One of the eeriest aspects of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and on the Pentagon was the fact that the spectacle of devastation stirred, beyond the feelings of horror, an unmistakable sense of *déjà vu*. Media observers had to struggle with the realization that the barely imaginable pictures coming from New York and Washington looked like real-life enactments of techno-thrillers or Hollywood disaster movies. Journalists and web users soon pointed out that Tom Clancy had earned the awkward distinction of having written the novel that most accurately predicts the mechanics of the terrorist attacks (see Bellet 1). In Clancy’s *Debt of Honor* (1994), a hijacked airliner crashes on the White House and kills most members of the U.S. executive. The attacks were also reminiscent of films such as *Executive Decision* (1996), in which U.S. Special Forces board a 747 airliner seized by Muslim terrorists and prevent them from detonating a biochemical device over New York. The aftermath of the September 11 attacks—the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan—had been anticipated in the opening sequence of *Executive Decision* itself, which shows Special Forces raiding a central Asian capital city. Likewise, warfare in Central Asia is the narrative focus of *The Peacemaker* (1997), starring George Clooney as a post-Cold War intelligence agent, and of the James Bond vehicle *The World is not Enough* (1999). Both films depict Central Asia as region where warlords run traffic in nuclear warheads. In a crowning irony, the anthrax scare that followed the Sept 11 attacks is anticipated in *Executive Orders*, the sequel to Clancy’s *Debt of Honor*. The novel chronicles the effort of the surviving U.S. president whose shattered country is now threatened by an Ebola epidemic unleashed by anti-US Muslims.

Through the prism of my own popular culture literacy, the World Trade Center disaster evoked striking echoes of *Islands in the Net*, a cyberpunk novel published by Bruce Sterling in 1988, and which I had
read a only few months before September 11. This text depicts an early-twentieth-century society in which people pride themselves in having averted the Cold War’s nuclear threat. Economic life is ruled by two types of nations: on the one hand, transnational networks of democratically inclined entrepreneurs regulated by a worldwide mediating body; on the other, rogue capitalists located in offshore tax shelters—the Caribbean, Singapore, and Luxemburg. The complacency of these affluent nations is shattered when terrorist attacks target the rogue nations, causing thousands of deaths and destabilizing the planet’s economic system. Initially, the attacks are interpreted as the outcome of economic warfare among offshore capitalists. Yet the culprits turn out to be a small Khmer-Rouge-style terrorist group named FACT, located of all places in the desert African state of Mali. FACT is actually no emanation of Mali as a nation. It is a conglomerate of transnational activists who act as the voice of the dispossessed. They feed on the discontent of African populations whose countries have been devastated by pollution-induced climate change. By the end of the novel, the terrorists have been provisionally defeated. The planet’s capitalist round of life is resumed, though in an expectant, apprehensive mode.

The present essay attempts to make sense of a situation where popular-culture texts act as predictors and interpreters of world events. Specifically, I aim to evaluate both the clear-sightedness and the ideological limitations of the 21st-century world picture elaborated in contemporary science fiction and geopolitical thrillers. Initially, this interpretation requires a reading perspective that avoids the knee-jerk skepticism toward mass culture customary in literary or even cultural studies. Instead of handling popular texts as deconstruction fodder, I need to grant them at least in part the status of authorized voices on social and geopolitical issues. This means also that the novels discussed below are approached as representative of a geopolitical discourse that extends beyond the boundaries of fiction. The image of the world they develop is, I believe, in many ways similar to that articulated in the political press or in Alvin-Toffler-style futurology.

Admittedly, some of the material mentioned above—the Hollywood films, particularly—make no claim to geopolitical versimilitude. *The World is not Enough* rather improbably makes Central Asian Kazakhstan the ancestral homeland of embattled, pious Slavs. Its villains are a coalition of ex-communists and fanatic Islamists so hardened by evil that they unflinchingly handle toxic plutonium with their bare hands. Cyberpunk fiction, however, sharply differentiates itself
from the counterfactual fantasies of such epic romances. Cyberpunk has from its inception in the mid-1980s attempted to act as a medium of scientifically and sociologically informed popular-culture vulgarization. As such, postmodern science-fiction has been consistently accurate in predicting a few defining features of the 21st-century present—its reliance on technologies of communication and electronic interfacing, particularly. Cyberpunk writers have been credited not only for making visible the technological framework of this near-future, but also for pointing out its likely failures. They have acted as the Jules Verne of the virtual world, while also minutely imagining the dysfunctional impact of new technologies on society and the environment.

A type of popular fiction that aspires to the consistency of the social sciences invites its readers to shed some of the literary theoretical assumptions most precious to twentieth-century academics—particularly the critical principles concerning the (lack of) relation of texts to the real. We must indeed assume that the value of the novels in the present corpus depends on their referential clear-sightedness, on the truth value of their predictions. This means conversely that they can be faulted for making faulty predictions. Sterling’s Islands in the Net would literally have been a better novel if the terrorist group it depicts had been religiously motivated. Also, Sterling’s novel looks technologically naive when it describes a 21st-century Internet with capabilities that barely go beyond a teletype service. By comparison, William Gibson’s concept of a mind-altering cyberspace—a field of computer-generated interrelations that acts as a full-fledged virtual environment—seems closer to the truth, even though it is a romance vision. In this light, writing cyberpunk amounts to gambling on the future: readers can retrospectively avail themselves of a prerogative of referential accountability with regard to the novels. When Gibson introduced in Virtual Light a character hailing from the state of Padania—separatist Northern Italy as depicted in the political program of Umberto Bossi’s Lega Nord—he probably knew that his novel would be outdated if, as he certainly wished himself, Bossi’s policies failed. Likewise, Gibson and Neal Stephenson lost hugely at the referential game when, in their early works, they evoked the image of a 21st-century United States economically dominated by Asia.

However, the paradox we face in the present discussion is that even a literature endowed with referential accountability—indeed even texts that have proved successful in their prognoses—do carry an ideological agenda. Postmodern science fiction’s maps of the near future
may be valuable tools of exploration but they are also charts of intercultural and political misunderstanding. For all its critical edge, postmodern science fiction tends to empower Western, or at least Western-identified protagonists only. This hegemony of (post)industrial values in cyberpunk is, one may conjecture, due to the fact that the texts are wedded to a view of world relations where information technology reigns supreme—be it for benevolent or harmful ends. Whether the writers criticize or endorse informational capitalism, their novels posit as inevitable the deployment of a computerized social bond. One may therefore legitimately question the ability of cyberpunk writers radically to transcend the technological, social sciences or journalistic discourse through which the informational society has for the most part been represented—sources whose ideological framework is consistently pro-capitalistic. The question is the more vital as the function of such techno-discourse goes beyond the interpretation of the present to include the shaping of the future. Indeed, cyberpunk resembles capitalist-inspired futurology in that it deploys what we may call a prospective brand of ideology. Its political discourse lays down the ideological framework through which crises of the future—like the present-day terror war—will be perceived.

Cyberpunk’s ideological work is most visible, I believe, when writers tackle what journalists would call foreign affairs—particularly the relations of the (post)industrial North to the pre-industrial South. Post-WWII British or American canonical culture has seldom attempted to develop the global perspective necessary to map such world-wide issues. This task as been delegated to such popular genres as spy narratives (Ian Fleming’s, Len Deighton’s or John Le Carré’s novels) or technothrillers à la Tom Clancy—a corpus that flaunts a right-wing brand of Realpolitik. Admittedly, cyberpunk did not seem initially meant to explore this particular territory. Its area of sociological insight is the (post)industrial technopolis. William Gibson and Neal Stephenson have, for instance, accurately pointed out the evolution of urban space in the age of electronic interlinking. They have shown that the information society fosters a privatization of social space. In their novels, suburbs are “burbclaves” (Stephenson Snow Crash 16) that act as autonomous city-states protected by private police forces (“Meta-Cops,” “WorldBeat Security” or “The Enforcers” [Stephenson, Snow Crash 45]). Yet the techno-social change that cyberpunk represents in the context of the the megalopolis has planet-wide consequences. It is the globalization of capitalism itself. Thus, cyberpunk novels have to
map the evolution of non-industrialized cultures as well. This imperative is the more insistent as, in a period of global immigration flows, cultures are no longer contained geographically: the boundary between North and South runs through major world cities. Thus, Gibson, in his path-breaking *Neuromancer* depicts not only the Sprawl, the megalopolis of the Northeast U.S., but also the “Zionite” community—Rastafarians living in the margins of cybercapitalism, indeed in a ganja-smoke-filled orbital station (103). Gibson means to indicate thereby how non-Western cultures may find niches of autonomy within the informational society.

More conspicuously, Neal Stephenson’s *The Diamond Age* and *Cryptonomicon*, with their East-Asian settings, focus on a neo-colonial Third-World environment. Such novels may be described as cybercolonial narratives. They revive not only the issues but the narrative techniques of late-nineteenth-century imperial romances—of novels of exploration by Jules Verne himself (*Around the World in 80 Days* 1873; *Michel Strogoff* 1976), for instance. Admittedly, Stephenson’s stories differ from previous colonial narratives in significant respects. *The Diamond Age* portrays colonial relations in a universe where nation-states have been replaced by “phyles”—planet-wide, geographically fragmented corporations or privatized citizens associations (114). Yet, as it draws to an end, the novel aligns its politics on older and cruder China-focused narratives. It evokes Nicholas Ray’s *Fifty-Five Days at Peking* (1963), which shows pre-WWI western powers unified against the Boxer rebellion, or Robert Wise’s *The Sand Pebbles* (1966), which focuses on US Navy gunboat sailors facing Chiang-Kai Shek’s insurrectional crowds. Stephenson’s China is going through a process of recolonization. Industrialized powers—Nippon, Hindustani and a Neo-Victorian phyle called Atlantis—have established offshore and coastline settlements in order to saturate the mainland market with nanotechnological consumer devices. These efforts are thwarted by Confucian fundamentalists running their own segregationist nation/phyle—the “Celestial Kingdom” (78). The shock troops of this anti-globalization power are martial-arts experts who see themselves as the modern embodiment of the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists, a.k.a., the Boxer gangs themselves. Like their forebears, the “Fists”’ crucify and disembowel Christian missionaries (448, 451). In this neo-colonial confrontation, readers of *The Diamond Age* find themselves uncomfortably rooting for the victory Queen Victoria II, Atlantis’s sovereign. Victoria’s phyle is a techno-oriented, multiethnic
group that paradoxically endorses a revived version of the Victorian protocol. The fact that Stephenson’s “Vickys” benefit from the occasional help of a white separatist South African phyle makes the confrontation the more awkward.

As these examples indicate, the main issue in cyberpunk’s mapping of international relations is cultural and ethnic pluralism. One of the most significant contributions of postmodern science fiction to contemporary popular culture, beyond technological forecasting, has indeed been its insight that societies of the near future would act as fields of co-existence for different ethnicities and subcultures. Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982)—a landmark in postmodern SF film—was acclaimed for its depiction of 21-st century Los Angeles in the guise of what we might call a Bakhtinian city. Ridley Scott’s LA is a multi-ethnic, multilingual, carnivalesque urban sprawl, diametrically opposed to the classical science-fiction imagery of the regimented technopolis. In privileging diversity over the technological rationalization, cyberpunk’s techno-narratives have played a cultural function similar to magic realism, the postmodern genre dedicated to making pluralism and difference visible. Yet pluralism is a fairly vague catchword, referring to dissimilar social configurations, not all of them equalitarian. While analyzing the ideological implications of cyberpunk’s discourse on difference, we can therefore not assume that the genre celebrates a form of pluralism that is empowering for all groups involved. We must therefore determine how far cyberpunk’s discourse on difference stretches. For this purpose, the rest of my argument focuses on several keywords—several components of pluralism as cyberpunk and postmodernist theory define it: homogenization, complexity, randomness, internal difference, and the perceived menace of essentialist politics.

In its departure from modernist fantasies of technological regimentation, postmodern science fiction turns its back not only on the outlook of most twentieth-century utopias and dystopias, but also on influential voices in social sciences and philosophy—one thinks of Max Weber or Theodor Adorno—who believed that the rationalization of public life was, for better or for worse, inevitable (see Adorno and Horkheimer 3-42; also Weber 226-71, 349-50). Yet, if cyberpunk’s skepticism with regard to a scientifically engineered future is unmistakable, it would be simplistic to assume that social homogenization ceases to be an issue in this corpus altogether. Indeed, what postmodern science fiction makes visible is a social field agitated both by centrifu-
gal and centripetal forces—by movements toward pluralism and fragmentation on the one hand, and toward technological standardization on the other. The information universe depicted in cyberpunk novels is still submitted to a powerful unifying force—the network of informational interlinking itself, which Gibson calls cyberspace and Stephenson the metaverse. Gibson depicts cyberspace as a world crowded with picturesque techno-freaks, but whose basic structure is a geometrical grid where information banks are represented in the shape of rhomboid “towers of data” graphically mimicking “Manhattan skyscraper[s]” (*Neuromancer* 257). In Stephenson, the Metaverse seems on the surface a carnivalesque world, “garish and brilliant [...] like Las Vegas” (*Snow Crash* 26). Yet the principle of organization of this universe is thoroughly geometrical. In virtual reality, “2 is the only really important number, because that’s how many digits a computer can recognize” (24). Accordingly, all locales of the Metaverse are given number coordinates generated by powers of two—that is, by permutations of binary ones and zeroes.

Complexity is arguably the keyword that best describes the texture of the informational society as cyberpunk depicts it. This term, I indicate below, has important implications for postmodernism: Theorists invoke the benefits of complexity in order to castigate the presumed dangers of a simple, communitarian world. As a descriptive term, complexity expresses the enigmatic status of a social system that is ostensibly heterogeneous yet covertly homogeneous, half random, half mathematically encoded, split among sharply demarcated levels (real vs. virtual space) yet potentially unified by the same set of semiotic laws. Stephenson’s sprawling *Cryptonomicon* recurrently explores this paradox. The novel suggests that industrial economies since WW II have been ruled by the logic of cryptography and cryptanalysis—the disciplines that gave birth to information technology. In this light, the baffling disorder and violence of the world—its informational noise, so to speak—conceals barely retrievable patterns of encoding. In the beginning of the novel, this world view is portrayed metaphorically through young Lawrence Waterhouse’s reflections on the workings of music and organs. Lawrence, influenced by Johann Sebastian Bach, discovers in the organ “a machine, simple in its design, [able to] produce results of infinite complexity” (7)—an intricate universe constructed on the basis of simple matrices. Lawrence, later trained as a cryptanalyst, comes to view historical and political phenomena according to this logic of complex encoding. The most chaotic media, he assumes, are
likely to yield significant patterns of data for those skilled enough to construe them. Even the ocean along which he walks can be viewed as a “Turing machine,” a primitive computer (445):

[T]he sand is [the Turing machine’s] tape, the water reads the mark in the sand and sometimes erases them and sometimes carves new ones with tiny currents that are themselves a response to the marks (445).

In this logic, “the water swirling around [Waterhouse’s] feet carries information about [Japanese] propeller design and the deployment of their fleet—if only he had the wit to read it” (445). As Lawrence’s own reflections attest, however, the very nature of complexity consists in the fact that what can potentially be grasped must also remain elusive to some degree. “The chaos of the waves,” Lawrence concedes, “gravid with encrypted data, mocks him” (445).

The plurality that may arise within the half-ordered/ half random field of the info-world is of the order of what one might call internal difference. By this, I mean that any form of otherness may turn out to be sameness in disguise, in the same way as informational noise may reveal to be data after all. Otherness, in this logic, can not go beyond hybridity: it can never aspire to be durably different. Stephenson’s Cryptonomicon, drawing on Thomas Pynchon’s fiction, provides a striking illustration of what such logic of difference amounts to on an ethnic plane. The novel includes among the subjects of the British empire a quasi-Celtic ethnic group called the Qwghlmians—hailing from two islands in the western Hebrides, Inner and Outer Qwghlm (256). The Qwghlmians boast an acute sense of ethnicity. Their language—unrelated to Celtic or any other Indo-European idiom—is composed mainly of consonants (“Smith” spells “cCmmndhd” in Qwghlmian) (550)—and splinters off into sharply differentiated dialects (Inner and Outer Qwghlmian). Yet to most other Britons, the Qwghlmians are invisible: they are physically identical to Anglo-Saxons and are the staunchest supporters of the British war effort.

In spite of obvious dissimilarities in context, the Qwghlmians, with their invisible ethnicity, boast a form of social insertion identical to that of William Gibson’s cyberpunk hackers—the stereotypical figures of postmodern techno-rebellion. These characters manifest their otherness in an extrovert fashion—for instance by adopting cross-species “elective surgery” that makes turns them into half-human, half animal crossbreeds (Neuromancer 59). Yet the most astonishing freaks of
Gibson’s early fiction do not entirely opt out of the information economy. Their very disfigurement—notably faces that are “a simple graft grown on collagen and shark polysaccharide” (*Neuromancer* 59)—is made possible both by the general grammar of DNA encoding, which straddles species boundaries, and by the capitalistic context that makes such surgical services available. Likewise, cyborg transformations—any interlinking of the human nervous system with computer technology—is achieved on the basis of a logic of computational interfacing and capitalistic marketing. Hackers may turn themselves into monsters by having “carbon sockets planted behind [their] [...] ear” (57). Yet the software that fits in the socket is most likely “a dozen spikes of microsoft” (57)—a corporate product, that is. At best, hackers are small entrepreneurs vying against monopolistic corporations within the same capitalist field.

Admittedly, a social context where otherness exists as internal difference still leaves room for cultural and political negotiations, even for political empowerment. It need not be mistaken for a polity where otherness finds no place. In their political reflections, postmodern writers and theorists have recurrently explored how otherness and dissent may indeed subsist in societies caught up in the apparently seamless field of techno-capitalism. They have provided widely different answers to this question—from the most pessimistic to the most utopian. Jean Baudrillard, under Adorno’s influence, discerns no hope whatsoever for authentic dissent against informational capitalism. Corporate capitalism, in this view, cannot efficiently be resisted either from within or from without (see *Echange* 7-13; also *Simulacres* 9-17). Theorists must limit themselves to acquiescence or to “the violence of theory”—that is, as Baudrillard’s work itself suggests, to quixotic doomsaying (*Echange*, 13; see also *Transparence* 92-94). Thomas Pynchon, whose central theme is the possibility of dissent, offers an aporetic yet slightly more encouraging view of the issue. The novelist represents oppositional practices as interstitial or paradoxical—as gestures perpetually reborn yet constantly threatened with cooptation.

More optimistic viewpoints have come from authors within cultural studies who have focused on the politics of subcultures and audience empowerment. The liberating momentum of 1980s cultural studies issued indeed from the Gramscian and Bakhtinian belief, voiced initially by Fredric Jameson and Stuart Hall, that mass culture audiences and postmodern political constituencies can appropriate elements of the dominant culture and make them work for their own ends (See
Jameson, “Reification” 29-30; and Hall “Rediscovery” 78-82). This approach, whose most utopian pronouncements appear in Dick Hebdige and John Fiske, implies that no culture can be so totalizing or hegemonic as to extinguish subversion (see Hebdige 100-127; Fiske 501-04). John Fiske, on the basis of E. Michaels’s studies, contends that authentic music of dissent—reggae, for instance—can be produced in a presumably homogeneous worldwide entertainment market (505). Reggae is a hybrid musical style drawing, on the one hand, on African-American Rhythm and Blues broadcast by American radio stations across the Gulf of Mexico and, on the other, on Caribbean-African religious traditions. Initially a local Jamaican idiom, it spread to several Third World nations where it spawned other types of oppositional musics. Similar arguments have been articulated in the fields of gender and ethnic studies. They are implicit in Cornel West’s definition of African-American postmodern identities and in Judith Butler’s paradigm of subversive gender performance (see West 261-65; Butler 167-85, 224-33).

In their most optimistic moments, cyberpunk writers abet the subversion/empowerment scenario. Stephenson’s Cryptonomicon describes how Filipino cars, though they originate from Japanese or American corporations, serve as signifiers of local cultural autonomy. When they build so-called “jeepneys”—minibuses fit for jungle use—the only elements Filipino mechanics borrow from the corporate manufacturers are the automobile’s frame; the jeepney’s “entire body, seats, upholstery, & incrustations of lurid decor are locally manufacterd by hight-spirited artisans” (512). The cultural logic of Stephenson’s contemporary Philippines is similar to that of Gibson’s twenty-first-century Zionite orbital station—itself a fictional embodiment of Fiske’s argument on reggae subversion. Dissent is based on a retooling of corporate culture. Similarly, in his later novels—Virtual Light and All Tomorrow’s Parties—Gibson describes a brotherhood of outcasts that manage to build a community of their own in the ruins of the Oakland Bay Bridge. Their utopian shanty town is endowed with a complex culture that seems to reconcile individualism and mutual help.

Fiske’s reggae subversion, Gibson’s Zionites and Stephenson’s Filipino jeepneys notwithstanding, it is unclear whether the subversion model can be applied to pre- or non-industrial populations, or even to countries that, though they do have a place in the techno-capitalist constellation, only enjoy a subordinate economic and political status. Indeed, Gibson’s and Stephenson’s examples leave one central assump-
tion of the subversion model unexamined—the belief that technocapitalism holds genuine political and cultural sway over the whole planet. When Jameson endorsed the subversion model, he was looking for a proper response to the presumably unquestioned existence of such global hegemony. The politics of internal difference were a defense mechanism with regard to a situation in which “the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating [the] precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which [previously’] offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity” (Postmodernism 49; see also “Reification” 23-26). Such a statement may have been compelling at a time when cultural theorists were first taking stock of the bewildering new info-economy. Yet it remains an unverifiable totalizing assumption. The global homogeneity thus ascribed to the world economy can not be tested in fact. Conversely, this hypothesis ignores the logic by which even a totalizing system must imagine or even generate forms of otherness that constitute its outside—its external enemy. In practice, cybercapitalism too is haunted by the figure of what it represses.

From what precedes, it follows that the absolute otherness facing the postmodernist/cyberpunk world economy must be an ideology prescribing strict social homogeneity, forcible order, cultural rootedness and an essentialist epistemology—attributes that stand opposite to the postmodern values of internal difference, subversion, hybridity, worldwide mobility, relativism and epistemological constructivism. In cyberpunk narratives, the former set of values is embodied in the figure of what we may call the essentialist villain—the character whose political acts are legitimated by absolute values that require blind faith. Stephenson’s Fist militias, in their struggle against the capitalist “Outer Tribes,” embody this ideology, as does the The FACT group in Stirling’s Islands in the Net. FACT guerillas might at first be mistaken for stereotypical cyberpunk subversives—romantic dissidents who roam the desert in all-terrain vehicles and launch attacks by means of high-tech robot planes. Yet their ambition has nothing to do with dissent: they aim to reduce the world economy to an enlarged version of the prison camp they run in the middle of Mali.

In the light of the Manhattan September 11 attacks, we might praise cyberpunk narratives for portraying villains that so accurately resemble the real-life foes of pluralist modernity—the Al Quaeda network, the Peruvian Shining Path guerillas, Algerian islamists, the ETA Basque militants or the various Jörg-Haider-like fascists move-
ments of contemporary Europe. Yet this otherwise perceptive insight is ideologically questionable precisely because it serves the interests of postmodernist theory (and postindustrial economics) too closely. The gesture that legitimates pluralism by the demonization of essentialist villains seems too clear-cut to be genuinely enlightening about the state of world affairs. Conversely, it leads us to raise an admittedly awkward question: how far is the postmodernist advocacy of pluralism and complexity neutral in terms of ethnicity and economics? Who is actually empowered by this agenda?

The ideological pitfalls of a narrowly anti-essentialist, complexity-oriented politics are spectacularly illustrated in Jean-François Lyotard’s writings. Heterogeneity and the “pursuit of greater complexity” are central to Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism (Postmodern Fables 99). In one of his postmodernist “fables,” Lyotard self-consciously takes on the garb of the teleological historian and makes the development of “open systems” the metaphysical destiny of our universe (Postmodern Fables 90). Yet when Lyotard defines the antagonist—the essentialist villain—that stands in the way of this cosmic/cosmopolitan evolution, embarrassing questions arise. Lyotard’s otherwise inspiring book Differend contains passages that scarify what the philosopher, in a derogatory gesture, calls the “‘savage’ community” (“communauté ‘sauvage’”) (Différend 224). Lyotard designates thereby the cultures of simplicity—the community-centered lifestyles of archaic peoples that, according to the philosopher, embody the antithesis of open-ended democracy (see Différend 219-23). Specifically, Lyotard argues that the archaic peoples’ mythology-based culture represses complexity by adopting the totalitarian logic typical of narratives of legitimation. The function of these “‘savage’ stories” consists in bestowing an aura of legitimacy and stability to local tribal names or heroes (224). For Lyotard, this is a gesture of philosophical bad faith: by embedding names within stories, the “‘savage’ community” shields those “rigid signifiers of identity” from the “perils” of contingency and complexity (Différend 224, 221; my translation). Further, the rigid narratives of the archaic group are given a spurious cosmopolitan value: they are used to designate the whole of humankind, while they only apply to a specific tribe, and even that imperfectly (224).

Granted, Lyotard’s critique of the culture of simplicity is directed not only against pre-industrial cultures but also against anti-democratic extremists or religious fanatics in the industrialized world. It is a logical offshoot of French Republican ideology, which pits the presumed
neutrality of the secular state against so-called communitarian (ethnic, religious, regional) identities. Yet this theory carries the obvious disadvantage of framing simple communities according to an ethnically biased historicist logic: simplicity and the closed community are the noxious utopian fantasies of groups who aspire to an Edenic past—an ideal that appeals mostly to the (predominantly archaic and nonwhite) peoples who have been bypassed by the cosmopolitan history of postmodern complexity.

The stridency of Lyotard’s portrayal of the essentialist villain surpasses many cyberpunk versions of the same figure. There are only few moments when cyberpunk novelists attempt to identify the menace of essentialism with populations entirely outside of the techo-economy: cyberpunk tribes—the “Lo-Tek” dissenters of Gibson’s early stories, for instance—are internal dissidents who display some degree of technological proficiency (Gibson, “Johnny” 31). Conversely, Stephenson’s Cryptonomicon offers a depiction of pre-industrial populations in WWII New Guinea that, though far from appealing, resorts to disenchanted realism rather than to philosophical excommunication. Stephenson’s New Guinea peoples are dangerous cannibals no one would mistake for noble savages. Yet they are also ruthlessly massacred by Japanese soldiers (Cryptonomicon 426). When cyberpunk novels do articulate anti-essentialist arguments similar to Lyotard’s, they often do so in displaced or metaphorical form. For example, the threat that hangs over the metaverse—the virtual world of Stephenson’s Snow Crash—is the resurgence of a simplicity-oriented “language of Nature,” reborn in the guise of virulent computer viruses (206). Snow Crash contains indeed a complex narrative focusing on the development of ancestral languages and writings from ancient Sumer to the present. Mesopotamian civilization, the novel implies, experienced a pivotal historical shift enacted through its linguistic practices. It evolved from a dictatorial, biologically rooted linguistic programming (the idiom of sects and of the closed Gemeinschaft) to the post-Babel constellation of complex idioms that characterizes the contemporary Gesellschaft and is alone able to support free consciousness. Such linguistic progress cannot be taken for granted, however. The viral infection caused by the primitive, pre-Babel language is liable to resurface in modern times, for instance in the form of “[u]rban legends [, c]rackpot religions [or] Marxism” (400). In the metaverse, this lethal idiom reappears as a chaotic background noise exerting a hypnotic influence that brings systems to a stall. Gibson, in some installments of the Sprawl trilogy (Count Zero;
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*Mona Lisa Overdrive*, develops a similar thematics. Cyberspace in these novels is haunted by mysterious figures taking on the appearance of Voodoo gods—“Legba ... Ougou Feray” or “Maman Brigitte” (*Count Zero* 232; *Mona Lisa* 102). These characters are aliases of artificial-intelligence softwares, covertly manipulating the deeper recesses of the cyberworld. What makes them comparable to Stephenson’s Sumerian villains is their superhuman magic—a form of knowledge that enables them to control the “shape, the overall total form” of the virtual world (*Mona Lisa* 75). Thus, the virtual sorcerers might reduce the complex, freedom-supporting field of cyberspace to dictatorial simplicity. Though Gibson’s novels give less prominence to the fear of the primitive than Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*, they do portray the desire for simplicity in terms of ethnic difference, in the guise of pre-industrial magic.

The proclivity to view the essentialist menace as an ethnic other is overdetermined by an economic discourse. It interacts with the cyberpunk belief that genuine complexity and diversity cannot develop outside of a capitalist context. Cyberpunk is in this sense tied to the post-Cold-War context: it cannot easily conceive of a future that might take inspiration from collectivist politics, which it implicitly brands as outdated and discredited. Admittedly, the brand of capitalism advocated in cyberpunk novels (militantly by Stirling and Stephenson, more guardedly by Gibson) is of the anti-monopolistic, individualistic kind. Cyberpunk’s discourse of dissent is rooted in the small-producers’ ethic of resourcefulness and autonomy. Its emblematic figures are “computer cowboys” such as the protagonists of Gibson’s “Burning Chrome,” who gather in small computer stores, lofts or hi-tech bars in order to plot cyber-attacks against bigger media capitalists (196). Yet even such a freedom- and creativity-oriented economic outlook is beholden to the features of capitalism that it ostensibly opposes. It is hard to avoid the impression that cyberpunk fiction, through concepts such as cyberspace and the metaverse, ends up advocating the deployment of a global market, thus of an institution that is only superficially pluralistic.

The link between the endorsement of complexity, the rejection of essentialism and the purported inevitability of capitalism is made clear in one of the main narratives of Stephenson’s *Cryptonomicon*—the story of the hunt for Nazi and Japanese gold reserves. Treasure-hunting seems an outdated romance device in a cyberpunk novel. One hardly sees how retrieving buried hoards might constitute a technical challenge worthy of an information-saturated society. Indeed, even though
Stephenson milks the romance of treasure hunting for a good 500 pages, his novel also reflects on the obsolescence of this project. The chief obstacle its protagonists face is less locating the hoard than giving it a profitable circulation. Gold worship, in this context, represents a fetishistic, essentialist economy to which only naive westerners, WWII fascists or New Guinea cannibals subscribe. Gold worshippers wrongly assume that value can be embodied in a material confined to a specific location. The futility of such essentialist economics is brought home to Stephenson’s characters when they are sent on an expedition through the guerilla-infested Luzon jungle, in order to be allowed, by way of downpayment, to glimpse a very small fraction of the gold stack—about a ton of pure gold. Each gold bar in the stack weighs as much as a human body and is worth one million dollars. Yet in its cumbersome materiality, the treasure can not be “turned into something useful” (512). Abandoned in a remote jungle area, it is cut off from any form of traffic or exchange. The task the protagonists have to carry out consists in bringing these gold reserves into a system of economic circulation. They are indeed to serve as the foundation of a new privatized virtual currency—an Internet money system meant to shore up chronically unstable Eastasian economies. In this way, gold will be transformed directly into valuable, mobile information. The simplistic economy of gold worship gives way to value generated by the complex virtual networks of information system—a transition that Stephenson’s characters regard as necessarily beneficial to all.

In itself, there is something distinctly appealing in the cyberpunk/postmodernist wish to further the advent of a utopian postmodern Gesellschaft—a society that mixes complexity and freedom. Yet this project is marred by its propensity to legitimize itself by demonizing what it perceives to be its ethnic and economic others. The world map that it offers, though sometimes accurate and prescient, is hampered by its prejudicial binarisms. Indeed, the developments in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks—the unprecedented visibility given to the ethnic and cultural complexities of central Asia—highlight the need for paradigms subtler than the stereotype of the essentialist villain. In other words, what is required is a reading map that refrains from positing a dichotomy between simple (i.e. pre-industrial) communities, desperately clinging to traditions deprived of rational legitimacy, and postmodern societies, relentlessly headed toward complexification. This paradigm—which, for reasons too long to discuss here, I wish to call postmodern realism—should assume in the first place that the simple life
world, its traditions, its historical continuities have a legitimate place in the postmodern constellation. Also, it should make clear that seemingly simple communities are caught up in any number of complex relations. Conversely, it should make visible the simplicities at the heart of the ideology of postmodern complexity—chiefly the belief in its own manifest destiny.

Cyberpunk is occasionally capable of this realist approach. One of the chief literary virtues of postmodern science fiction has indeed been its capacity to develop a local-color realism of the informational metropolis—to highlight its local details, small ironies, or unpredictable dysfunctionings instead of its grand technological design (see Den Tandt 109). Such a local-color perspective is rooted not only in a skeptical appraisal of technological progress but also in the realist belief that, even in a cyber-community, the continuities of everydayness do exist and are liable to be demystified. In *Cryptonomicon*, Neal Stephenson hints at the possibility of this brand of realism when he lets Randy Waterhouse, the grandson of the WWII cryptanalyst, reflect on the proper way to represent his own family. The Waterhouses are an ostensibly common-place clan of white middle-class American academics. They do not boast the colorful pathologies that affect the family histories of Randy’s college friends. Yet the Waterhouses’ behavior is beset with such oddities as a fetishistic worship of handmade furniture or an academic insistence on being proved right on all issues. To Randy, this family configuration—both commonplace and enigmatic—is metaphorically equivalent to such quirky physical phenomena as the dust vortices of his native East Washington State. Dust devils are occurrences too modest to find any “room in the laws of physics, at least in the rigid form in which they [are] usually taught” (621). Yet they bring into play all the subtleties of chaos theory: they are a compound of regularity and unpredictability. The strategy of characterization underlying Randy’s scientific metaphor is clearly at the farthest remove from the rhetoric of the essentialist villain. It is, however, not a coincidence that only a white middle-class American family seems to deserve this nuanced scrutiny. The weakness in panoramic cyberpunk novels resides precisely in the fact that they cannot easily focus their realist gaze on the non-industrial world. As a result, they portray the margins of post-industrialism only as the field where cybercolonialism is destined to spread, or where it is likely to be countered by antagonists irrationally clinging to an indefensible past.
Notes


2. See Dani Cavallaro for a discussion of binary logic in the cyberpunk representation of urban space (140-41).

Works Cited


