William J. Burling

Reading Time: The Ideology of Time Travel in Science Fiction

ABSTRACT

This essay argues for the existence and ideological significance of two principal variants of time travel form in science fiction (SF): the temporal dislocation form and the temporal contrast form. The principle examples for discussion are, respectively, Stephen Baxter's *manifold: time* (2000) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), though the case is bolstered by additional references to other SF works. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Adorno, Benjamin, Žižek, and Jameson, the argument then considers more broadly the connection between ideology and ontology implicit in these time travel forms. The essay concludes with a critique of the assumptions by which time travel SF stories are created, studied, taught, and read by SF writers and academics, as well as general readers.

> "Time paradoxes," Emma whispered. "I always hated stories about time paradoxes."
>
> Stephen Baxter, *manifold: time*

As has been widely argued, cultural production in general and literary expression in particular of the modernist era were concerned primarily with temporality, whereas, the argument runs, in our era of global, multi-national capital, fundamental re-conceptualizations of and emphasis on spatial

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relationships and uses of space (e.g., architecture, geography, etc.) have been identified as dominant shaping elements of the postmodern ontological paradigm.[1] What explanation, then, can account for the fact that time travel in science fiction (hereafter SF), expressed as paradoxes, ruptures, and all kinds of alterations and juxtapositions of past, present, and future, "has not passed with any modernist vogue, nor succumbed to postmodernist temptations for closure" but rather is "perhaps the hardiest form of sf" (Slusser and Chatelain, "Spacetime Geometries" 181)?

The pressing questions in the present essay do not involve demonstrating that an emphasis on time travel is a continuing and prevalent narrative strategy in SF, or attempting to inventory the variations in formal strategies as an end in itself. In fact, not even the ostensible themes of such works require clarification. After all, SF authors regularly acknowledge that their fictions are representations of present-day thematic concerns and identify those themes with great specificity; in other words, they know exactly what they are doing at the *manifest* level of meaning and have no wish to conceal their agendas.[2] At issue in the present intervention, rather, is the *latent*, that is to say, the ideological meaning of the narrative strategy of time travel as *form* in SF, and particularly forward time travel. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, "the status of the idea of the future has very real practical as well as theoretical consequences, for the quality of social life itself as well as for the strategy of cultural politics" ("Introduction/Prospectus" 364). My general contention, therefore, is that time travel as a formal strategy in SF is inscribed with fundamental *latent* ideological valences, variously reactionary and utopian, that function irrespective of the work's *manifest* content.[3]

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[1] The proposition that the temporal mode is fundamental to Modernist thought and the spatial to the post-modern is, if not fully accepted, at least widely debated by theorists. One of the seminal arguments on this subject is that by Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, chapter 1.

[2] E.g. Ursula K. Le Guin's axiomatic comment that "So far as science fiction goes, we are trying to deal with the present" (Le Guin, "Informal Talk" 271).

[3] The notions that form has meaning separate from content and that both manifest and latent meanings can be identified in human consciousness and literature are scarcely either new or provocative. Dating to Marx's (and Freud's) original insights, the concept has become established as a key foundation of the theoretical work of

First I will outline what I take to be the two principal variants of time travel in SF: the *temporal dislocation form* and the *temporal contrast form*. My principle examples for discussion are, respectively, Stephen Baxter's *manifold: time* (2000) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). I pick these two novels because they epitomize the characteristics I am attempting to argue, though I will bolster the case with additional references to other SF works. I will then move on to a broader consideration of the connection between ideology and ontology implicit in these time travel forms, and conclude with some observations concerning the assumptions by which time travel SF stories are created, studied, and taught by SF writers and academics.

Two types of time travel in SF

Readers and critics have long noted the great variety in SF time travel narratives. The best work is perhaps that of George Slusser and Danielle Chatelain, who have produced a valuable classification of numerous types of time travel narrative strategies based on a broad and careful analysis of literary and other factors. They conclude that all of the variations of narrative strategies form one general family relationship, the *temporal paradox*, which is "never . . . the *structure* of the narrative itself" (Slusser and Chatelain, "Spacetime Geometries" 166; their emphasis). By approaching time travel from an ideological rather than aesthetic angle, however, I suggest that their detailed work in fact reveals not one but two formal categories of time travel SF: the *temporal dislocation form* and the *temporal contrast form*.

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cultural commentators at least since the time of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, especially as articulated by T.W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Jameson's approach, initially outlined in *Marxism and Form* (1971, Chapter 5, "Towards Dialectical Criticism") and then demonstrated at length a decade later in *The Political Unconscious*, is an especially detailed presentation to which I am indebted. To put the matter broadly for the moment, form is a fundamental and unavoidable organizing strategy of *all* cultural *reproduction*, and literary form as genre is expressed as a widely employed strategy of narrative where "one rule rings them all." As Carl Freedman has usefully suggested, literary genres should be understood "in a radically different and thoroughly dialectical way. In this understanding, genre is not a classification but an element or, better still, a tendency . . . within a literary text that is itself understood as a complexly structured reality" (Freedman 20).

Briefly, temporal dislocation, just as Slusser and Chatelain rightly suggest concerning what they call the temporal paradox form, features attention to the presumed scientific or philosophical nature of the paradoxes of time and the possible mechanisms of time travel. This manifest meaning may well be of considerable philosophical interest, as Veronica Hollinger argues with respect to Wells' *The Time Machine*. The latent meaning of the form, which hitherto has not been subject to close critical scrutiny, however, turns out to be either ideologically neutral or, more often, reactionary. The temporal contrast form, on the other hand, may be defined as a structural juxtaposition of sharply differing nova that expresses intentional manifest ideological estrangement. In other words, in contrast to Slusser and Chatelain's assertion, this variation of time travel *serves precisely to structure the narrative*. The temporal contrast form therefore bears significant manifest *and* latent ideological meaning, variously dystopian or utopian. Recognizing the existence of the temporal contrast variation is thus crucial for a more complete understanding of literary representations of time and time travel.

Temporal dislocation

The *temporal dislocation form* appears quite regularly in SF as an exercise in the paradoxes and vagaries of the presumed physics of time and time travel. Slusser and Chatelain discuss Robert Heinlein's "By His Bootstraps" (1941) as their exemplar; mine will Stephen Baxter's *manifold: time* (2000; herafter *m: t*). Baxter, a trained engineer, regularly creates fictions that explore the scientific and philosophical riddles of time and time travel, as well as writing non-fiction essays on the subject.[4] He proposes the mind-boggling proposition in *m: t* that the presumably unavoidable "heat death" of the universe is actually a solvable problem. A precocious group of human "Blue children" are discovered to have been recently born on Earth. They exhibit massive powers of intelligence and consciousness and are ultimately understood to be time travel visitors. These "downstreamers" from billions of years in the future near the very end of time in a nearly heatless universe, identify and seek to remediate a fundamental flaw in the cosmic order such that the second law of thermodynamics is circumvented. Their plan requires the creation

[4] See his "The Technology of Omniscience," for example.

of a new, variant universe which will not be subject to entropy and is thus truly timeless. In the process, they establish the meaning and validate the purpose of humanity's existence.

Baxter's manifest agenda in *m: t* is scientific, in as much as he attempts to think through various challenging notions, not only of time paradoxes, but a range of additional current scientific suggestions (literally listed in the Afterword, e.g., that cephalopods may be intelligent, that quark-nuggets are potentially very dangerous to the universe, that the Earth has a second "moon" called Cruithne, and so forth). As fascinating as these concepts are, and as skillfully as Baxter weaves them into the narrative, the key motif of the book, as the title emphasizes, is the nature of time. For starters, we learn from Anna, one of the Blue children, that our current notion of time is "trivially wrong" (422), and from Michael, another Blue child, that the future of our universe - that it will succumb to entropy - is "the wrong future" (468). The downstreamers have returned to the twenty-first century to take advantage of a historically unique and localized energy surge that can be manipulated to alter the space-time continuum, thus creating a different and improved "true vacuum" (468) not subject to thermal decay. Further, we learn that humanity is the first and only sentient race in all of "time" and that ours is the first and only currently existing universe; therefore, if this universe dies, sentience dies for eternity. The downstreamers take advantage of the unique, unrepeatable present opportunity for the "seeding" of numerous new universes, each of which will contain the conditions necessary for sentience to thrive forever. The process entails, however, the destruction of the present flawed universe. Current sentient life is sacrificed for the benefit of all future sentient races, but the inhabitants of the alternative time continuums to come somehow will know of and revere present-day humanity for its heroic act of martyrdom.

We learn that this new, improved future universe will be chronologically infinite, presumably allowing for unlimited sentient development, but will it be socially just? To be sure, some later pages in Baxter's novel express a vague interest in social changes on Earth in the years just before the end (e.g., pp. 454-56), but the ideas are presented ever so briefly and cannot be said to be seriously thematic. Exploring the social details of the presumed future was not, of course, Baxter's intention, and that is my point: the temporal dislocation

form (temporal paradox) is but one of the two time travel strategies in SF. In Baxter's novel (and others of the same type) temporal dislocation thus is connected with and manifested as "hard" scientific cognition,[5] which serves to celebrate the ideology of *scientific idealism*.

The temporal dislocation form functions not simply as a plot structure in which science prevails, but also at the level of characterization, represented as a formal binary opposition. The manifest idea of a universe being saved by scientific rationality is expressed via an idealized scientist hero and colleagues, who is juxtaposed to the presumed anti- or non-scientific biases of present-day humanity, as expressed by both greedy capitalists and their political cronies, and the anti-scientific masses. Both plot structure and characterization thus remind the rest of humanity that science can (and ostensibly will) solve the world's problems, irrespective of any and all political, social, or economic factors. Scientific idealism is the latent ideological ground of all "hard" SF, as further exemplified by the work of such authors as the "killer B's" - David Brin, Greg Bear, and Greg Benford (especially the latter) - and others such as Damien Broderick,[6] but *not* in the work of Kim Stanley Robinson[7] or, as we shall see, in that of John Kessel, who represent the possibilities and limitations of science in very different ways.

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[5] I refer here, of course, to the well-known definition of SF offered by Darko Suvin as presented in "SF and the Novum" in Chapter 4 of his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. Expanding and clarifying this account are his own later essay "Locus, Horizon, Orientation," and Carl Freedman's analysis in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (16-23).

[6] On this point, see, for example, "Paul Preuss" "Loopholes in the Net."

[7] Robinson's Mars trilogy (1991-97) at first glance seems identical to hard SF in that science and technology serve "progressive" ends, but Robinson's representation goes beyond mere depiction. He spotlights the ownership and control of the means of production and consumption of the products of science. In Robinson's fiction the assumptions and effects of science and technology are always carefully scrutinized. For a detailed discussion of Robinson's careful sensitivity to the socio-economic issues of utopian technology, see my "The Theoretical Foundation of Utopian Radical Democracy in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Blue Mars*."

Another excellent example of the temporal dislocation form, Gregory Benford's *Time-Scape*, at first glance seems to refute my analysis. His novel, though also primarily concerned with time paradoxes and the possibility of the "Feynman radio" (a theory stating the possibility for communication with the past - a concept also employed by Baxter), seems to go a step further in focusing on a historically relevant and sensitive ecological theme. Benford's dystopic "near future," however, is represented ultimately in only general ways, making his "warning" far less interesting than his speculations concerning time paradoxes.[8] Thus his novel, too, exemplifies the foundation scientific idealism of hard SF as a variation of the "ideology of the aesthetic." The temporal dislocation form is therefore reactionary because of its unexamined ideological assumption of the value of science as a *transcendent* (idealist) ontological category.[9]

Hard SF temporal dislocation narratives have no interest in social critique. They assume, in fact, quite the opposite, i.e., that collective oversight and input are hindrances, and that science and technology best function autonomously from or above the presumed debased and limiting dynamics of mere political, economic, or social factors.[10] Likewise they have little to say about the ideological dynamics of science or of the ruthless capitalist exploitation of science and technology, as contrasted to attention to these very issues in the work of authors such as Philip K. Dick and William Gibson. The temporal dislocation form, therefore, in its unexamined idealist assumptions concerning hard science and its entire focus on theoretical science has no interest in where the time travelers go or in the socio-economic complexities of time travel. The total attention is placed on the phenomenon of time-travel itself.

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[8] Benford himself is pleased to point out that quantum theorist David Deutsch "got the idea of putting it all together [i.e., his theory of the feasibility of overlapping universes] in the late 1980s after reading [*Time-scape*]" (Blackford 14).

[9] This interpretation should not be understood as a negative evaluation of science's potential but rather an illumination of the "ideology of the aesthetic," operating in silent service to the ideological requirements of the capitalist status quo.

[10] Ironically, Baxter provides an excellent discussion of exactly such implications in "The Technology of Omniscience" (see esp. 101-102), an essay surveying SF stories based on the specific trope of a gadget that allows "one to *view* the past - but not the future - and not to alter the course of history" (97).

Even the most artistically sophisticated instances of the temporal dislocation form, as represented in novels by the popular and critically acclaimed Baxter and Benford, ultimately should be understood as notable instances of the variously musing and amusing "gee whiz" time paradox trope in SF literature. Their artistic experiments are fascinating and complex, but the same cannot be said for the vast majority of less sophisticated cases, as, for example, the numerous temporal dislocation time travel episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Further, the temporal dislocation form is the more prevalent and widely replicated of the two types, which goes far towards explaining why Slusser and Chatelain assumed it was the only form.

Temporal contrast

The principles and results of *temporal contrast* time travel differ considerably from those of temporal dislocation. The narrative structure contrasts sharply differing historical nova via the application - knowingly or not - of *Verstehen*, or subjective understanding, a materialist theoretical strategy that emphasizes historical specificity over assumptions of universal historicity, in other words, an emphasis on dialectical awareness as critique. Walter Benjamin further clarifies the importance of this approach, remarking that *Verstehen* "takes cognizance [of an oppressed past] in order to blast a specific era out of homogenous history" (Benjamin 263). As Jameson notes by calling upon Raymond Williams, this methodology generates a "contrast [with] an era whose structure of feeling is at least substantially different from our own" (*Seeds* 81). This "blasting" contrast of the "structure of feeling" of the present with the alternative era which the time traveler visits *emphasizes not an abstractly scientific meditation on the "how" of time travel, but rather a dynamic historical critique*.

Thus the temporal contrast form features both an extensive *manifest* representational emphasis on details of the social conditions of the eras being contrasted and a potent *latent* meaning at the level of form. This attention may be expressed as intentionally dystopian (as in the *Terminator* movies); simply neutral (Maxine McArthur's *Time Future* [2001]); can offer some mixture of dystopian and utopian impulses; or can overlap and even merge with utopian SF in offering what I will term here (and later explore) as a latent, utopian "gesture of offering." Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and

John Kessel's *Corrputing Dr. Nice* (1997) are excellent examples of the temporal contrast narrative, but I wish first to examine briefly some literary kinship connections and implications of form.

Not unique to SF, the temporal contrast form has an ancient genealogy,[11] and exists in literature in multiple variations.[12] For example, Michael Cooperson has pointed out that "in the Arabic case, the unresolved confrontation of two historical orders in fiction corresponds, more or less explicitly, to the experience of equally unresolved confrontations in history" (Cooperson 6). Cooperson's important but neglected essay is richly suggestive and insightful, but his conclusion, that confrontations such as "between the Arab world and the West, or between tradition and modernity" result (following Linda Hutcheon's view) in a meta-fictional foregrounding of "the representation of history itself" (4) misses the much greater dialectical point. On Cooperson and Hutcheon's view of postmodern fiction, the temporal contrast form is only about itself, a form of meta-history, a point well worth noting and no doubt relevant. I contend, however, that Cooperson's identification of the clash "between tradition and modernity" should be restated (via the dialectical perspective of *Verstehen*) as the "clash between modes of production," or, more specifically, between feudalism and capitalism as the latter specifically and historically developed in the Arabic world.

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[11] M.M. Bakhtin comments extensively on the relationship between ancient forms of fiction and time in his essay entitled "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel." Of special significance is his discussion of the ideological meaning of form in the strategy he terms historical inversion: "a thing that could and in fact must only be realized exclusively in the *future* is here portrayed as something out of the *past*, a thing that is in no sense part of the past's reality, but a thing that is in its essence a purpose, an obligation" (Bakhtin 147). This utopian obligation, he continues, "must lead into a real future" that sharply differs from "the available reality, which . . . in contrast, is bad, not true" (149).

[12] Variations deserving of further analysis include time-slip stories in children's literature and, interestingly, romance time-slip stories. In both categories the narratives virtually always depict *backward* time travel. Also significant are futuristic novels (not science fiction), SF future histories (on this form see Slusser and Chatelain, "Conveying Unknown Worlds" 172), the apocalyptic genre, and alternative past histories.

Both expanding and refining Cooperson's suggestions in light of *Verstehen*, I offer that the essential point of the temporal contrast form in SF (and all other types of time travel fiction) is its depiction of *contrasting modes of production*, which means the sharp juxtaposition of present-day capitalism with some non-capitalist mode of production. We must always remain aware, however, that this latent content differs according to the historical particulars.[13] Nevertheless, at least since H.G. Wells's paradigmatic *The Time Machine*, the function and meaning of the form of temporal contrast time travel in SF have been mainly ideological not metaphysical, i.e., the narrative has only a limited (if any) interest in the "physics" or the "philosophical implications" of time travel. At the manifest level, Wells and other authors pursue an ideological agenda pertaining to contemporary stances on issues of economics, politics, class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and so forth, and typically the genre is some variation (or mixture) of dystopia and utopia, as for example in Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975). While the contrast of modes of production may produce some disagreements over exactly what is being thematically highlighted, the very form of narratives such as Piercy's demands and easily supports a comparison and contrast interpretive response.

Numerous critical studies have already done ample justice to the manifest thematic concerns brought to light by Consuelo (Connie) Ramos, Piercy's protagonist, thus requiring only a brief summary here.[14] Capitalist, racist, patriarchal, and hence dystopian New York City in the 1970s and the complexly nuanced eco-techno-utopian Mattapoisett (Massachusetts) in 2137 form the contrasting poles of Connie's life and highlight numerous topics, such as construction of personal identity, sexual freedom, raising of children, conditions of production and consumption of material goods (especially food), ownership of property, and the production and consumption of the arts, to name only a few. The scientific details of Connie's "virtual" time-travel are of no

[13] The temporal contrast strategy thus also can serve, as Cooperson shows, reactionary impulses. In the case of certain Arabic temporal contrast narratives, the feudal past "is the future to which Egypt hopes to return," in order "to restore the scientific and cultural glory of Islam as it existed in the high caliphal period."

[14] An especially noteworthy and thorough analysis is that by Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, chapter 6.

significant thematic interest to Piercy (or the reader), being described vaguely by the author as some sort of psychic manipulation of the space-time continuum and offered only for the sake of answering Connie's initial questions (and thus serving narrative, explanatory duty). The point is that Connie frequently "travels" back and forth in her mind, not always at will, and not always under ideal circumstances until the psychic connection is broken, stranding her permanently in her (our) "own" time, and in a mental institution to boot.

The formal fact of the many repeat visits to the future itself is important, foregrounding by repetition and extension the density, happiness, and freedom of utopian life in 2137 in all of its variety and appeal. Hence the novel invokes one of the key formal elements of the temporal contrast form, i.e., the repeated "gesture of offering." Each visit to the future is a self-contained vignette, calling attention to the future fulfillment of a contrasting lack in the reader's present of what Jacques Lacan terms the Symbolic Order. Luciente, Connie's contact, guide, and mentor in the future, patiently answers all of the queries in a matter of fact way. Initially, Connie and, presumably, the reader respond defensively with unrelenting negative criticism and attempts to "find fault" with the Mattapoisettian society, in what can only be termed denial, but, of what? The answer: the pain arising from the sudden revealing of the stark and shocking sense of lack in our world that is unrecognized by the collective Symbolic Order. Luciente and her fellow "persons," therefore, happily enjoy the fulfillment of our lack, a lack we could not (dared not) even name until we learned of its existence "in the future."

This mechanism can be understood by way of considering a passage concerning food in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Connie experiences and thoroughly enjoys the delicious smells, tastes, and appearances of a sumptuous celebratory feast in the utopian future, but Luciente is quick to remind her, "Remember, this won't nourish you" (Piercy 172), because of course, Connie is not physically present. The same may be said of readers when confronting the lack revealed by the "gesture of offering" made by Piercy's utopian discourse. We savor the "food," i.e., the pleasure of the fulfillment of the lack that the story provides, but the pleasure is an illusion, and a temporary one at that, *being only symbolic*. It is, after all, "only a story." We stay safely at a distance from the painful and explosive questions: "Why can't the real world

of the present be as humane and free as the wonderful world of this story right now? What's stopping us?" Louis Marin describes this uncomfortable moment in the presence of utopian representation as "the time of mourning. We know ahead of time that we can only forget what we mean when saying it" (Marin xxvi). To avoid the pain we generate a subconscious defense mechanism.

The operations of this psychic mechanism are explained by Slavoj Žižek (calling upon Lacan). The reader enjoys the fantasy without examining why it provides pleasure, because to do otherwise, to acknowledge the lack that the pleasurable fantasy (the symptom) exposes, would be devastating: "the only alternative to the symptom is nothing," i.e., hopelessness and "psychic suicide" (75). The reader, rather than fully acknowledging the present state of unfreedom,[15] simply embraces the aesthetic pleasure that fictional fantasy produces as an end in itself. In other words reading a fantasy about a better world is a "guilty pleasure," symptomatic of collective, high-order ideological pathology.

The recoding convention of social dis-ease as aesthetic pleasure by both authors and readers is one of the key reasons why utopian representations are not interpreted in our own era as seditious or inflammatory, or banned by censors. Instead of instantly eliciting dialectical understanding and arousing the reader to political engagement, the potentially dangerous energy generated by the recognition of the lack (of freedom) is safely reformulated as follows: "Piercy is such a good writer. She creates such interesting characters. Art like this is so finely crafted!" In other words, the clarion "call to action" announced in the temporal contrast's utopian gesture of offering is completely defused as a *purely* aestheticized response: "reading SF is an enjoyable personal experience. I like to escape into another world, especially when the story is so well written. I need to buy another book by Piercy." This ideologically sanitized response is, of course, one component of what Jameson means by art serving to provide a *symbolic* solution "to unresolvable social contradictions" (*Political Unconscious* 79).

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[15] I use "unfreedom" in the sense outlined by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, esp. in Part Three, Section I.

Unlike Piercy's Connie, unfortunately, we are unwilling to accept to the truth of Luciente's reminder. In our imagined (and imaginary) relationship with the world, we long to believe that fiction (as art) in itself will be enough to nourish us in difficult times. It cannot. The aesthetic value and pleasures of art are considerable, but they must not be understood solely as ends in themselves. As T.W. Adorno remarks, "art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived" (*Aesthetic Theory* 6).

Another useful example of the temporal contrast form is Kessel's *Corrupting Dr. Nice*, not coincidentally termed by Kim Stanley Robinson on the novel's dust jacket as "the best time-travel narrative ever written." Kessel's novel is perhaps the most aggressive time travel critique of the impact of science and technology entirely in the service of capitalist greed and exploitation. Owen Vannice, the protagonist scientist, serves the actantal function of confronting and negotiating the severe contradictions that emerge as a result of "visiting" two widely contrasting modes of production. In this case a future capitalist moment, grounded on scientific and technological wonders, is entirely controlled by corporations (even the functions of state government such as traffic control and police protection are owned and operated for profit by corporations). This hyperbolic capitalist future is intentionally and directly contrasted with that most hallowed and sacrosanct of past locales and eras, Jerusalem during and shortly after the time of Jesus.

Kessel combines pastiche, parody, and burlesque and other strategies of postmodernist fiction with the tropes of science fiction, and especially time travel, to represent and critique what one character calls the immoral and shocking "widespread commercial exploitation of the past" (Kessel 197). The clever "moment-universe" concept, also employed by Kessel in his short fiction collection *The Pure Product* [1997]), ostensibly serves as the "scientific" ground of time travel and is duly explained (38-39) and reviewed (196-97) in the name of narrative convention but carries no actual philosophical or scientific thematic emphasis or significance in the novel.

His time travel theory is simply a fictional device, a literary trope that serves not expositional but thematic purposes, most notably to critique techno-scientific capitalism. For example, in the novel commercially viable time travel creates extensive capitalist opportunities, ranging from tourist tours of

historical moments, such as the crucifixion of Jesus, to "trade" opportunities for merchants who cut deals with the local potentates (such as Herod), and exploit the temporal locals by acquiring valuable merchandise and artifacts at the low, local price and then "exporting" the goods to the future where unconscionable profits can be realized. This exploitation of other time cultures by companies, epitomized by the emblematic Saltimbanque Corporation, even extends to convincing famous personages, such as Jesus, Abraham Lincoln, Marilyn Monroe, and, in a sharply apropos instance, Richard Feynman (the very same scientist whose work figures so prominently in the novels of Baxter and Benford), to "immigrate" to the future where their fame can be exploited.

Kessel's utterly over the top representation of temporal contrast time travel, by eschewing any pretense of scientific realism, sharply critiques the inherent reactionary elements of scientific idealism. Critical but not negative about the importance and application of science, Kessel invokes an assessment of science's possibilities and applications from a social perspective. Further the novel's narrative strategies serve to spotlight mystifying elements of capitalist ideology by way of humor and historical estrangement. By placing capitalist practices and assumptions in non-capitalist time frames, their artificial, non-natural historicity is clearly underscored and thus demystified.

The temporal contrast form in SF can be truly empowering, however, only when, and if, the historical conditions emerge that enable readers to recognize and reinterpret the ideologically numbing mystifications borne by a total, unexamined belief in autonomous aesthetics. Once confronted, a new understanding is needed to replace those mystifying assumptions with dialectical awareness. Then, and only then, will readers recognize that the message conveyed by the temporal contrast form in SF is *not* an ill-conceived or hopeless or merely artsy delusion, neither "true art" nor "mere entertainment," but a historically specific and formal "gesture of offering" capable of registering concrete utopian potentialities. A particularly poignant passage in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* clarifies this urgent issue. Sevek remarks to Keng, the Terran amabassador who represents one possible dystopian future for Earth, "You would destroy us rather than admit our [utopian] reality, rather than

admit there is hope!" Keng replies, "You are like somebody from our own past, the old idealists, the visionaries of freedom; and yet I don't understand you, as if you were trying to tell me of future things; and yet, as you say, you are here, now!" (Le Guin 350). Even when *directly* confronted with utopia, Keng cannot accept its existence!

As with Keng, at present we collectively do not understand. Utopian thought thus remains elusive simply because we assume it is impossible, or perhaps even more revealingly, not needed. As Shevek sadly notes, "We cannot come to you. We can only wait for you to come to us" (Le Guin 350). With this realization we are now positioned to consider the broader ideological significance of the temporal contrast time travel form.

The ideology of the temporal contrast form: or, the answer without the question

Post-structuralist theory argues generally for the impossibility of epistemological determinacy or privileged vantage points, and these assumptions are generally characteristic of much post-modernist SF of the past several decades. Damien Broderick, for example, observes that SF "time-travel stories are maps which seemed designed to defeat, delightfully, the notion of mapping [i.e., understanding], as post-modern narratives seem designed to defeat determinacy" (Blackford 13). Likewise, Hollinger's view of time travel SF affirms Broderick's assessment: "there is no vantage point outside the boundaries of the observable, no privileged observer, no completely innocent reading of 'reality'" (Hollinger 203). How then can we make a case for apprehending and theorizing the totality of capitalism? And how do we validate the historical specific assumptions of *Verstehen*? The possible answers to these challenges point the way toward an understanding of the "ideology" of time and time travel in SF.

Let us consider afresh a widely cited aphorism by Roland Barthes: "Literature is the question minus the answer," an insight that Adorno resituates in his remark that artworks "are real answers to the puzzle externally posed to them," thereby functioning as "answers to their questions." Adorno adds a further insight that in answering questions the artworks "thereby truly become

questions."[16] To understand the latent meaning of the temporal contrast form as quintessentially ideological, therefore, I propose to stand Barthes on his head (or should I say, on his feet, as Marx did with Hegel?) by restating the original assertion as follows: "Literature is the answer minus the question."

This recognition of the answer before or without the question is not, however, only Adorno's idea. Étienne Balibar in *Reading Capital* (the title of which serves as one inspiration for the title of the present essay) proposes the same strategy for understanding Marx's rhetorical strategy in the Preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "if it is read attentively, [the Preface] does not present us with the form of a hypothesis, but explicitly that of an answer, an answer to a question we must try to reconstitute" (Althusser and Balibar 202).[17] What, then, can this rhetorical reversal reveal? Simply stated, if the manifest content of a passage from Marx or a temporal contrast time travel SF narrative is the "answer," then a latent "question" is *formally* implied in the work's rhetorical structure even though it is unexpressed - indeed even initially unrecognized - and thus needs to be derived from the way in which the "answer" is delivered as an answer (i.e., its means of delivery). *The revealing of this "question" as the "question of History" is precisely what is meant by the latent meaning of time travel as a form.*

To clarify the basic mechanics of this function of form, let us recall the famous "Carnac the Magnificent" comedy routine performed by Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show*. Carson would hold up a sealed envelope containing an "answer" to which he would then "psychically" determine the question. After opening the envelope he would read the contents, and the punch-line would consist of an utterly unanticipated connection between the previously announced answer and the newly revealed question, the latter serving to generate a meaning which supplanted any provisional version. Thus the "answer" when announced before the question either had no meaning at all (being completely opaque) or suggested an incorrect meaning which was wrongly

[16] I have been unable to identify the precise source of Barthes' remark, which is widely quoted. Adorno's comment appears in *Aesthetic Theory* (6).

[17] As David Harvey points out, this presenting of the answer to an unformulated question is also Marx's rhetorical structure in *Capital* (*The Limits to Capital* 1-2).

assumed due to the ambiguity of the wording of the "answer." Therefore, even when given the "answer" in the plainest of terms, the audience did not, and *could not* recognize its eventual "true" meaning without the availability of the properly relevant question, for the simple reason that *they could not conceptualize the context*. Only the combination of both question and answer produced meaning, and thus interpretive closure is made possible by the particular narrative strategy (i.e., form), which is in Carson's case one version of the genre of wordplay known as "the joke."[18]

The process and the "meaning" of the "question" posed by temporal contrast time travel in SF (as opposed to talk-show humor), however, require theorization on more rigorous philosophical grounds. Fortunately such an argument appears in a suggestive proposal by Žižek that we must quote in full:

> One is therefore tempted to see in the 'time paradox' of science-fiction novels a kind of hallucinatory 'apparition of the Real' of the elementary structure of the symbolic process, the so-called internal, internally inverted eight: a circular movement, a kind of snare where we can progress only in a manner that we 'overtake' ourselves in the transference, to find ourselves at a point in which we have already been. The paradox consists in the fact that this superfluous detour, this supplementary snare of overtaking ourselves ("voyage into the future") and then reversing direction ("voyage into the past") is not just a subjective illusion/perception of an objective perception taking place in so-called reality independently of these illusions. The supplementary snare is rather, an internal condition, an internal constituent of the so-called" objective process" itself: only through this additional detour does the past itself, the "objective" state of things, become retroactively what it always was. (*Sublime Object* 57)

Žižek is here presenting a tight summary of several elements derived from the theories of Lacan and comprising the process by which a subject recognizes

[18] Adorno and Horkheimer have observed in "The Culture Industry" that laughter (i.e., as a response to the joke form, though they do not formulate precisely this connection) has its own ideological meaning: "there is laughter because there is nothing to laugh at. . . . In the false society laughter is a disease . . . [and] a laughing audience is a parody of humanity" (39).

the existence and confronts the meaning of the symptom projected by the unconscious (though Žižek employs time paradox SF in a quite different sense than that which I will examine below).

Drawing upon the notion of the "Real," which for Lacan (in his later thinking) represents the paradoxical existence of "an entity . . . *which must be constructed afterwards* so that we account for the distortions of the symbolic order" (162; my emphasis), Žižek suggests the grounds for a process by which an entire culture comes to a new collective, hegemonic awareness and understanding of its own hitherto unacknowledged, irresolvable social contradictions. The Real, "although it does not exist . . . can produce a series of effects in the symbolic reality of the subjects" (163) and is therefore a void, or, to use Lacan's term, a *lack*, that "functions as the object-cause of desire" (163). This lack is precisely the source of the unformulated general question to which the answer of the specific time travel text responds: the presence of what Louis Althusser would call the historical "absent cause."

Yet another factor is at play, however, which richly complicates the decoding of the question. The reader naturally generates an interpretation of a text, that is, grasps at both an "answer" and, in turn, a question, *but both are invariably wrong*, in the same sense of the audience trying to interpret the "answers" via the formulation of explanatory provisional questions in Carson's Carnac jokes. As Žižek notes, the Symbolic Order, when confronted with the unacknowledged presence of the Real, employs the strategy of *misrecognition*: the text as an object demanding interpretation is simply "too traumatic for the people to grasp its real signification" (57). So the "wrong" question is generated by the attempt to complete the hermeneutical loop. Jameson sheds light on this problem from another direction: "Science fiction . . . corresponds to the waning or blockage of . . . historicity, and, particularly in our own time (in the postmodern era) to its crisis and paralysis, its enfeeblement and repression" (*Postmodernism* 284), such that our culture has an "absolute inability to imagine anything other than what is" (*Marxism and Form* 416). In short, the ontological paradigm of postmodernism, being quintessentially anti-historical, causes readers to misrecognize the painful "problem of history" as something, anything, other than that of irresolvable social contradictions (i.e., class struggle).

In an especially fruitful and optimistic insight Žižek further asserts that misrecognition is not to be understood as a failure to understand "historical necessity" as a set of conditions that somehow exist separately and outside the realm of individual human activity, but as a *necessary step* along the path toward eventual understanding. The moment of truth occurs via a process which at last allows us to comprehend the idea of the meaning of form: "[O]nly *though repetition* is this event recognized in its symbolic necessity - it finds it place in the symbolic network" (*Sublime Object* 61; my emphasis). In other words, temporal contrast narratives arising from the fact of, and in response to the irresolvable social contradictions of the mode of production must now also be defined and understood as *symptoms* of the Real,[19] and are initially "misread" by the public, as, for example, that wealthy capitalists personally "earned" their vast fortunes, and that the poor are lazy and do not want to work.

Eventually, *due to the repetition* of numerous instances of the "answer," the "question" is not simply recognized *but created*. Before exploring how the question is created, however, we need to explore why readers misrecognize the "question." In the postmodern era misrecognitions, generally speaking are reducible to a single basic cause and pattern: *what are in fact historically collective and connected events or phenomena are misconstrued as individual, discrete, and unrelated*, or, in Žižek's terms, the individual instance is misperceived as "an arbitrary act, an expression of contingent individual self-will" (60). In short, each literary work is misrecognized via the reader's assumption that artistic expression is solely the product of individual authorial genius.

The powerful appeal of this mystifying aesthetic assumption can be clarified in one (though not the only) sense by reference to Lacan's notion of *transference*. As an expression of the classical psychoanalytical transference of a symptom, the time travel fiction, in at least one variation, "rehearses a future" which the reader construes as some sort of special knowledge or insight on

[19] Jameson remarks in his essay "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" that Lacan's domain of the Real "is simply History itself" (106). This insight gains even more significance when contrasted with the realm of the Symbolic Order - the allowable limits of the ontological paradigm.

the part of the author, as contained in the commonplace beliefs that "SF is *about* the future" and that the author has some sort of special "vision" or understanding.[20] Ray Bradbury, for example, has famously remarked, "I don't want to predict the future; I want to prevent it," thus representing himself, as did the Romantic poets, as having privileged access to prophetic truth (Roach). Adam Roberts has rightly noted, however, that "only very rarely . . . have any of those [SF] texts accurately predicted anything." Properly demystifying this assumption on the part of readers (and authors) regarding predictive value, Roberts asserts, "SF texts are more interested in the way things *have been*" (Roberts 33; emphasis in original), to which we may also add "and as things currently exist."

We can now return to the matter of the *creation* of the question, rather than its *discovery*. Žižek stresses that "This knowledge [of the future] is an illusion," and "is constituted" only after the fact by readers, but "we can paradoxically elaborate this knowledge only by means of the illusion that the other already possesses it and that we are only discovering it" (*Sublime Object* 56). In short, "what is it [i.e., the assumption of the SF author's presumed "knowledge" of the future], then, if not the *transference* itself?" (56; emphasis in original). That is, the reader transfers the symptom onto the author as Other, in the sense that the reader assumes that the Other knows something about the present (as embodied in the vision of the future as a response) that the reader "does not know." The creation of the question that unmasks the symptom of the present,[21] therefore, can come only "from the future" as the

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[20] Marie-Hélène Huet suggests an intriguing parallel mode in Jules Verne's novels where SF "anticipates the past" (38) by presenting the stories as having already taken place. Huet goes on to argue the latent, ideological implication that SF is "the very form of modern scientific anxiety" that is posed as "the attempt to reconstruct lost beginnings . . . [that] are not innocent" (Huet 41).

[21] Recent research in cognitivism and neuroscience adds further evidence to support the theory that present time can be "rewritten." As Žižek remarks in another place, "our experience of the present is basically past experience, but projected back into the past" so that "what we perceive as immediate reality is directly a judgment" (Žižek, "Conversation 2" 55). And for yet another argument clarifying the creation of meaning after the fact via repetition, see Homi K. Bhabha's excellent analysis (During 199-206). Bhabha draws upon Lacan and on Hannah Arendt's assertion that "the

accumulation of numerous instances of the answer which are then overtaken and that create retroactively a meaning for all the many *past* "visions of the future": "the event which repeats itself perceives its law retroactively, through repetition" (61). The "event" is simply the temporal contrast time travel form itself, endlessly repeated until the subject perceives the "law" of the present, which is nothing less than unfreedom.[22]

Of course each author's "vision of the future," as an exercise in extrapolation, seeks to answer a specific manifest question, but why does SF keep asking the question(s) over and over? In other words, *why are there so many time travel stories*? Precisely because *the real question of history is seldom if ever posed*, let alone understood, until the proper historical moment arrives.[23] We should be asking not *what* exactly is to be done to prepare for (or alter) the future, but, rather, *why do we feel this emptiness, this lack in the present? Of what does it consist?* And, then, *why aren't we doing anything about it?* This fundamental historical impulse of literary fantasy has also been identified by Herbert

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reification" of the "agent" of history, that is, its "invisible actor," "can only occur, she writes, through 'a kind of repetition' . . ." (206).

[22] Alain Badiou's work on truth theory opens up yet another way to articulate this notion of the creation of meaning. His truth validation procedure argues that a historical "situation," such as the French Revolution, is understood and rises to the status of an important truth "event" only retroactively via an "intervention," the latter being none other than a "forced" interpretation which is repeated, scrutinized, and debated until it either achieves hegemonic consensus or is rejected. This *truth procedure*, however, is not to be understood as simply some utterly subjective interpretation respecting the situation, but rather as a logically valid choice that was naturally contained within the "multiples" of the situation's possible meanings. Both Žižek (via Lacan) and Badiou allow us, therefore, to understand how meaning can be established after the fact. The groundwork of Badiou's theory appears in his seminal *L'Être et l'événment* (1988), which, unfortunately, is not yet available in English translation. He covers many of the same basic points in his *Ethics*, however, and Jason Barker provides an excellent analysis of the theory in his *Alain Badiou: A Critical Introduction*. Badiou's innovative work is only recently becoming known outside of France.

[23] Likewise Jameson remarks that SF "is only incidentally about science or technology . . . [being rather] *in its very nature a symbolic meditation on history itself*" (Mullen and Suvin 275-76).

Marcuse: "The truth value of imagination relates not only to the past but also to the future: the forms of freedom and happiness which it invokes claim to deliver the historical *reality*. In its refusal to accept the final limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle, in its refusal to forget what *can be*, lies the critical function of phantasy" (Marcuse 148-49). So there we have it. For Marcuse, the literature of the fantastic, which includes SF, is none other than a symbolic formal mechanism that affirms and addresses the ongoing historical desires for freedom and happiness as *denied by and within the presumed ontological limitations of the present lifeworld*. This formulation is another way of understanding Jameson's assertion that "narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right" (*Political Unconscious* 79) that functions entirely at the latent level.

Slusser and Chatelain, in their classification of numerous types of time travel narrative strategies, have perhaps undervalued the importance of their own work. Their conclusion that such strategies function primarily to bring "the displaced narrator's message . . . back into the reader's plausible range of communication" (Slusser and Chatelain, "Spacetime Geometries" 182) is certainly true, though I interpret the meaning of their conclusion in a way quite different from their intentions. Their survey has additional value, however, in as much as it documents the incessant, recuring historical vitality of time travel as a form whose central "question" remains ideologically urgent but un- or mis-recognized by an entire century's population. The ultimate powerful meaning of time travel as an "effective response" is not expressed in the manifest details but rather is produced by *the very (f)act of offering a vision or proposal at all.* In other words, the latent meaning of form emerges as the question asked - or rather begged - by the narrative form itself now understood as a genre, whose series of individual instances collectively serve *as a gesture of offering*, or, as Adorno would have it (via Nietzsche), of art's *promesse du bonheur* (*Aesthetic Theory* 12).[24]

[24] Consider, too, Jameson's remark and reminder, in summation and approval of Adorno's unrelenting assertion: "in the long run the content of a work of art stands judged by its form" (*Marxism and Form* 55).

Conclusions

In addition to discussions of the manifest content of this or that individual time travel text, as revealing as the results might be, we should insist upon relating any particular text to others sharing the same formal strategies in order to consider their broader, shared, historical meaning(s). By employing this strategy, one notes interesting, perhaps even shocking, conclusions that establish new perspectives on interpretation of SF (and, by extension, all literature). For example, Jameson has argued that "utopia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them" ("If I find one good city" 231).[25] The historical task before us, it seems, is simply to believe that we can believe, let alone to act.

The most important point of all, however, is rather more provocative. Properly recognizing and differentiating the temporal dislocation and temporal contrast forms in SF are crucial to understanding their broader, latent, ideological functions. This recognition is made possible by V*erstehen* expressed as dialectical analysis. The point I wish to emphasize is entirely that of method. Only via dialectics can we theorize the complex ways that capitalist ideology shapes ontological assumptions in the arts, especially, as Darko Suvin has noted, the extent to which culture supplies the "authoritative horizons for agency and meaning" (Suvin 192) expressed as the Symbolic Order. Thus Marx and Engels's famous dictum in the *Manifesto* that "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of the ruling class" becomes even more poignantly apropos. In this light, we must consider the scandalous extent to which non-dialectical interpreters of SF, in their creative work, essays, and teaching, by solely emphasizing aesthetic understanding, extrapolation, and scientific idealism, and, conversely, ignoring the dialectical issues inherent in form as a mechanism of ideology, minimize or even negate the critique of capital that SF is poised so well to carry out. Such non-dialectical approaches thus passively and unwittingly serve the status quo.

[25] I might also observe at this juncture the complete absence of utopian, and the utter dominance of dystopian, representations in cinema and video, especially in recent years.

The other meaning of this essay's title, "reading time," therefore serves to deconstruct the academic emphasis on the "aesthetics" of literature (and all art) which portray time, as one of the principal pacifying and mystifying practices of bourgeois culture. I conclude by insisting that *Verstehen* is the only theoretical methodology by which to identify and grasp the latent meaning of history inscribed in and expressed time travel in SF, the practices of reading, and the limits of allowable thought about time in the present ontological paradigm.

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