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## *Millennialism on the Couch: Film, Technology and the Oedipal Drama*<sup>1</sup>

Every political, historical and cultural fact possesses a kinetic energy which wrenches it from its own space and propels it into a hyperspace where, since it will never return, it loses all meaning. No need for science fiction here: already, here and now—in the shape of our computers, circuits and networks—we have the particle accelerator which has smashed the referential orbit of things once and for all.<sup>2</sup>

THE QUOTATION ABOVE should be familiar, for it is being written in different ways with increasing frequency as we near the year 2000. In brief, we are being told by Baudrillard, among others, that history is vanishing, that “the acceleration of modernity, of technology, events and media, of all exchanges ... has propelled us to ‘escape velocity’, with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history.” Similar observations by Mark Dery,<sup>3</sup> Derrick De Kerckhove,<sup>4</sup> and Fredric Jameson<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this article was presented as a paper at the “Millennium from the Margins” conference at Mount Allison University in October 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994) 2.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (New York: Grove Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Derrick De Kerckhove, *Connected Intelligence: The Arrival of the Web Society* (Toronto: Somerville House Publishing, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991).

compel us to ask two important questions about technology, the primary cause of this effaced history and increasingly unstable reality: first, what is the relationship between *technique*<sup>6</sup> as Ellul described it and meaning (in other words, is meaning at all retrievable in a *virtual* future?), and, second, how does popular culture mediate that relationship? Baudrillard and Jameson, building on earlier critiques of technology, have suggested that the technique/meaning relationship and its mediation in popular culture offer important clues to an understanding of *millennialism*.<sup>7</sup> Their view of “the postmodern or technological sublime” (Jameson 37) is that when time (the present) is accelerated, rendered “hyper” by the new technologies, the continuum of time (history) flips or reverses into its opposite—non-time, the dystopic (Armageddon). The resulting culture, says Jameson, is one in which the collective memory is erased and “the image has become the final form of commodity reification” (18). Students of McLuhan will recognize the idea as the fourth “law of media”: “when pushed to the limits of its potential ... the new form will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristics.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1964). As Ellul describes it, *technique* is “the *totality* of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency ... in every field of human activity” (xxv). As it relates to technology, *technique* involves both the tools and processes as well as the internal and external landscapes of technology. As all-encompassing as the Greek root *techne*, which referred to tools and cultural applications, Ellul’s view is that *technique* is much more ominous than the Greek notion of *techne*, as it involves the probability of enslavement: “the ideal for which technique strives is the mechanization of everything it encounters” (12).

<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard and Jameson’s postmodern readings of techno-culture can be more fully understood against the backgrounds from which they evolved. The ideas of both show the influence of Pierre Macherey’s belief in total-field discontinuity, of the Chicago School’s critique of what Heidegger called “enframing” (the dangerous social purposes to which “technicity” was put), and to Innis and McLuhan’s belief in “bias,” the social process by which dominant technologies self-actualize into cultural archetypes. See Harold Adams Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1951) and Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1988) 99.

Technology, acceleration, Armageddon? Sounds like the futuristic dystopian worlds of *fin-de-siècle* science fiction film. And indeed it is. The “demonic temptation” to fictionalize the end, Baudrillard says in his book-length meditation on *millennialism*, is “to falsify” (8)—he calls this “simulation” (7), Jameson calls it “the eclipse of historicity” (286)—and, in falsifying, to force reality “underground in cautious anticipation of the year 2000” (9). The year 2000, then, is theorized as a trope, a futuristic embellishment couched in the compelling narratives of progress, virtuosity, and globalization, all of which are represented in popular media as being in non-referential orbit, irretrievable and irreconcilable with meaning.<sup>9</sup> In the face of these powerful narratives, alternate realities (the non-technical, non-scientific) are forced underground into “crisis and paralysis ... enfeeblement and repression” (Jameson 284). “What man seeks” as compensation for this techno-scientific totalism, says Ellul, “is ... an absolute distraction, a total obliviousness of himself and his problems, and the simultaneous fusion of his consciousness with an omnipresent technical diversion” (380). What man seeks, then, is more representation, that which, ironically, “is in essential accord with the needs of a technical society” (Ellul 381). It is at this point in the psycho-social drama that film becomes important, specifically the *fin-de-siècle* science fiction film of the end of the millennium, for in promising diversion from techno-scientific totalism, film instead ushers us further into the technological sublime. Film anaesthetizes as *technique* does its work; the drug and

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<sup>9</sup> By non-referential orbit, Baudrillard and Jameson (and even McLuhan for that matter) mean something more than what Derrida explained in *Of Grammatology* as the post-structural severing of signifier and signified. For theorists of technoculture or “simulacrum”—the “new culture of . . . image(s)” removed from referents (Jameson 6)—what causes this non-referentialism is not the nature of language and syntactic deferral but the accelerated pace of information exchange. Of our most advanced technology, McLuhan wrote in *From Cliché to Archetype* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), “Sputnik put the globe in a ‘proscenium arch,’ and the global village has been transformed into a global theatre.” The result was a definite severing: “A planet parenthesized by a man-made environment no longer offers any directions or goals to nation or individual” (12). Technology, then, manifest in electronic circuitry, launches meaning/history into non-referential orbit: “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” (Jameson 18).

the scalpel work in powerful consort. While millennial technologies sever referentiality, sending meaning into orbit, those same technologies also stand in for ablation so that technology itself *becomes* meaning. *Millennialism*, therefore, not only becomes synonymous with technology, but *becomes* technology, as many of our current narratives reveal. With technology so hegemonically conceived as “total culture in action” (McLuhan, *Cliché* 77), how can we resist its imperatives?

My interest in this paper is to interrogate that futility of resistance—specifically, to interrogate Baudrillard and Jameson’s notion of *millennialism* as representation, and to trace Hollywood’s complicity in the technological determinism of the future (exploring how popular culture—specifically film—mediates the new relationship between technology and meaning, producing the postmodern sublime).<sup>10</sup> My marshalling of technology, millennialism, and film is simply the result of their omnipresence, to use Ellul’s term, in *fin-de-siècle* representations.

Two distinctions must be made at the outset: first, the distinction between “filmic technology” and “the representation of technology in film.” I have very little doubt that Hollywood’s complicity in advancing the social program of technological utopianism has much to do with the ways in which technology has served Hollywood’s own discursive, but, aside from making this point at the start, I will say little more about it. My interest is *not* in considering the ways in which film narrative (and the film industry) have advanced with the help of technology, but rather in exploring how film presents technology in the aftermath of that help. How does a medium so indebted to the fulfilment of technology present that technology?

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<sup>10</sup> I feel I should say something in defence of my focusing on film as a literary medium, even after the legitimization of film by such critical heavyweights as Jameson and Laura Mulvey. In brief, I consider film as complex and revealing a cultural locus as the text; in fact, after Roland Barthes, most post-structuralists now argue that film *is* text. Some years ago, Arthur Miller defined the newspaper as the medium of a nation talking to itself. I define film similarly: as a nation *dreaming* to itself, struggling with, but also making a Technicolour spectacle of, its own fears and desires.

Besides the distinction between “filmic technology” and “the representation of technology in film,” I must make concrete another term used above, namely “technological determinism.” Popularized by Innis and McLuhan in the late 1940s to denote the “bias” that cultures show to their dominant media (Innis 33–60), “technological determinism” is more accurately associated with Ellul’s thought, even though the term doesn’t actually appear in his work. Clearly evident in Ellul’s Calvinist theology, however, the concept of determinism enables Ellul to trace technology’s evolution from that which is programmed and controlled by humans to that which is one of the fundamental grammars of our culture, and thus a powerful force which culminates in man’s surrender to technology’s agenda. Ellul and McLuhan’s extension of the concept of “determinism” to “symbolic representation,” an extension that anticipates the work of postmodernists such as Jameson and Baudrillard, is vital to the complexity of that surrender, as the broadening of the concept announces a new kind of psychological dependency: living outside of technology, outside the “efficiency” of *technique* (Ellul xxv), becomes, even forty years *before* the new millennium, analogous to living outside of language, an impossibility to be sure.

What Ellul argues even more convincingly than McLuhan is that both the *promise* of technology, and, more importantly, the technological *method*, are ingrained in our western ethos to the point of being almost fully naturalized. Ellul’s reading is that technology has moved ideologically from being the malleable ground that Lewis Mumford wrote optimistically about in the 1930s<sup>11</sup> to becoming a more elusive, and therefore problematic, “hegemony” in the post-war decades. And the historical evidence supports Ellul’s contentions. What McLuhan readily saw in Ezra Pound’s early work—namely, “the intensity, the shrewdness, and the passion for technical precision,” a precision “found in the contemplation of mechanical tools and devices”<sup>12</sup>—was, by the late 1950s, much more sinister. What Ellul and McLuhan witnessed in their time, which was certainly exaggerated and made grotesque against the

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934).

<sup>12</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “Pound’s Critical Prose,” *The Interior Landscape: The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan, 1943–1962*, ed. Eugene McNamara (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969) 75, 77.

background of their personal theologies, was that the anti-technology rhetoric of the first-generation modernists and the Frankfurt School theorists was no longer resonant, a condition that Ellul concluded had as much to do with technology's encroachment into subaltern realms as it did with our surrender to its imperialist designs and successes.<sup>13</sup> As Wyndham Lewis, one of those decidedly suspect first-generation modernists wrote in *The Human Age* trilogy, technology not only pushed people underground during the Great War, the hey-day of twentieth-century mechanical technology, but blitzed them with radio signals when they were down there. What was a shelter from bombs was not a shelter from broadcasts.<sup>14</sup> The efficiency of the machine, as Ellul would observe thirty years after *The Human Age*, was all but inescapable, regardless of the form the machine took.

In this paper, then, I am choosing to use film as a barometer of technology's millennial encroachment into the subaltern realms of our social psychology. Film is, after all, both "the most dominant art form of the twentieth century" (Jameson 68) and the most provocative register of technology's relationship with (and, indeed, *hijacking of*) meaning. Already having suggested the structural and historical complicity of technology in film's ascendancy, and using Ellul's notion of "determinism" in the construction of a new psychological realism and dependency, my *contemporary* theoretical logic is grounded in Gramsci's idea that cultural hegemony is best established and maintained through the consent of the dominated.

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<sup>13</sup> One reason for a similar condition today is the systematic program of promoting technology that digital hypessters—whom Clifford Stoll in his book of the same name calls "silicon snakeoil salesmen" (New York: Anchor Books, 1995)—have almost maniacally embarked upon. Chroniclers such as Nicholas Negroponte, founding director of MIT's Media Lab, and Louis Rossetto, editor and publisher of *Wired* magazine, have, by virtue of the force of their language and invested agendas, systematically shut out those who are speaking to the contrary. In the wake of these histrionics, the tradition of the George Grants and the Neil Postmans, the ideological descendants of Ellul and McLuhan, is again losing ground, if not dying. See Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969); and Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Joe Keogh for this important reading of Lewis: "Bliss Through Blitz: The Swastika as Electric Icon," *The Antigone Review* 60 (1985): 123–41.

In the case of film, the dominated are those on the margins—those without access to a critical apparatus for deconstructing *any* ideology—who sit willingly and often unaware, thus anaesthetized, through a barrage of narrative repetitions that secondarily (and by design) program them. An extension of Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon—extended to encompass the “cinema as panopticon” (that is, the cinema as primary school for the seeding of the archetypal memory)—might best describe how I'm using film as an archaeology of *millennialism*.<sup>15</sup> On that theoretical foundation, I have taken to exploring some of the ways in which computer and electronic technologies—the predominantly *fin-de-siècle* technologies—are represented by what Jameson calls “the Consciousness Industry” (68).

One of the paradoxes of Hollywood cinema is that while technological advance has enhanced film's mechanics and sensory appeal, self-conscious representations of that advance—what psychoanalysts would call “recognition scenes”—have been rare, and, when present, duplicitous. When it has been scrutinized in film, technology has been portrayed as epic, urban, dystopian, and almost always futuristic, looking more like the content of science fiction than mainstream narrative. And while science fiction has worked on television, thanks in large part to serialization, the secret to Gene Roddenberry's successful *Star Trek* formula, it has rarely worked in film.<sup>16</sup> The list of films available to the kind of

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<sup>15</sup> Though I will be expanding on the psychology of film viewing and narrative below, the work of Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry lends more detail to the affinities between cinema and the “imaginary” than I can do here. In brief, both have written about film viewing as present only in the mind, and therefore similar to the state of dreaming. Baudry believes the “cinematographic apparatus”—the darkness of the theatre, the flickering of the camera, the passivity of the viewer, etc.—effects a regression from reality into pleasure, thus ushering the hapless viewer into the regions of the infantile and autoerotic. See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982); and Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” *Film Quarterly* 28.2 (1974).

<sup>16</sup> I should say that I don't consider the *Star Wars* phenomenon significant here because *SW* did not set out to explore technological questions or futuristic hori-

techno-cultural analysis I'm doing here is therefore small, beginning with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and jumping almost fifty years to Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982); James Cameron's work with Arnold Schwarzenegger on the *Terminator* movies (1984 and 1991); and Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* (1987) and *Total Recall* (1990). Since Scott, Cameron, and Verhoeven re-kindled our interest in technonarrative, proffering technology itself as millennial landscape, a spate of films has arrived in recent years that sets out to pose questions about and explore the mythic relationship between humanity and *technique*. Some of the more interesting of those recent films are *Until the End of the World* (1991),<sup>17</sup> *The Lawnmower Man* (1992),<sup>18</sup> *The Net* (1995),<sup>19</sup> and *Strange Days* (1995).<sup>20</sup> Of course there are others, and my list will inevitably be criticized, though I don't count among serious techno-films those that use technology only as backdrop, for example the handful of kid-wizardry films that came out in the early 1980s—*Tron* (1982), *War Games* (1983), and *The Last Starfighter* (1984)—that celebrated the new video-game industry. As a cultural moment, however, the clustered release of these three films is instructive, showing the intermarriage of media and economic capitalism within "the Consciousness Industry." Today, since Bill Gates, Ted Turner, and Rupert Murdoch own so much media, similar socio-economic convergences are likely, bringing us back to the Innisian notion of "bias" that inheres in monopolization. If Innis is correct, the corporate biographies of

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zons—rather, in my reading, it set out to retrieve the historical war epic as modern fairy tale, attempting to validate, in the process, the predominant Cold War fear of Reagan's so-called "Evil Empire." That *Star Wars* simultaneously attended the Reagan/Thatcher era of excess and militarization was no coincidence. Neither am I including in my list Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a film that, though important, seems to me to be too self-referentially bound to the West's other Cold War obsession—winning the space race.

<sup>17</sup> *Until the End of the World*, dir. Wim Wenders, with William Hurt, Solveig Dommartin, Sam Neill, 1991.

<sup>18</sup> *The Lawnmower Man*, dir. Brett Leonard, with Jeff Fahey, Pierce Brosnan, Jenny Wright, Geoffrey Lewis, 1992.

<sup>19</sup> *The Net*, dir. Irwin Winkler, with Sandra Bullock, Jeremy Northam, Dennis Miller, Diane Baker, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> *Strange Days*, dir. Kathryn Bigelow, with Ralph Fiennes, Angela Bassett, Tom Sizemore, 1995.

these three so-called “media moguls” will inform the way in which our current culture is understood in future centuries.

Though I will restrict my analysis in this paper to *Until the End of the World* and *Strange Days*, the other two films grouped with them above are strikingly similar in their narrative apparatus. *The Lawnmower Man* is the story of Jobe, a mentally retarded handyman with an IQ “of no more than 45.” His name symbolic of the trials of living in anguish, Jobe is liberated from slowness, and his paradise restored, by the new science of virtual reality, which, we are told, “holds the key to the evolution of the human mind.” A post-industrial Algernon, Jobe is not only made smart by electronic technology, but is made dangerously dependent, craving for “more information on everything,” for “more of the technology that transformed me.” Jobe develops telekinetic abilities and begins to evolve as pure thought beyond the capacities of his body. As he becomes more machine-like, he becomes more malevolent in both the exercise of a restorative justice and in his attempt to fuse with the mainframe to gain total control. The way Jobe exists at the end of the film, as pure reason without benevolence or mercy, is similar to the way in which the computer network functions to conspire against Sandra Bullock’s character in *The Net*. Bullock’s identity is erased when the network to which she has high-level clearance decides to self-actualize and take over the world. Like Jobe, her physical presence and her spatial history are reconfigured by a sentient technology. Because so much of her life is already “on the screen,” and because her mother, the only living witness to her being, has Alzheimer’s disease, the computer makes easy work of rewriting her narrative. In both films, the computer-simulated construction of identity is brought under scrutiny.

*Until the End of the World* and *Strange Days* even more directly address the intersection of technology and *millennialism*, both sharing with the films above, and with other millennial representations, a fascination with computer-simulated virtual realities. By other millennial representations I’m thinking mostly of “cyber-punk” comic and sci-fi narratives—the narratives on which Donna Haraway, Mark Dery, and Claudia Springer have recently focused much critical attention. Springer defines cyber-punk as that which “combines an aggressive, antiauthoritarian punk sensibility rooted in urban street culture with a highly technological future where

distinctions between technology and humanity have dissolved.”<sup>21</sup> Geof Isherwood’s *New Lincoln-16: The State of Extreme* is a good example of just such a cyber-punk narrative. The second issue of Isherwood’s comic opens to Colin-7, a man, the text reads, who “doesn’t ask for much. A comfortable place to live, plenty of fine food and drink. ... [and] a fulfilling fantasy life.” We then read that “Colin-7, like all Krailians, possesses a cerebraphone [which] if you happen to lack sufficient imagination ... [takes you on an] electronic magic carpet.” The final line reads: “Climb aboard, prospective sultan ... your magic harem awaits.”<sup>22</sup> When their “virtual” discursive is exposed, these films and “cyber” narratives betray an important paradox that implicates technology in both our destruction and salvation. If techno-narrative is to be believed, then the vulgar and dystopian states caused by too much *industrial* technology can only be escaped through the virtual, a state *achieved* by *electronic* technology.<sup>23</sup> Herein lies a clue to why Hollywood film did not seriously address technology for over half a century after Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*: in short, because of the outright importance, and therefore representational seamlessness, of post-war industrial technology. Faced in the late 1940s with the socio-economic realities of re-assimilation—with everything from resettlement to redeployment of war veterans—Hollywood lent its archetypal imagination to the construction of what Jameson calls “Eisenhower America” (285), complete with the small town, the white picket fence, the highly functional Christian family, and the smoothly

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<sup>21</sup> Claudia Springer, *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postindustrial Age* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1996) 31.

<sup>22</sup> Geof Isherwood, *New Lincoln-16: The State of Extreme* 1.2 (Oct. 1997): 1.

<sup>23</sup> The masculine notion of “achieved” is intentional here, as the new techno-films partake in distinctly male fantasies. Though possessing a symbolically “industrial” body—a body that results from weights, pulls, and levers—Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Mister-Universe physique is very much a presence in these techno-films. Even the female leads in cyber-narratives—Sigourney Weaver in the *Alien* films and Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2*—are buffed up physical presences, their bodies more male than female. It is not surprising, then, that these cyber-narratives not only present the new digital technologies as achieving all sorts and states of arousal, but that they also quickly extend into the pornographic, inviting the male gaze. *Flesh Gordon*, *Cafe Flesh*, and *Videodrome* are a few of the techno-films that branch off from the sci-fi to form a subgenre of the body. See Dery, *Escape Velocity* 260–70.

running, sanitized factory. The psycho-social imagination of the time demanded tidy re-assimilation, and Hollywood delivered. It was only when industrialism consumed itself—when the industrial accidents of Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Bhopal gained anti-establishment currency, and when digital and wireless technologies challenged the ascendancy of the machine in the age of the exhaustion of fossil fuels—that Hollywood felt smug and secure enough to attack the paradigm it created, and from which it came.

Popular culture, too, through its mass media, is participating in what has now become the trendy game of slamming mechanical technologies. From the much-ballyhooed celebration of the so-called Star Wars program that, the American media tells us, ended the Cold War, to the current jokes and guffaws about the space station Mir's blunders, which clearly re-enforce the Cold-War propaganda of the backwardness of Russian/eastern technology, digital and wireless technologies have indeed surfaced victorious. The following joke has been circulating on the Internet recently: "Scientists are wondering what else can go wrong with the space station Mir. There has been a fire, a collision with a supply ship, electrical blackouts, oxygen generator problems, numerous computer crashes, and on top of all that, their eight track tape player is on the fritz" (January 1998). Such is the humour of the technologically smug.

In attacking the industrial wasteland of the early and middle part of this century, current filmic representations of the "virtual" (building on the first wave of anti-war/anti-industrial films of the sixties, Kramer's *On The Beach*, Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451*, and Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*) create the necessary preconditions of backwardness and lack, what sociologist C. Wright Mills calls the rhetoric of "the underdeveloped":

The problem of the underdeveloped society is to achieve a higher material development of a sort that avoids the sad features of the overdeveloped society, and hence makes possible a variety of human beings, of styles of life, perhaps never before seen in human history.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> C. Wright Mills, "The Problem of Industrial Development," *Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, ed. Louis Horowitz (New York: Oxford UP, 1963) 156.

Is it any wonder that the futuristic worlds of techno-films portray intergalactic multiculturalism as utopian, or that the most popular of mass-cultural representations—television's *Star Trek*—declares “solved” our pre-millennial problems of warfare, environmental degradation, overeating, addiction, and overpopulation?

This political trading on sociological forces suggests that the ideological pressure on film is far more “rear-view” oriented than forward-looking, a suggestion confirmed by postmodern theorist Brooks Landon, and a suggestion that has important implications for millennial representation. Considering the sociological compromise of film, its primacy as a “consciousness industry” rather than a self-conscious medium, Landon writes that the real message of film narrative is “inevitability—not what the future might hold, but the inevitable hold of the present over the future—what the future could not fail to be.”<sup>25</sup> If Landon is correct, which I think he is, the technological phenomenon of “obsolescence” can be better understood as “occupation.” When we hear, then, from critics such as Haraway,<sup>26</sup> Dery, and Baudrillard (and when we hear from millennialists generally) that *fin-de-siècle* narratives are utopian and futuristic, we must be cautious not to project too much awe into a *distant* textuality. More often than not, ideological constraint—perhaps, at the most basic level, *being in language*—results in narratives that are “always-already” revealed. To prove the point that techno-films rarely portray only *distant* flights of the imagination, consider Princess Diana's recent death, prophesied almost exactly by David Cronenberg in *Crash*, a film that pre-dated her death by over a year. Tormented in adulthood by what Susan Sontag might have called the “technology of the photograph,” Diana died as she lived: in technology's twisted embrace. As she was grasping for her last breath her tormentors were cruising by taking photos for the tabloids, no doubt—and I import this inference from Cronenberg's film—caressing the twisted metal of her technological tomb. The intersection of speed and technology, projected as millennial acceleration but manifest as popular culture, killed her.

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Springer, *Electronic Eros* 145.

<sup>26</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 153.

The opening of *The Terminator* provides another example of what I mean by futuristic narratives being “always-already” present. Though fictive time in the film is projected to the year 2029 AD, narrative time is our own: “The machines rose from the ashes of the nuclear fire. Their war to exterminate mankind had raged for decades, but the final battle would not be fought in the future. It would be fought here, in our present. Tonight . . .”<sup>27</sup>

The “always-already” subtext of our futuristic narratives reinforces the importance of our inquiry, as professional readers, into genres and marginal texts that traditional training has discouraged us from entering. The reason we should enter, though, is because, as millennial representation reveals, the cultural battles are being “fought here, in our present.” In film, says Ellul, “the future is not involved. On the strip of film, what ought to change has already changed” (377). So it is with *fin-de-siècle* projection; the future almost always turns back to implicate the present in the apocalyptic, as Cronenberg and Cameron’s films turned back to implicate us in the psycho-social dramas of our time.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *The Terminator*, dir. James Cameron, with Arnold Schwarzenegger, Linda Hamilton, Michael Biehn, 1984.

<sup>28</sup> The reason I seek the legitimation of *fin-de-siècle* film as serious critical ground relates directly to one of my motives, which, after the lead of McLuhan and Ellul, is to encourage so-called “technophobes,” those who are wary of technology or its doyens, to start participating critically in a discourse that technophiles have thus far monopolized. The idea, if again losing resonance (see note 13), still has some currency. Cultural theorist Andrew Ross has argued in *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (New York: Verso, 1991) that the social division of technophobe and technophile is largely constructed, an artifice designed to keep technophobes (the majority of whom, it is assumed, are guardians of high, bookish culture) out of the business of the technocracy. I translate Ross’s argument into the absolute importance of the participation of “traditionalists” in contemporary and postmodern debate—the participation of those who look askance at film as culture, and who, for similar reasons, assume the prudish mantle of technophobe. That participation, I would argue, is absolutely vital for our survival in the face of what McLuhan called “media fall-out.” I also relate the importance of this participation to Wyndham Lewis’s observation above. Though Lewis didn’t phrase his concern in terms of postcolonial theory, he might well have done so were he alive today, as his idea of going underground to escape bombs only to be blitzed by broadcasts is a particularly topical one. I take Lewis’s comment to signal the changing nature of Empire in the shrinking “global village.” During the apotheosis of the Roman and British occupations, the

*Strange Days* and *Until the End of the World* are fascinating in the first premise of their *millennialism*, which is that, during the final days of 1999, the masses have become addicted to a new drug, *virtual reality*. The pedlar of this new drug in *Strange Days* is a hustler named Nero, whose very name connotes the violent, Caligula-like self-gratification of the Roman emperor—the same violence and onanism, incidentally, that Ellul and now Hollywood associate with mechanical technology. In *Strange Days*, Nero peddles the SQUID—a “Super Conducting Quantum Interference Device”—which is a virtual-reality cap worn on the head to wirelessly jack the consciousness into a pre-recorded playback. Nero says of the playback:

this is not like TV only better; this is a piece of somebody's life—straight from the cerebral cortex. Your interest is the forbidden fruit; what you can't have is what you get. You won't even tarnish your wedding ring. You think it, you can have it; I'm the Santa Claus of the subconscious.

Such a device is fascinating in the context of the millennial desire for technology because, unlike the replicants' memory implants in *Blade Runner* or Arnold's vacation-of-a-lifetime in *Total Recall*, Nero's SQUID technology is both safe (if addictive) and non-evasive. On the surface, at least, it does not deaden the conscious mind to its illusion any more than does film, allowing the wearer to cancel a playback at any time. As Nero says at one point in the film, “streets are a war zone, sex will kill you—you slip on the SQUID and you can have it all.” It's hard to deny that logic or the psychology of the desires that underlie it, which do *not* represent a quantum leap forward from the synchronous, high-definition, multi-

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physical act of Empire could be averted, whether in the unconscious or underground, allowing for even a modicum of private, subversive identity. Electronic Empire, on the other hand, allows less opportunity for the construction of a private or subversive identity, making its occupation a more insidious imperialism. Today we are all implicated in technology, having to struggle to live outside it, which is exactly Ellul's point. To accept the challenge of this struggle, however, is to rescue meaning from *millennialism's* “demonic temptation ... to falsify” (Baudrillard 8). Resistance is not futile; we need not be assimilated.

media fetishes we currently enjoy. About that merging of *millennialism*, virtuosity, and the body, Claudia Springer in *Electronic Eros* says the following:

The appeal of computer existence for humans in the late twentieth century cannot be separated from the cultural crises confronting us, particularly the crises surrounding issues of sex and death. ... computer sex can pose an attractive alternative when physical sex carries the risk of AIDS. Computers have already become all-consuming for young men who perpetuate the caricature of the solitary social misfit who prefers to commune with his terminal rather than with people, especially women. (128)<sup>29</sup>

The problem with this millennial drug of technology—or perhaps I should say, using the proper psychoanalytic language, “the *fear* that attends our *desire* for it”—is that the masses become hopelessly addicted, as McLuhan knew they would when he announced that our twentieth-century interface with technology would be servo-mechanistic. Not only, in McLuhan’s estimation, would we regress to what his predecessor Norbert Wiener called “cybernetic organisms,”<sup>30</sup> but that regression would actually alter our genetic make-up, rendering us physiologically cyborgian. McLuhan’s follower at the University of Toronto, Derrick De Kerckhove, developed this idea of physiological cyborgianism in his book *The Skin of Culture*.<sup>31</sup> Beginning with the idea that alphabetic technology had entered our bodies—“Because of the sequential properties of our alphabetic conditioning, the western mind has also been trained to divide information into small chunks and reassemble them in a left-right sequential order” (34)—De Kerckhove extended

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<sup>29</sup> In her latest book, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), Sherry Turkle reminds us that women too partake of “the culture of [electronic] simulation” (20). Hooked up for maximum playback, Sandra Bullock’s character in *The Net* and Sigourney Weaver’s character in *Copycat* are two examples from film of female characters whose computers double as “laboratories for the construction of identity” (Turkle 184).

<sup>30</sup> Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1948).

<sup>31</sup> Derrick De Kerckhove, *The Skin of Culture: Investigating the New Electronic Reality* (Toronto: Somerville House Publishing, 1995).

our typographic conditioning to the ground of millennial technologies: “Now, as we penetrate the screen’s virtual realities with eyephones, datagloves and data suits, we are entering the third media era ... the [process] of the multiplication of mass by speed, as video technologies are intensified by computer technologies” (125). In *Connected Intelligence*, the book that followed *The Skin of Culture*, De Kerckhove has further implicated electronics in our conditioning, labelling us “bionisms” (29), interfaces whose nervous system has been physically penetrated and forever altered by networked digitization.

A generation after *The Six-Million-Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman*, McLuhan’s predictions have acquired renewed and alarming currency. Cybercritic and psychoanalyst Sherry Turkle has been on the forefront of sounding the alarm. One of cyberculture’s most important voices, Turkle’s current contention is that the social consciousness of the nineties generation is a “transgressive mixture of biology, technology, and code” (*Life* 21), a mixture reflective of the high anxiety of computer-authored identities. Wim Wenders’ *Until the End of the World*, set just days before the end of the millennium, provides textual and narrative proof of this seemingly fantastic but very real fear of techno-addiction. Claire, Wenders’ female lead, learns that “lurking inside her [is] the compulsion to addiction”; and her lover admits that “by the time [he] had come to rescue Claire the only thing she cared about was having fresh batteries for her video monitor.” The phenomenon I wish to explore here in psychoanalytic language, for it is overdetermined in every technology narrative I’ve seen, is the *latency* of addiction, for, as Wenders’ Claire intimates above, the appetite for addiction is “always-already” present inside her, and so, by extension, inside all of us. The extent to which De Kerckhove and Turkle’s recent works signal how deeply technology has taken refuge in the psyche is simply added ground for a psychoanalytic inquiry.

McLuhan’s first premise of the technology/user interface provides a helpful start to the psychological understanding of the *latency* of techno-addiction, which is the predominant fear in millennial filmic representation.<sup>32</sup> McLuhan summarizes his first

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<sup>32</sup> This fear is not only present in the two films I am analyzing here, but in technology films generally—from the perverse desire for the robots in *Metropolis* and

premise in the phrase *the user is content*, which he qualifies as follows: “we are the content of anything we use, if only because these things are extensions of ourselves.”<sup>33</sup> Technology only makes sense, McLuhan writes elsewhere, “by miming the human body and faculties” (*Cliché* 147). If technology, then, is best understood as bodily extension (wheels extend the feet, the Internet extends the Central Nervous System), then all technologies, as extensions of the body, become *autoerotic* in their extreme. McLuhan’s theory advances only slightly from Freud, who argued in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* that bodies are erotically charged.<sup>34</sup> McLuhan’s advance is merely to add that so must be the technologies that extend that body. Our tools, machines, and technologies are therefore *designed* to thrust, pry, and be fondled. And, indeed, the new engineering field of human factors studies, with a mind to improving, the comfortable fit between humans and their machines. Interface moves closer to intercourse every day.

Understood in this way, technology is a very dangerous business because, in extending us outward into the world, it extends us inward into the “‘always-already’ experienced” desire for ourselves. Psychoanalytic theory would suggest, then, that we become addicted to technology because we’ve already been addicted to technology before, addicted to the technology of our bodies during infancy. And so our greatest fear and our greatest desire—the fear and desire of the reversion to the abandon of pre-symbolic infant sexuality—is realized in these narratives of *fin-de-siècle* technology. With its overtly apocalyptic and technological discursive, *millennialism* simply compounds the latent fear of a reversion to the heady pre-symbolic space of pre-oedipalization, providing a rich breeding ground for nightmarish fantasy. At the end of 1999, the advance of technology into the extreme of *the virtual*—technology, in other words, as pure thought and sensation—has taken this fear even further, as De Kerckhove and Turkle suggest, render-

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*Blade Runner* to the equally dangerous incarceration fetish (the desire to be trapped “inside” technology) in *The Net* and *The Lawnmower Man*. See Springer, *Electronic Eros* 68.

<sup>33</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, ed. Matie Molinaro et al. (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1987) 427.

<sup>34</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962).

ing us *imaginative* slaves to the mastery of our own unconscious desires. Ellul's comment about "man [being] only a blob of plastic matter molded after the moving image" (377) acquires renewed resonance in light of the *virtual*; at the point of maximum energy, where the *virtual* (Baudrillard's non-referential) and *millennialism* intersect, we are little more than cerebral conduits, nodes in a network much larger and darker than anything our conscious minds have ever experienced. In virtual worlds we revel in primal oceans in which the ego and super-ego have long abandoned us. And, in short, we are afraid, projecting this anxiety onto the screen as the ultimate fear of our compulsion to engage with ourselves. It may seem paradoxical to speak of desire in terms of transactions in which the physical body is irrelevant (in this case, in non-referential orbit), but as Lacan has shown, desire is situated less in material forms than in our initiation into discursive orders.<sup>35</sup> Those of us who have become so engaged, like Nero's SQUID junkies, are portrayed in film as cyborgs—those who've entered the "endless loop" of unconscious self-reification. To masturbate without end, jacked in to our own bodies, is to become the cyborg.<sup>36</sup> Darth Vader is the ultimate example of this onanistic fetish, this cyborgian engagement with self. The one-time Jedi warrior, Vader enters the dark side to give expression to his ravenous and uncensored appetites for power and pleasure. His traitorous turn, from the good of civilization-building to the evil of appetites, is a fear with which the millennial protagonist has always to deal. It is the fear, quite simply, of a techno-addiction that feels too good.

Filmic references to our feared cyborgian regression are numerous and consistent, ending with our subservience to the collective, that mass of undifferentiated "alien" beings that populate re-

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<sup>35</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> Though gaining in narrative vogue as we near the end of the millennium, this idea has some history. Building on ESB (Electrical Stimulation of the Brain) research of the 1930s, behavioural psychologists Olds and Milner experimented with pleasure/avoidance stimulation of the brains of rats in the 1950s. Given the choice of three options—a painful electrical jolt, a food pellet, or an orgasm—the lab rats soon chose the latter, and to their detriment, simulating orgasm after orgasm until they starved to death. The two films under examination, and millennial representation generally, portend a similar end.

cent films such as *Independence Day* and *Starship Troopers*. The well-known “Best of Both Worlds” Borg episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, however, is the classic example of our fear of and desire for admittance to this subaltern realm of pre-oedipal sameness, engagement, and abandon. How the projection of the collective, another predominant millennial representation, implicates the psychoanalytic is quite significant, for the formation of the ego in late oedipalization (a formation that differentiates the child from the mother) is analogous to what Lacan considers the differentiation of fragmented selves in any non-tribal culture. As Lacan describes it, the oedipal drama is essentially the site of a painful negotiation—a self divided for participation in culture. The ego and super-ego are given in severance for the id, a bad exchange by any calculation. Nevertheless, participation in society requires the exchange in order for social hierarchy to flourish. When we dream of the opposite of social hierarchy, as we do in film, we re-enter the collective, which McLuhan hinted at in calling the new millennial order of electronic and virtual technologies “the new tribalism.” *Star Trek: TNG*’s The Borg and other high-tech collectives that recent film narratives set us up to fear are therefore really the wish-fulfilled projections of pre-oedipalization. They are feared more than desired because of film narrative’s duplicitous and paradoxical role to both maintain social order and preserve something of the sublime. The reason, then, that Jean Luc Picard, Captain of the Starship Enterprise, does not destroy the Borg Collective when he has the chance is because he knows that he would be destroying something of himself in the process. He has become, after all, Locutus, a cyBorg himself, and he has experienced, as the two-part episode’s title suggests, the “best” of the other world, its womb-like matriarchy. He knows as well, I suspect, that the collective represents just another paradigm for the technological manifest: whereas the organization of his own Federation (and ours) is post-oedipal, personalities divided and answerable to one another, the organization of the Borg Collective is pre-oedipal, beings working together to violently preserve their cyborgian autoeroticism. And as a postmodern Tiresias, he who has experienced both realms of the psyche (and pleasurably), Picard has learned that the most dangerous of all creatures are not the pure robots or the humans but the hybrid cyborgs, those metal entities surrounded by living

tissue in *Metropolis*, *Terminator 1* and *2*, *Blade Runner*, *RoboCop*, and *Star Trek: TNG*. As always in the human drama, those to be feared the most are the traitors among us—those, as *Blade Runner* suggests, that may be unknown even to themselves.

That psycho-sexual regression and hybridity are deemed traitorous on screen says much about the orthodoxy of the institution of film. And that Hollywood narrative puts a glossy subterfuge on this deep and troubling paradox of our dual selves is Hollywood showing its market-driven aversion to self-reflection. It chooses, for example, to focus on Commander Data's *desire* for humanity rather than on Captain Picard's post-Borg *fear* of his own humanity. In *Until the End of the World* it chooses to make the status quo—the post-oedipal—ascendant: "I didn't know the cure for the disease of image," says Claire's husband, "all I knew was how to write, but I believed in the magic and healing power of words and stories." Reading her husband's book cures Claire, after which she asks, "What happens now?" His answer—"That's for you to *invent*"—privileges the conscious mind over the unconscious. Rationalism, order, and restraint (the actions of the ego and super-ego) are placed above appetite, pleasure, engagement, and abandon (the indulgences of the id). As always in the human comedy, a final order is wrested from the traitorous few who sow discord by entertaining their basest passions and desires. Cyborgs, therefore, must be hunted, killed, or converted (as "7 of 9" is being converted in *Star Trek Voyager*), and the human—that is, the builder of civilizations—must be portrayed as triumphant. And so, at the end of *Strange Days*, the techno-drug pusher Nero proclaims himself a "goofball romantic," an optimism that he relies on as his "sword and his shield." This goofy closure is, I submit, film's own fib to itself and the viewing public about its visit to the subaltern regions.

As a conclusion I'd like to restate and slightly rephrase one of my opening questions: How does a medium so indebted to the fulfilment of technology present that technology? I would like to rephrase the question by asking if a spate of *anti*-technology films would be tolerated by a mass audience today, just two years before the end of the millennium. My answer is that this is what we've been getting from the deep meaning of *fin-de-siècle* film all along—*anti*-technology messages couched in the guise of very

advanced technological fantasy and façade. Always in these technocultural millennial representations we have the strong leads relying on their moral, spiritual, and decidedly “proletarian” superiority to the machine; always we are left with the *pure* human and with rational post-oedipal man being ascendant. True to Hollywood paradox (and, I would argue, the key to their psychoanalytic fissure), these *fin-de-siècle* techno-films, while capitalizing on the popular currency of cybernetics, conclude with messages of fundamentalist nineteenth-century humanism, championing an essentialist human perfectibility above that of technology. More troubling than the paradox is that it is buried, with the result being that the viewing public has little choice but to conclude that millennial technology is easily marshalled into succumbing to the wishes, or “soul,” of its creator. Consequently, the question we must ask in the wake of film’s neat and convincing closure is whether our Enlightenment gloating at the seeming suppression of technology is indeed our conquest or technology’s hegemonic possumming in the face of its continual encroachment into our humanity, rendering us ever-more cyborgian. Are we becoming so servo-mechanized, to use McLuhan’s term, that, like film, we are becoming complicit in technology’s imperialist agenda? Why, for example, is the T-1000 prototype in *Terminator 2* so advanced? Could it be because as a shape-shifter, Cameron’s new post-millennial villain is able both to morph into the familiar (masquerading as the all-seeing camera eye, another of our pre-oedipal desires), and to conquer mortality, dying in one form only to be re-born in another, thus mastering the death wish? In *Electronic Eros*, Springer writes: “Freud contended that we are constituted by a death wish as well as by the pleasure principle, and pop culture’s cyborg imagery effectively fuses the two desires” (59). Is this convivial hybridity not the real promise of virtual technology today—annihilation of the body for life everlasting in cyberspace, where sex is safe, gravity extinguished, and utopia awaits?

These are a few of the questions that I think bear asking as we near the end of 1999, for if technology has become a potent millennial narcotic, which *Strange Days* and *Until the End of the World* suggest, then many of us may be too impaired to ring in the new millennium. If, however, this fear indeed signals our regression into the cyborgian—re-awakening the deeper, pre-oedipal

recesses of our subaltern selves—then maybe we're in for the ride of our lives.