet the interconnection of its eroticism, the car crashes symbolizing the advent of a new sexuality, shows how the novel is a work of new wave science fiction writing. The setting of the novel is based in the concrete landscape of the late industrial culture. In the novel Ballard presents the world through a wide-angle lens that deprives it of depth, depicting it as an endless surface. In this fashion, Ballard is crafting a novel that is apocalyptic in both the destructive and generative sense of the term.

Through *Crash*, Ballard shatters the very notion of organic wholeness. His text is a narrative of merging technologies and emerging biology, of abnormality and eccentricities. As Ballard states, “*Crash* is a study of splattering carnage and mechanized carnality; of new eroticisms angling forth as ancient humanist myths perpetually collapse under the weight of their own tired fictions” (Ballard). Furthermore, it is a tale that provides an account of what it means to be human, an account that very few novelists would even attempt. It is, in short, a collection of collisions that convey the destructive force of essentially all forms of modernization. At the same time, however, it is a book that reveals, though in a distinctly non-modernist manner, the multiple potentials of destructive intersections of man and machine. Ballard claimed that the novel was



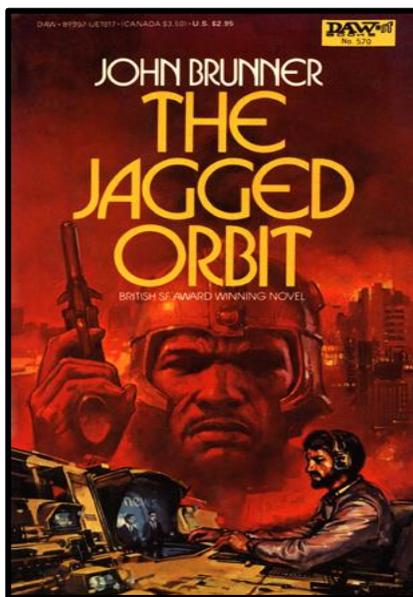
"cautionary, a warning against that brutal, erotic and over lit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape" (Ballard). Ballard does not simply tell the story of a man obsessed with an actress. Instead, he creates a terrifying vision of obsession mixing with technology and eventually leading to the death of innocent people. He captures the horrifying consequences of car accidents and speculates on the terrifying possibility that there may be people who want to create car crashes for their own pleasure. The technology of the automobile, which seems beneficial on the surface, is easily turned into an instrument of mass destruction. Moreover, Ballard is foreshadowing on the concept that if humans were to become solely dependent on technology, it would have catastrophic results, a concept that Ballard deliberately promotes as an underlying theme in *Crash*. In conclusion, Ballard is a creative, literary outlaw. His literature is driven by a restless pursuit to truly comprehend modernity. For example, many of his works are based upon inquiries such as, “Where is society going? What are our deepest fears and motivations?” He is engrossed and repulsed by the estranged, technologized, post-industrial world of which he writes. He warned of the leveling threat of technology, of the "suburbanization of the soul" in many of his works including *The Drowned World* and *Crash*.

John Brunner

John Kilian Houston Brunner was one of the most prolific and influential new wave science fiction authors of the late twentieth century. According to Donald H. Tuck, a science fiction bibliographer, Brunner was born at Preston Crowmarsh, near Wallingford in Oxfordshire, and went to school at St Andrew's Prep School, Pang Bourne then to Cheltenham. He wrote his first novel, *Galactic Storm*, at the age of 17, which he published under the name of Gill Hunt, however he did not write full-time until 1958 (Tuck). During his career, the British author wrote with a fortitude that could only be matched by a few other great science fiction writers. Through his writing style, he incorporated modernist techniques into his novels and probed every major theme of his generation, varying from robotics and racism up to technological warfare, and space exploration.

Brunner was known for focusing on examining prejudice, social fragmentation, advanced weaponry, and existentialism in a dystopian setting. During the 1960's there was a significant amount of social tension and conflict, within the United States. Along with unpopular feuds being fought on foreign soil, blood was also being shed on American streets as ethnic, gender, and counter-culture anxieties often turned to violence. As a result of these social issues, the new wave science fiction movement shifted the genre's emphasis, moving away from extra-terrestrials and instead focusing on Earth-side concerns. John Brunner, an ingenious author, made the shift highly successful and began integrating these concerns directly into his works.

The Jagged Orbit



In his novel, *The Jagged Orbit*, John Brunner highlights several of these issues, with the main focus on how advancements in technological weaponry can wreak havoc in society. The novel takes place in the early 21st century, in the year 2014. At this time, the U.S. is divided into racially separate city-states of knees, referring to African Americans and knee-blank, referring to the whites. These groups clash with each other, driving the rise of a second civil war. Alongside this setting, Michael Flamen, the main character of the novel, a mudslinging gossip reporter with his own daily television newsmagazine, carries on as the last spoolpigeon, a media commentator. However, his show has been interrupted for several months by a strange interference. Flamen theorizes that the network, the elite who control the public broadcasting of the nation, is plotting to force him off the air, in order to utilize that time for certain infomercials. As he tries to investigate the cause

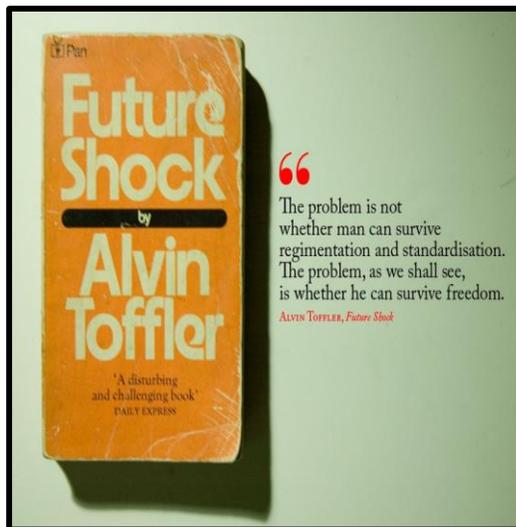
of the interference, he accidentally discovers a conspiracy within the Gottschalk gun-dealing cartel. The Gottschalk's exploit the racial fears of both sides, by selling an abundance of weapons to one side in order to make the other want more. As one character puts it, "they live off the carrion of our mutual distrust and bribe us with symbols that equate hatred with manhood" (Brunner 65). They act as the cold-blooded middlemen who fuel the growing conflict between the two racial groups. Flamen believes Gottschalks have persuaded the I.N.S. to allow

Morton Lenigo, an influential racial separatist, into the country. In order to put a stop to the Gottshalks, Flamen joins forces with Lyla Clay, a woman who speaks prophecies while under the influence of powerful hallucinogens, Xavier Conroy, a psychiatrist, Pedro Diablo, exiled knee propagandist, and Harry Madison, a knee mental patient with a gift for electronics engineering. These characters come together to and try to put a stop to the Gottschalks scheme: to use the advanced weaponry to keep the nation segregated.

Considering the ruthlessness of the setting and the harsh manner in which the social concerns are presented, *The Jagged Orbit* is a dark, unsettling read. The narrative dense and oblique, in terms of the world Brunner imagines, the readers have much to digest over coming to terms with the novel's background and meaning. The feeling of vagueness, which arises due to being unfamiliar with the futuristic scene and frightened at the possibility of such startling chaos, parallels the instability and uncertainty the characters themselves experience. Throughout the novel, racism, gun violence, drugs, dependence on computers, and mental health figure are key issues, however, the chaos caused by advanced weaponry and isolation take center stage. Throughout the novel, Brunner makes many accurate predictions about the future. For example, he manages to illustrate a society with advanced computer and communications technologies, as well as the significance of "spoolpigeoning", referring to blogging. Brunner manages to accurately predict the uprising of the Internet and cybersex, however he chooses to portray these as a distancing rather than unifying technology. Additionally, the novel's central theme is the indistinct concept of isolation: how technology, if put into the wrong hands, can be used to construct and exploit cracks between people, causing catastrophic effects, and ripping the delicate fabric of society into pieces. Brunner's ultimate resolution, that true tranquility can only be unifying ourselves rather than dividing ourselves in war, can be seen as he titles, chapter 1: "I -" and Chapter 2: "-solationism"; Chapter 99: "You-", and Chapter 100: "-nification" (Brunner).

Brunner's predictions about gun violence, drug abuse, and our over-reliance upon technology is still very relevant. For example, according to an article in the New York Times, a group in Arizona sought to offer free guns to single women and other "people of vulnerability". This is an instance that relates to the novel in that it ignores the actual issue of safety and suggests to be overly dependent on technology. Intrinsically, it would appear that the theme of the novel has only gained in relevance since the book's publishing in 1967. Like the Gottschalks, the gun manufacturers of today, are only concerned with profits, rather than the greater effect of their product on society. Furthermore, considering the increasing number of incidents involving gun violence in the U.S and the insane possibility that guns may be offered out like candy, it seems that Brunner's concern, of the harmful effects of technology, needs to be addressed now more than ever.

The Shockwave Rider



In his novel, *The Shockwave Rider*, Brunner further examines and predicts the destructive effects of technological advancements and how they alter our society. Based on the novel *Future Shock* by Alvin Toffler, *The Shockwave Rider* depicts a dystopian society, in the U.S around the year 2010, dominated by computer networks. Along with this, the government has become an oligarchy whose holders are participants of systematized delinquency, or wide scale corruption. The setting includes an enormous earthquake leveling out the entire city of San Francisco in California. As a result of the earthquake, the nation experiences a massive economic depression, combined with the social instability

caused by access to private online data. Moreover, the novel is focused on the protagonist, Nick Haflinger, who was orphaned at an early age, but was recruited at 10 years by Tarnover, a government agency whose purpose is to cultivate a generation of gifted children to use as a resource in a race with other nations. The novel is set in the weeks succeeding Nick's recapture after several years on the run from Tarnover. The story begins with Nick discovering that experiments are being performed at Tarnover, in genetic engineering, experiments that produce horrifically deformed children who were treated as lab rats and eradicated when they are no longer needed for study. Because of this, Nick becomes determined to escape. In order to execute his escape, he steals a personal ID code, reserved for important individuals who can afford to live their lives without surveillance, and flees the facility. He uses the code to conceal his data trails and build new identities for himself. After his escape, Nick believes that the only way to improve all states of the nation is by eliminating all secrecy. Thus, he constructs a "worm," to implement a kind of utilitarian socialism, with people's value being measured by their roles on society, rather than their connections in high places. By activating the worm, he leaks out all the government's deepest darkest secrets. Consequently, the government tries to seek revenge by ordering a nuclear strike at the activation site of the worm, putting millions of innocent lives in jeopardy. Luckily, Nick surpasses the military computers, by using a "hearing-aid" and orders to stop the strike just before it reaches its destination (Brunner).

In his novel, Brunner presents several concepts that are extremely relevant in today's time. He truly understood the harmful effects that computers can cause to society. He even presents the concept of worms, referring to computer viruses, and the havoc that they can cause, a concept that was far out of his temporal period. Along with this idea, Brunner presents a world where every phone is connected to the computer network, much like today due to the advent of smart phones and social media. However, in the novel everyone had a "code", a number that stands for his or her overall identity. Thus, people were afraid that their codes might be devalued or even misused by others, creating an unnecessary notion of paranoia in society. Although it does not exist in our society to the extent it did in the novel, the theft of personal information is a growing issue that causes social concern. Additionally, Brunner shows how a society with an advanced informational & technological network would be very chaotic because everyone would

try to gain control of this informational network through the technology, whether its digital data or genetic code. Governments may use this tech-based network to keep a lock on society, and individuals may exploit this network to gain power for themselves as well by controlling and infringing the private information of others. Therefore, Brunner is suggesting that our society should not solely depend on such a network, because it may cause complete mayhem and deconstruct society, as publicized in the novel.

Conclusion

In conclusion, postmodernism is a critical phenomenon that originated in the early 60's and continues hold influence to this day. Diverging from the traditional conventions of pulp science fiction, postmodernism allows authors to create their own reality and explore ideas that are ahead of their time. Furthermore, the postmodern movement was instrumental in the emergence of new wave science fiction writers, who revolutionized literature generating a genre all their own. New wave science fiction, as a genre, provided authors and their audiences an outlet to reflect on contentious social issues, without being antagonized by the established order. In addition, it also attracted a larger audience that would otherwise pay little attention to social issues that are imperative yet typically go unnoticed. As seen in all the novels investigated above, the authors are attempting to emphasize the notion that if society were to depend solely on technology, it would result in catastrophe. Expanding further, both Ballard and Brunner introduce a troubling issue that exists in society and extrapolate that societal degradation will occur if the issue at hand goes unaddressed. If new wave science fiction has taught us anything, it's that authors of this form of literature have either accurately predicted, or significantly influenced, the trajectory of technological advancement. It is reasonable to speculate, then, that contemporary science fiction writers may offer readers a glimpse of a future reality, perhaps even influencing the technological trends of tomorrow.

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